

Visual AIDS initiated
DUETS to foster dialogue
between artists, writers,
and activists about their
creative process and issues
around HIV/AIDS.

Che Gossett and Alice O'Malley speak about the art, activism, and life of Chloe Dzubilo. Additional contributions by T De Long and JP Borum.

An icon of downtown New York City nightlife, **Chloe Dzubilo** was an artist, performer, and activist. She was a member of the Blacklips Performance Cult and a singer-songwriter for the punk-rock band Transisters. Chloe advocated for civil rights, adequate health-care, and dignity for people living with HIV/AIDS, transgendered people, and drug users. Her drawings and collages reflect the world around her with beauty and confrontation, humor and heartbreak. Chloe Dzubilo died in 2011 at age 50.

Che Gossett is a Black gender-queer and femme-fabulous writer and activist.

Alice O'Malley is a New York-based photographer whose portraits constitute an archive of downtown's most notorious artists, performers, and muses.

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Chloe Dzubilo: Che Gossett & Alice O'Malley

Chloe Dzubilo

Che Gossett
& Alice O'Malley
in conversation

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Visual AIDS

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Chloe Dzubilo



**Che Gossett
& Alice O'Malley**

in conversation

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Visual AIDS, New York



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Preface

Duets is a series of publications by Visual AIDS that pairs artists, activists, writers, and thinkers in dialogues that examine their own creative practices or the work of others in a larger social context. These engaging and highly readable conversations highlight the connections between communities of artists and activists. Drawing from the Visual AIDS Artist Registry and Archive Project, the series continues the Visual AIDS mission to support, promote, and honor the work of artists with HIV/AIDS and the artistic contributions of the AIDS movement.

In this volume, Che Gossett speaks to Alice O'Malley about the art, activism, and life of Visual AIDS artist member Chloe Dzubilo (1960–2011). Additional contributions include those by T De Long and JP Borum, as well as the artwork of Chloe Dzubilo. We sincerely thank everyone involved for their dedication and thoughtful contributions to this issue.

Visual AIDS utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV+ artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over.

Nelson Santos
Executive Director, Visual AIDS

In Her Own Words

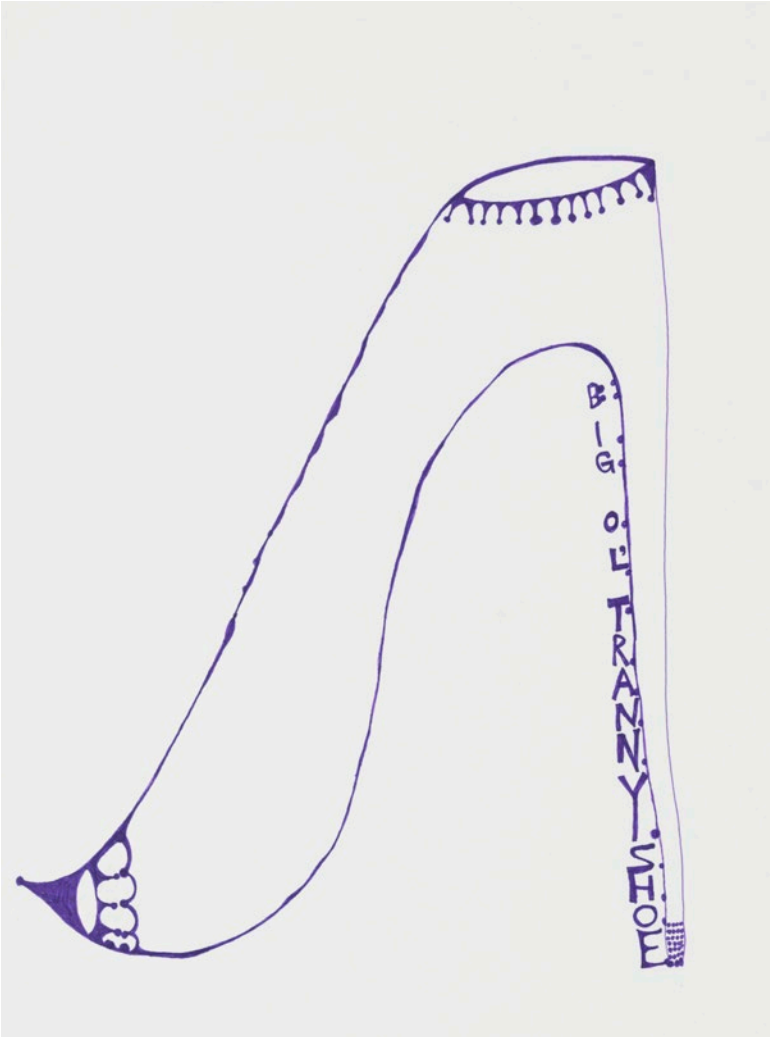
Chloe Dzubilo

I am an art-school dropout, but I did get a scholarship to an experimental arts high school in Madison, Connecticut. It taught me self-motivation, and the teachers were awesome. I was exposed to the New York art life in high school, as I would come into New York to see bands and go to art shows. My brother was an artist—he really encouraged me. My dad, who worked at a newspaper while I was growing up, encouraged me to write, and my mom was always doing creative, fun stuff with us. I loved drawing flowers and writing poetry.

When I came to New York City, I started taking classes at Parsons but became distracted by decorating my shoes with newspaper articles and little drawings, using a glue gun. I used to wear the shoes when I worked at Studio 54. Writing poetry and dancing became my thing—I just wanted to dance all the time.

As the ad director at the *East Village Eye*, selling ad space for indie films and designers, I was around a lot of artists. I also worked on an East Village map and guide. In New York, I knew many artists who passed from AIDS—people think it was such a glam time. It was really intense, and my partner at the time was managing the Pyramid Club, so I was exposed to all kinds of gender expressions and performance art. Everybody was so gifted back then—it was like living in a life museum. But people were dying and using a lot of drugs, as well. AIDS was such a huge part of that time. I found out I was poz back then (1987). So I'm a long-term survivor.

The first time I dressed as a woman I was working at the Pyramid, and I dressed as Karen Silkwood. My brother had influenced me regarding antinuke rallies, so I really identified with her, and with



Untitled (Shoe), 2009; ink on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Annie Hall, being a WASP and all. (I didn't even say the F-word till I was thirty-two—hard to believe maybe, but true!)

I guess I could express myself through clothes, dancing, makeup, and shoes. I always loved using words and trashing classic clothes as part of my rebelliousness. Years later, when I transitioned, clothes were a major part of my expression, but I attracted some pretty wild people, which used to really freak me out. I started to write poems again, and I met incredible musicians. We created a band called Transisters. I would write on my body for gigs—write poems about what was happening during transition, which became the songs. I found I could be a strong female-identified person with a voice, finally.

I also used to draw pictures of things that were happening that would really upset me. Like dealing with being trans in the health-care machine. Even in the hospital, though, there would be creative stuff going on. There was no policy to protect queer people accessing health care. I was also working on the front lines in the trans movement in the nineties. I would listen to trans women talk about their horrible experiences. Many didn't want to even go to doctors or had been treated like freaks. You know, transsexualism is still considered a mental illness, whereas being gay or lesbian was taken out of the *DSM* [*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*] more than twenty-five years ago. There was a group of us working on the front lines, fighting against all the pathologizing of trans people and gender-queer people. Transgender really became known more. I always had an issue with the term *transsexual*, because at its root is the word *sex*, and it's not about sex—it's about gender expression. I found out in transition that many people make it about sex. Trans people are incredible to look at—amazing—and I pray that one day there are policies to protect us all. I'm over seeing how trans people are abused in systems.

It's so clear that there has always been something other than

just two genders, and I have always felt that we need another pronoun at this time in herstory/history. Lingo is what we do have in our community, and maybe texting is creating a new lingo—our youth are creating this lingo every day. I've seen the worst in all people around this, and the most incredible humanity coming from people not in the community. We are all more alike than we'd like to admit. Now we just have to advocate for this third gender. I know some people think there are even more genders. I think all people get this, but they just don't know how to really incorporate it into our mainstream language.

I used to show horses, the only sport where men and women compete equally. My family didn't have money, so I had to work for it. I was working as a kid, basically.

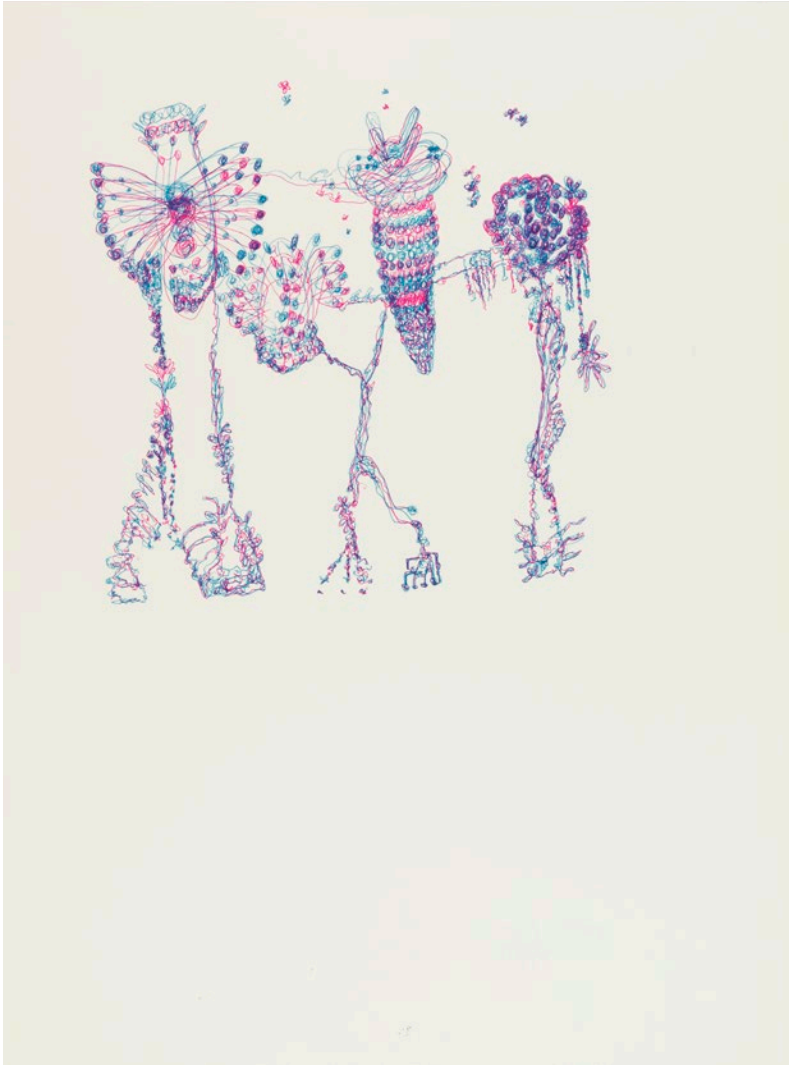
Being a long-term survivor is high maintenance. What people don't get is that there are side effects from HIV meds. I have had my share of that crap—if only young people knew what they were in for when they are having unsafe sex. I know I saved myself by not taking HIV meds for more than ten years. That's my story. I use a low dose of HIV meds today, thank God.

I want to make my work larger. The work I've done was mostly created from being in bed. I have terrible neuropathy and live with a lot of chronic bone pain. The works are mostly small, because I work where I live, in a studio apartment.

I think it's my life's mission to educate. Trans women are treated as women were in the early days, when women weren't allowed to be angry if something wasn't right for them. I've been oppressed by so many different types of people that eventually it just becomes almost absurd and comical. It's so ridiculous how much gender is still the final frontier!

New York, 2011

Foreword



Untitled (Busy Busy), 2010; ink on paper, 24 x 18 inches

Chloe wrote the preceding statement as the result of several twists of fate, and so I can't claim credit for it. I knew Chloe the way hundreds of downtown queer people did: I'd see her around, get close to her for a month or two, then lose track of her for years. That's how it was.

I was not part of her inner circle, the brave ones who nurtured her through the hell of abjection that trans people suffer in the health-care system and in our culture. They deserve credit for protecting and celebrating her legacy. A labor of love.

Chloe was a legend. She was fierce. At first, I was nervous to talk to her, but over the years I saw how warm and truly generous she was. She suffered from chronic health problems but was constantly helping other people.

Not long before her death, I bumped into her at a party. She was talking about her artwork, and I asked to see it. In the following months, she showed me her badass zine-style drawings, mostly scenes from her life sketched with a few lines and brought to life with dialogue and captions. Some captured moments from East Village life back in the day. Others showed her endless struggle with abusive health-care workers. Despite all this, her drawings somehow maintained undeniable street-scrrawl cred and fierce humor. Girl!

Chloe devised a simple but powerful language with which to speak the unspeakable truth about a health-care system that wants people like her dead. The system got what it wanted. Or did it? Go look at her drawings and ask yourself: who has the final say here, the last snap? She's calling it out. We have to listen up and keep working to humanize inhumane systems, destroy the gender binary, and advocate for people with AIDS and homeless trans kids. Girl!

A month before she died, I wanted to get some of our talks down in writing, so I e-mailed her some questions—just prompts to shape an arc to her life and work. Asking these questions felt so fake, because Chloe had her own swirly way of telling you how it was. In an attempt to capture that, I dropped the questions and collaged her answers, so I could hear her voice again. That’s how this statement formed. She wrote about specific drawings, so we have a few great captions.

If I hadn’t been at that party, I wouldn’t have stumbled into this. So again thanks to her core people, the ones who built a living web of life and love around her. The ones who kept her with us for as long as possible and who continue to keep her with us. Chloe’s art isn’t about isolated genius, it’s about being part of a community. This statement was published first for her bittersweet memorial. Morty Diamond then published it online (with the captioned drawings) in *Bodies of Work* magazine. And now, here, is another context that will help keep Chloe’s voice alive. We need to continually invoke her voice and spirit. You think I mean this metaphorically, but I mean it literally. Read her words, look at her art, talk to her, and you’ll get an answer if you listen. Then make up your own language to speak the unspeakable about being a PWA or trans or abuse survivor and never shut up.

JP Borum
New York, August 2014

Che Gossett & Alice O'Malley in conversation

Che Gossett: I am so struck by Chloe's artwork because it shows her radical political imagination. She doesn't accept "what is" but instead keeps asking "what if."

Alice O'Malley: That's a great way to put it. Her drawings read like a comic strip, recounting the day-to-day battles of a transgender superhero and long-term AIDS survivor. Like her songs, Chloe's illustrations are autobiographical, circling around themes of horses, fashion, feminism, HIV, and ill-fated hospital stays complete with creepy doctors and Nurse Ratched.

Che: So much of her artwork acts as an archive and reflection on how she and others resist and struggle to change institutions from the inside and outside. She pushed to bring visibility and resources to trans communities impacted by HIV/AIDS and led trans-sensitivity trainings.¹ Chloe's brilliant work, wisdom, and imagination are very relevant since those issues are so pressing and urgent now.

Alice: Is it true that you never met Chloe?

Che: It is true. I was introduced to her through a video of her memorial. Artists and activists, including Rosario Dawson, Antony, Justin Vivian Bond, and many, many others, were there. It was incredible to see such a powerful intergenerational tribute, which continued with the Chloe Awards.

Alice: It was an epic downtown funeral—five hundred people packed

¹ See *A Gender Variance Who's Who*, April 1, 2011, highlighting Chloe's life and work. <http://zagria.blogspot.com/2011/04/chloe-dzubilo-1960-2011-equestrian.html>.



Judson Church. Kelly McGowan had the idea to honor Chloe's legacy by recognizing activist groups in her name: the first Chloe Award was a framed print of *Untitled (Flower Lady)* (n.d.), her shocking pink homage to the Venus de Milo.

Che: While I never personally met Chloe, my work on queer and trans people of color and AIDS-activist archives often brings me in touch with people who are no longer here in the corporeal sense but whose influence continues to shape the political communities that I am a part of. Chloe's art and activism are powerful because of the importance of naming and claiming trans-artist and AIDS-activist legacies in our present—that is, of collectively lifting up lives and legacies.

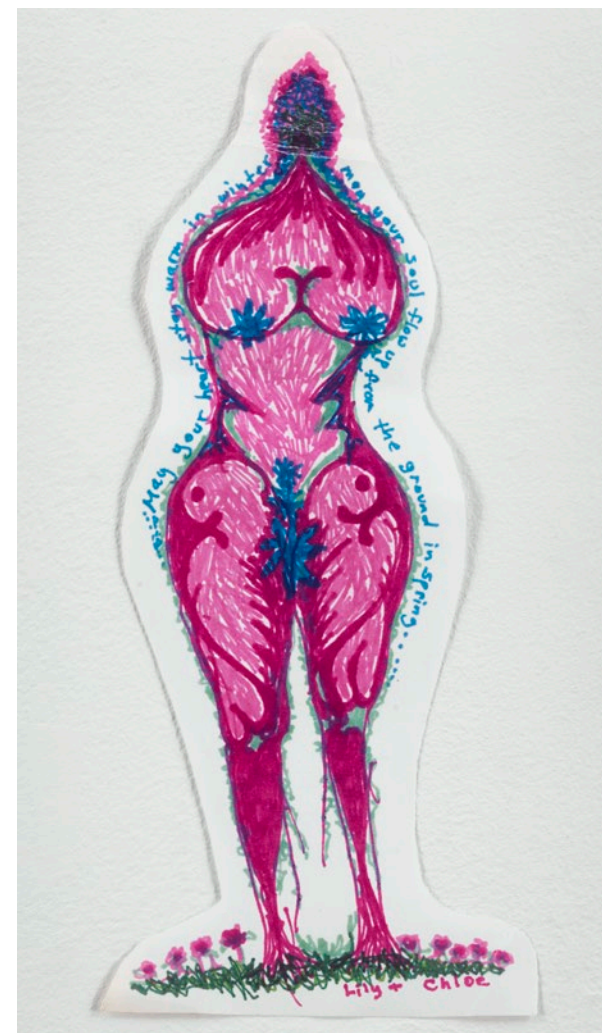
Alice: How do you understand Chloe's legacy?

Che: Chloe is part of a legacy of trans AIDS activism. Her work for HIV/AIDS prevention and services, how she focused on sex workers and trans communities in that work, and the feminist ways that she reinvents language to make space for gender-nonconforming people are all so crucial today, in that there is still a need for trans women and people of color to be at the center of shaping HIV/AIDS prevention and care.² And her legacy is especially relevant considering the resurgence of AIDS-activist films.

Alice: There's a film about Chloe waiting to be born. She left a lot of material to work with, including audio and video recordings and so many photographs. She loved the camera.

Che: The photograph you took of her lying on the ground is beautiful and dramatically shows how trans liberation and AIDS activism are linked.

² Trans communities and organizations receive very little or are excluded altogether from HIV/AIDS funding, and the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief includes restrictions that prevent sex workers from receiving international AIDS funds.



Untitled (Flower Lady), n.d.; ink on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Alice: That photo, one of the first of many we made together, was taken at an ACT UP die-in. She looks very glamorous. She obviously did her makeup before the demonstration. I think it's fair to place Chloe in a lineage of transgender revolutionaries that traces back to Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, particularly in their shared commitment to direct action.

Che: Totally, about lineage. My sister Reina Gossett has been doing incredible and rich archival work on Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson and the collective they formed in 1970, Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR).³ Her work has made their stories and legacies accessible—stories and legacies that so often, as Reina emphasizes in a powerful recent interview, have been made invisible through the violence of “historical erasure.”⁴ Marsha was living with HIV and also cared for those close to her who were living with HIV, many of whom died during the onset of the AIDS epidemic. I found this out when watching the biographical documentary about her life directed by Michael Kasino, *Pay It No Mind* (2012). STAR House was the space they created for trans youth who were living on the street in the face of state violence and organized abandonment. They opened their home. Like the Panthers, they saw a need in their community and filled it. For STAR, struggles that are often portrayed as separate—against racism, transphobia, etc.—were in fact united.⁵

³ See *The Spirit Was*, <http://thespiritwas.tumblr.com>, which includes Reina Gossett's archival research on Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and STAR. Gossett is also currently working with Sasha Wortzel on the film *Happy Birthday, Marsha!*, which will further document these women-of-color, feminist, trans histories.

⁴ “Happy Birthday Marsha!: An Interview with Reina Gossett by Morgan M. Page,” <http://helixqpn.tumblr.com/post/9350001367/happy-birthday-marsha-an-interview-with-reina-gossett>.

⁵ Johnson talked about police profiling of trans women of color, and Rivera frequently emphasized that incarcerated trans people must be at the center of the conversation and also spoke out against misogynistic violence against trans women within queer communities and organizations. See “Rapping with a Street Transvestite Revolutionary,” in *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation*, ed. Karla Jay and Allen Young (1972; repr., New York: New York University Press, 1992), 112–20.

Alice: And they turned tricks so the kids wouldn't have to. I think their building was on Second Avenue in the East Village, not far from where Chloe lived a decade later. I'm guessing they crossed paths. The influence seems so obvious.

Che: When Chloe talked about a “transolution,” she meant that the solution needs to come from us and not be imposed on us by “experts”—we are empowered, we are the ones who have the knowledge. This can happen through the political organizing of sex workers and their allies against condom criminalization or through trans women of color working against police violence, incarceration, and criminalization, for instance. In the drawing *Untitled (Outreach)* (2008), Chloe depicts herself on the street, probably giving out condoms.

Alice: In the midnineties, she worked with Positive Health Project, a drop-in center near New York's Port Authority Bus Terminal that provided needle exchange and other HIV-prevention services, particularly for sex workers.⁶ She led a support group for trans women and did harm-reduction outreach at night on the stroll. In this picture, she's telling the officer she has the okay from the precinct. I love the cop's uniform, by the way. Chloe could have been a fashion illustrator.

Che: So true. The issues that Chloe fought for—such as sex-worker self-determination, decriminalization of needles and condoms, and “safe-sex” discourse—are still resonant and more crucial than ever, especially for trans people targeted by the so-called war on drugs, which criminalizes needle exchange. I lived in Washington, DC, in the summer of 2008 and became part of the Safe and Diverse DC Coalition, an inspiring group that formed in response to the “prostitution-free zones” that were instituted in gentrifying areas of the city. Trans women of color, in particular, were targeted in these

⁶ In 1993, Jason Farrell, Kelly McGowan, and Barbara Warren started Positive Health Project.

zones of exclusion and profiled by the police for “walking while trans.”⁷ Recently, Laverne Cox spoke out with CeCe McDonald on *Democracy Now!* about “the war on Black trans women’s bodies in this country.”⁸

Alice: Sexual assault and sexual harassment are recurring themes in Chloe’s drawings. In *Kickboxing for T-Gurlz* (2008), Chloe offers a self-defense strategy for the random violence a trans woman could be subject to while just walking to the store. Her advice is “Use your handbag as if you are really trying to find your makeup. Or whatever. Try to breath . . . be totally exact: whip out your lipstick, compact, etc. and when he’s that close to you . . . JAB Him w/ your elbow! And kick him in the ballz! And run girl for help . . . protect your face.”

Che: Yes, a fierce femme self-defense strategy! Her work is explicitly trans feminist, always casting light on trans misogyny and showing how feminism is already trans.

Alice: Chloe was the first person I knew to use the word *transfeminism*. Chloe’s drawing *Untitled (In the Middle of It All)* (2010) talks about transphobia in the gay community. The gay guy says, “I’m not confused like you are, gurl,” and the lesbian says, “You’re not really seriously a woman.” There’s a backlash against trans inclusion in certain feminist circles and especially in separatist spaces like the Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival. And it’s mostly in the form of trans misogyny, as trans masculinity has always been part of lesbian

7 “Move Along: Policing Sex Work in Washington, D.C., a Report by the Alliance for a Safe & Diverse DC” (Washington, DC: Different Avenues, 2008); <http://dctranscoalition.files.wordpress.com/2010/05/movealongreport.pdf>. These trans activists, sex-worker activists, AIDS activists, and service providers came together to combat unjust laws that criminalize the distribution of condoms and escalate the ongoing HIV/AIDS epidemic.

8 CeCe McDonald was sent to prison for killing a man in self-defense when he attacked her on the street at night. McDonald’s trial put a face on the prevalence of violence against trans women of color, many of whom are kicked out of their homes as youth and turn to sex work to survive, placing them at a high risk for HIV, drug addiction, and violent hate crimes.



culture.⁹ The belief that trans women aren't "real" is based on an essentialist idea of gender, something I thought we as radical women threw out a long time ago. Biology isn't destiny, right?

Che: In 1974, the Combahee River Collective published a statement that spoke out against the limits of gender essentialism. They said "As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic."¹⁰ They saw patriarchy and racial capitalism as tied together and advocated for a feminism that didn't leave anyone behind but instead built in solidarity against forms of racial and gendered violence.

Alice: No one has a monopoly on feminism. I think it's exciting.

Che: Yes. Chloe seemed particularly interested in fighting back against the kind of labeling that works to exclude. I'm thinking of *Untitled (HIV Activist)* (2008), where she writes, "She can be difficult in the eyes of people who try and labelize her and she's under the umbrella taking notes."

Alice: She is referring there to the time she was appointed by the mayor of NYC to the HIV Planning Council. In the drawing, she talks about the impact she hoped to have once she was behind the "closed door" but also about the closing of doors once she got there.

Che: Her attempts to have an impact from within the system reflects an AIDS-activist approach that reminds me of the tactics of ACT UP NYC's Treatment and Data Committee and also of the work of Kiyoshi Kuromiya, the queer Japanese AIDS activist and cofounder

⁹ Twenty years ago, a trans woman was "escorted" out of the Womyn's Music Festival against her will. The alternative Camp Trans, across from the main entrance of the festival, has gained increasing support with performers and attendees boycotting the festival in protest of its "womyn-born-womyn" policy. See Julia Sorano, *Excluded: Making Feminism and Queer Movements More Inclusive* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press, 2013).

¹⁰ See the full statement at <http://circuitous.org/scraps/combahee.html>.



HIV Activist Chloe Dzubilo gets
Appointed by The Mayor of NYC.
For The HIV Planning Council.

Once in The system, The
the activist began to
approach everyone in
power in NYC, through the council,
to speak about HIV and
the transgender community.

god, we got so far. Then
POOF. The leaders were at
a CLOSED DOOR. That led
to other closed doors.

Ms. Dzubilo continues to
plug away. One person at a time.
She can be difficult in the eyes
of people that try to LABELIZE HER.
AND She's under the Umbrella taking notes.
cde 2008

of ACT UP in Philadelphia who edited the first standards-of-care document written by people with AIDS.

Alice: Chloe kept records on the side effects of her HIV meds, and she gathered information from other people on the same regimens. She would tell her doctors, "I don't want to take that, let's try this." She went on low doses. I suspect they learned a lot from her. The first time I visited Chloe's apartment on Sixth Street, she had Chinese herbs boiling on the stove. She was very intuitive about her health care. Chloe didn't take AZT or any of the treatments for the first ten years. When she got PCP pneumonia in the nineties, she went on protease inhibitors. She had a makeup case for her HIV meds and another for her supplements. Her brother Duane introduced her to alternative medicine and then became her guardian angel. There was acupuncture, gluten-free diets, twelve-step meetings, horses . . .

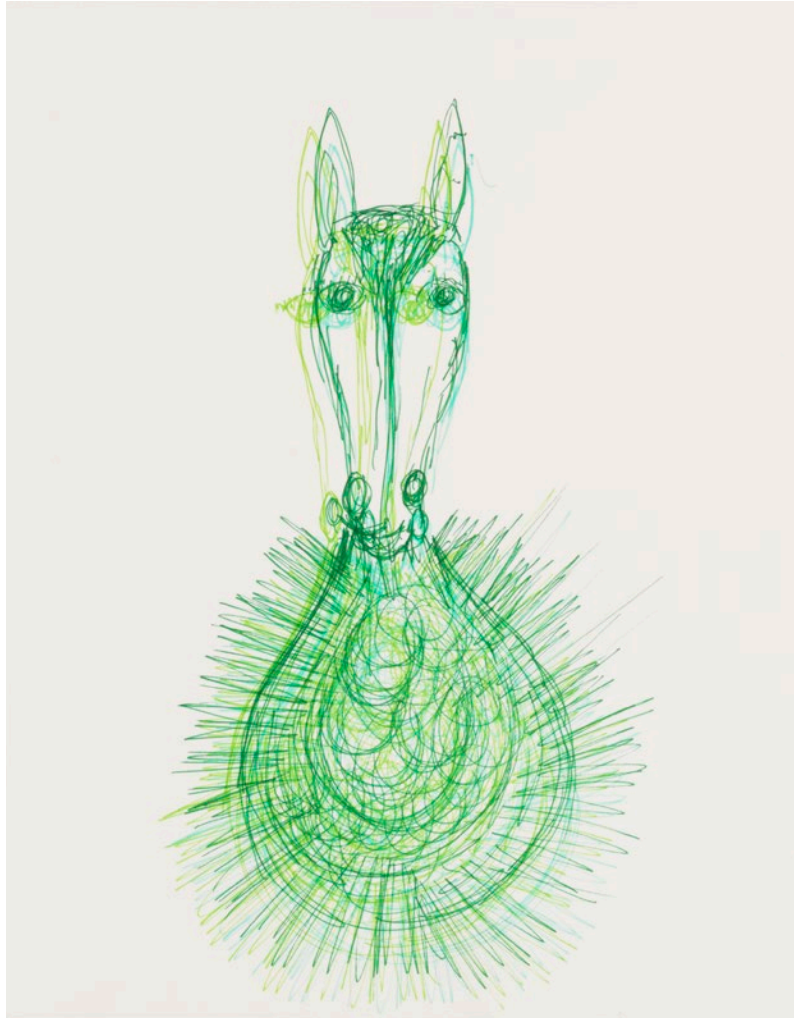
Che: Did Chloe ride?

Alice: She was a champion jumper. As a teenager, she showed other people's horses in world-class competitions at places like Madison Square Garden.

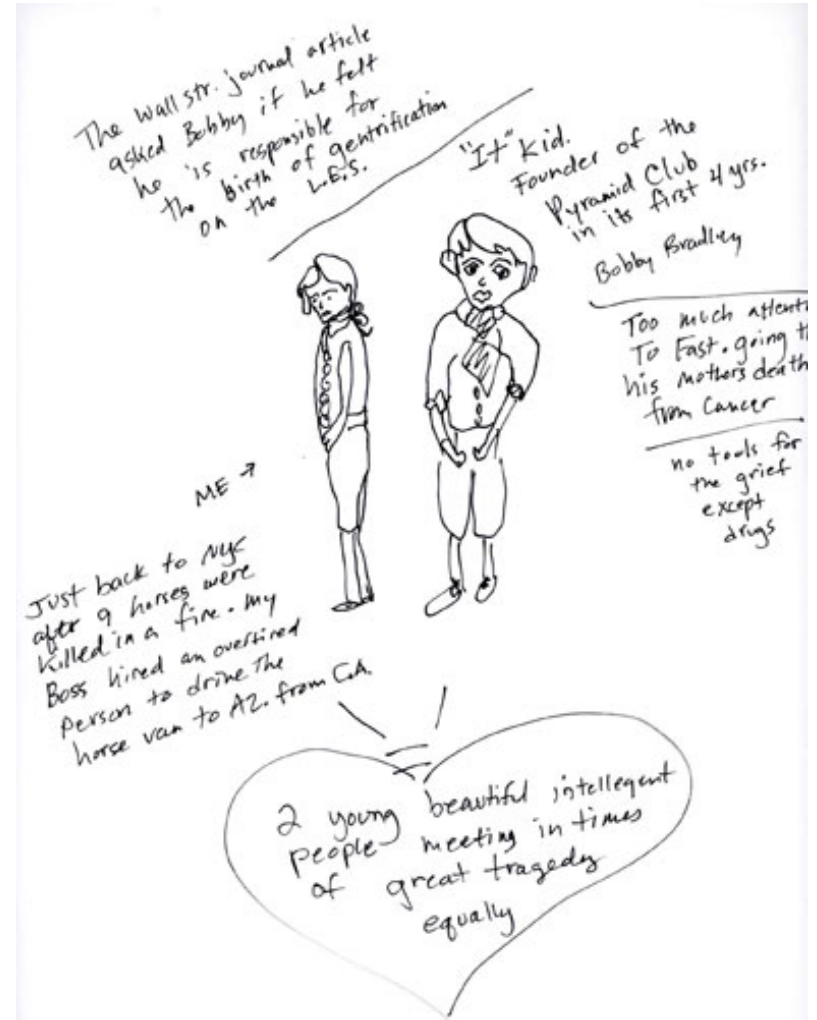
Che: In *Untitled (From Horses to Heroin)* (n.d.), she writes, "And all 9 horses were burned alive. No grief tools." Do you know what that is based on?

Alice: In the late seventies, nine of the horses Chloe had been riding were in a fatal trailer accident. In a strange coincidence, her brother Duane had died not long before, when the truck he was riding in went off the road in the Southwest. In the wake of these two tragedies, Chloe moved to New York.

Che: And she started to work at Studio 54 then, right? In one of the drawings, she writes that she left the club because the owner wanted her to rip her shirt. When did she become part of the NYC club scene?



Untitled (Horse Portrait), 2010; ink on paper, 14 x 11 inches



Untitled (Bobby and Keith), n.d.; ink on paper, 12 x 9 inches

Alice: Her boyfriend at that time was Bobby Bradley, one of the founders of the legendary Pyramid Club, where all the East Village queens found a home. Do you have any reference for this scene as a young gender-queer archivist?

Che: I don't, actually . . . The queer and/or trans archival work I'm most familiar with is actually about Black drag balls from the early nineteenth century to the 1920s, from books like Shane Vogel's *The Scene of the Harlem Cabaret* and George Chauncey's *Gay New York*, as well as research by Monica Roberts, who has written about *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines as repositories of Black trans "hirstory" in the 1950s.¹¹

Alice: There was a Black drag queen during the eighties named Ebony Jet. In terms of influence, eighties East Village nightlife was as important to gender expression and performance as Weimar in the thirties.¹² Lady Bunny, Hattie Hathaway, Ethyl Eichelberger, Tabboo!, Joey Arias, Larry Tee—they were creating high-camp postmodern-pop-culture drag in ways that are now being codified in queer studies, and on TV . . . *RuPaul's Drag Race* is fifth-generation Pyramid Club. It was Chloe's art school, and they were the "transgeneration."

Che: Did many trans women perform?

Alice: International Crisis, Stephanie Crawford, and Page all took the stage.¹³ AIDS stole so many of them. After Bobby died in the late eighties, Chloe put down heroin and changed genders.

Che: It's really powerful and healing for me to see Chloe's feminist

11 See Monica Roberts, "African-American Transgender History—50's Style," *Racialicious*, January 29, 2009, <http://www.racialicious.com/2009/01/29/african-american-transgender-history-50s-style>. Chris Vargas's Museum of Transgender Hirstory and Art project inspired this use of the term *hirstory*.

12 See Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin* (Los Angeles: Feral House, 2000).

13 Videos documenting the Pyramid Club are on YouTube, courtesy of the estate of Nelson Sullivan.

politics of gender self-determination, how she opens up room for trans and gender-nonconforming people outside of the gender binary in the face of authenticity politics—realness, etc.

Alice: My favorite line in the *Wigstock* movie is when the interviewer asks Chloe, "Do you pass?" and Chloe says, "Pass for what?"¹⁴

Che: Chloe's reinvention of language, her creation of new names and representations, reminds me of the liberatory poetics of Black feminist writer and bi activist June Jordan. Chloe's redefinitions created "living room" for trans and gender-nonconforming people.

Alice: Right, and that really comes through in the lyrics she wrote for Transisters, her punk band, for which Jayne County was a big inspiration. One of her songs was called "Kaposi Coverstick."

Che: Meaning using makeup to cover Kaposi's sarcoma lesions?

Alice: Yes! She was public about her HIV status onstage, which was radical.

Che: We can take inspiration from Chloe's liberation of language and think about how to talk about AIDS prevention and health care in ways that don't reinforce shame and sex negativity. How often have I gone to the doctor's office and heard the doctor using risk rhetoric, which can reinforce queer shame? Chloe helps us to think in more liberatory ways.

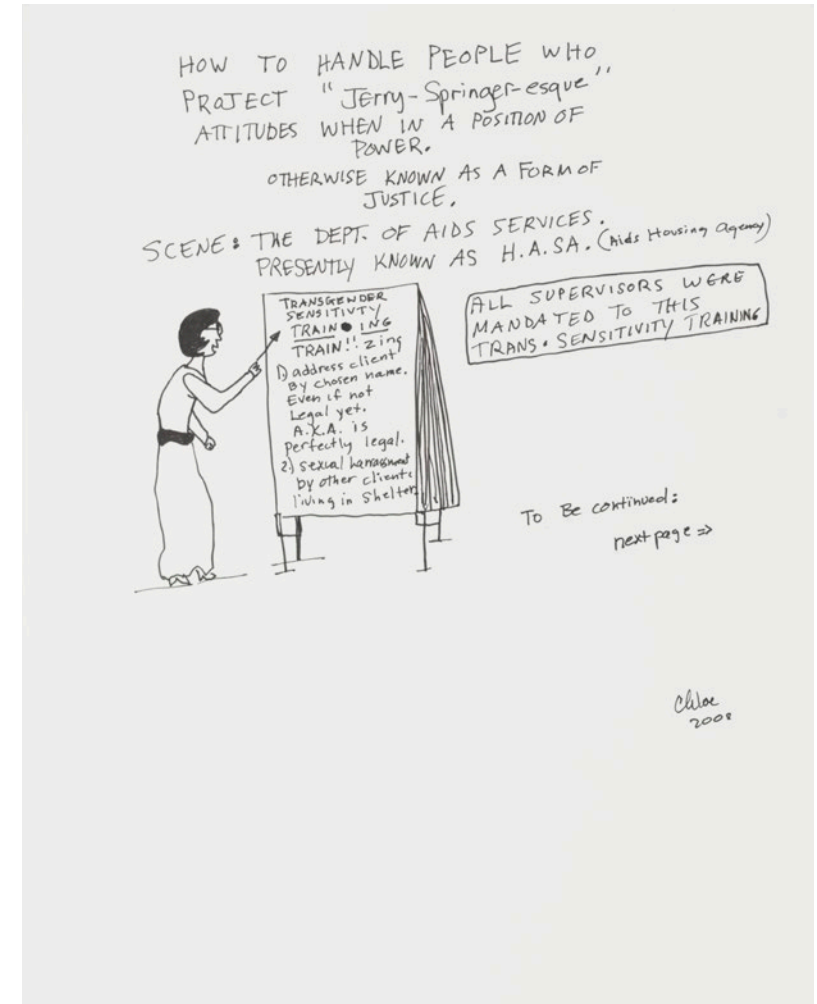
Alice: Chloe knew a lot about medical shaming because she went through so many doctors and hospitals as a long-term survivor. She always said one of the upsides of being trans is that you get a private hospital room, which is important if you receive many visitors—and Chloe did. But the downside of having a private hospital room

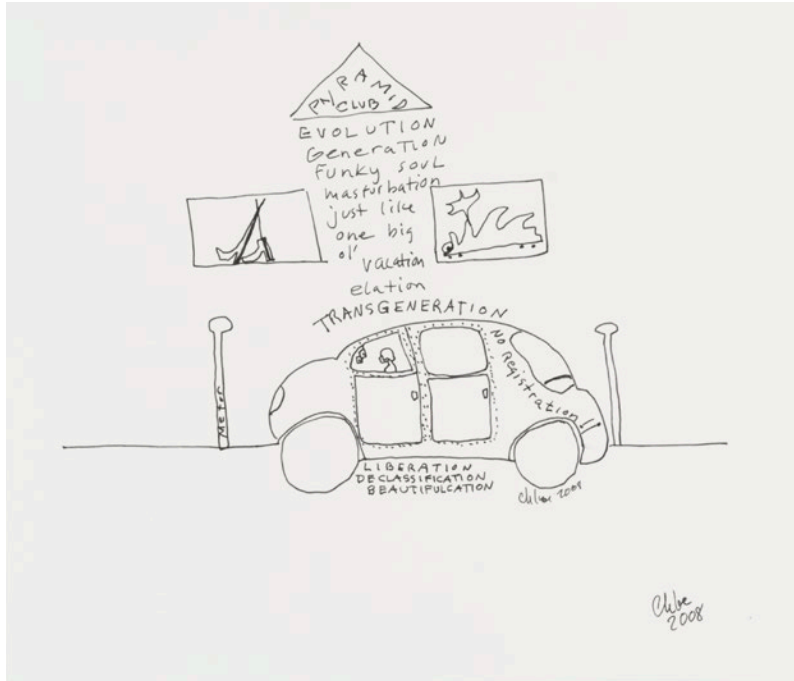
14 *Wigstock: The Movie* (1995), directed by Barry Shils, is a documentary about the annual drag music festival that was held in New York City's East Village during the 1980s and 1990s.

is that there are fewer witnesses. One of Chloe's drawings, *Untitled (Behind Closed Doors)* (n.d.), finds her with a male nurse pointing an enormous needle at her and saying, "We all know what's under that gown." A side note reads, "Just ask any transwoman of the lack of accountability."

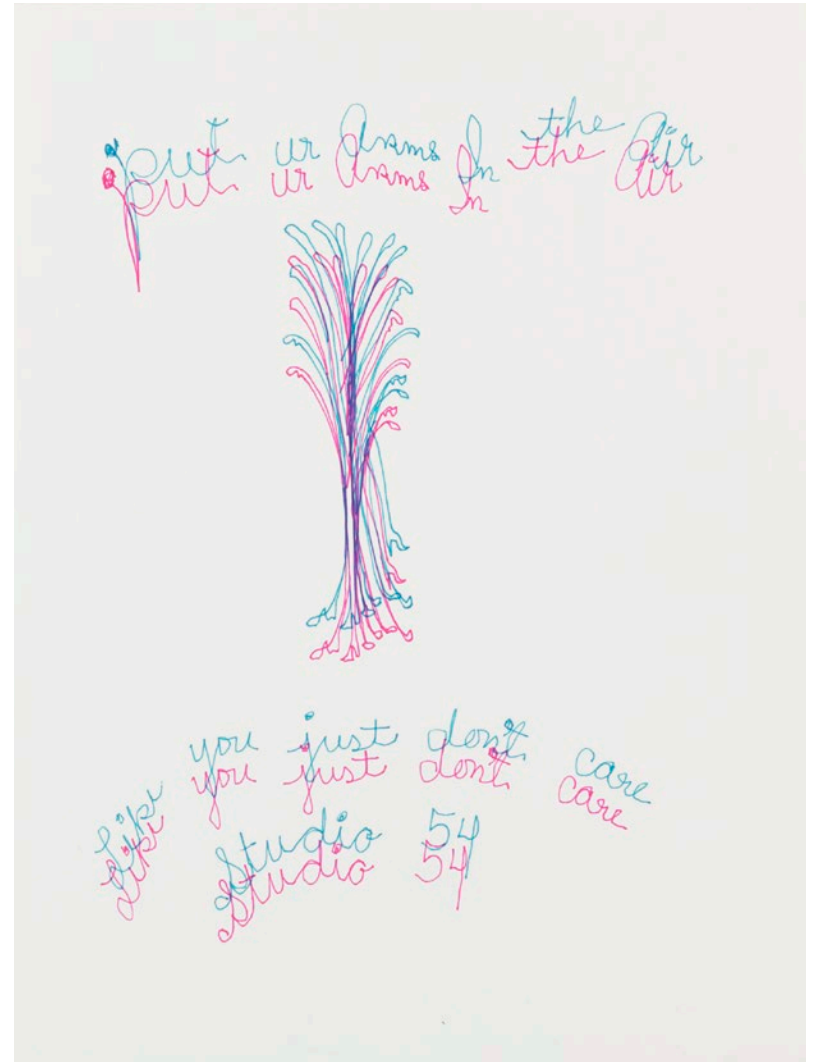
Che: I know that she led trans-sensitivity trainings in hospitals and AIDS-service organizations. She was sensitive to how trans people might be included in HIV services that were originally designed for gay men. It's so powerful to see direct action and trainings by trans activists in places like shelters and hospitals and the welfare office, which are all places where folks are denied benefits and access to beds or treatment. There's been incredible work by both individuals and organizations against anti-trans violence in these spaces. Just one example, in Philadelphia, is a grassroots organization called Riders Against Gender Exclusion (RAGE), formed in 2009 to oppose the Philadelphia transit system's "labelizing"—as Chloe called it (her words stick, and their brilliance resonates)—of public-transportation passes according to medically assigned sex (a form of "labelizing" sex that excludes intersex people). This "labelizing" had material consequences that specifically targeted trans and gender-nonconforming people, denied service, and kicked them off public transit—which is a service that poor, of-color trans folks need. The group not only protested against the South Eastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority (SEPTA) but also did trainings with their employees. The stickers that bestowed these labels have since been removed from the passes, and, most important, their actions represent a moment of political education and solidarity building. There's a history of institutionalized violence against trans people, which of course also extends into the medical and psychiatric realms.

Alice: Six months before her death, Chloe put herself in Bellevue Psych to get her meds adjusted. The head psychiatrist agreed to





Untitled (Pyramid Club), 2008; ink on paper, 9 x 12 inches



Untitled (Studio 54), 2009; ink on paper, 12 x 9 inches

admit her to the women's floor, until she signed the papers and then was put in the men's ward, with no recourse. The irony was that Chloe had led transgender-sensitivity trainings for the staff of Bellevue in 1995. Her experience there got worse when the nurses took away her HIV meds, which is dangerous for any patient but particularly critical for her, because she was on the last cocktail with no other options for treatment. Shira, a friend who's a social worker, flew in from Chicago and signed her out. It was midnight when Chloe walked out of the locked ward. She dropped her pants and mooned the security cameras.

Che: Wow! What a powerful story of solidarity and direct action!!

Alice: Yes, it really was. In the final years, Chloe suffered from chronic pain and other extreme side effects of the meds, like paranoia. Her partner, T De Long, and their four-pound teacup poodle, Lily, were her closest companions in New York. Chloe and T were married in 2009 onstage at Rapture, a queer bookstore on Avenue A. They collaborated musically and made art together. T was her primary caregiver and her amazing grace. She would also talk to her dear mother every day. It got very intense. She was going to one doctor for pain management, one for psychiatry, and another for HIV.

Che: And the doctors weren't talking to each other?

Alice: No, she was doing her own case management. And then came the letter from Medicaid cutting off payments to her therapist, the one person who was monitoring her emotional state.

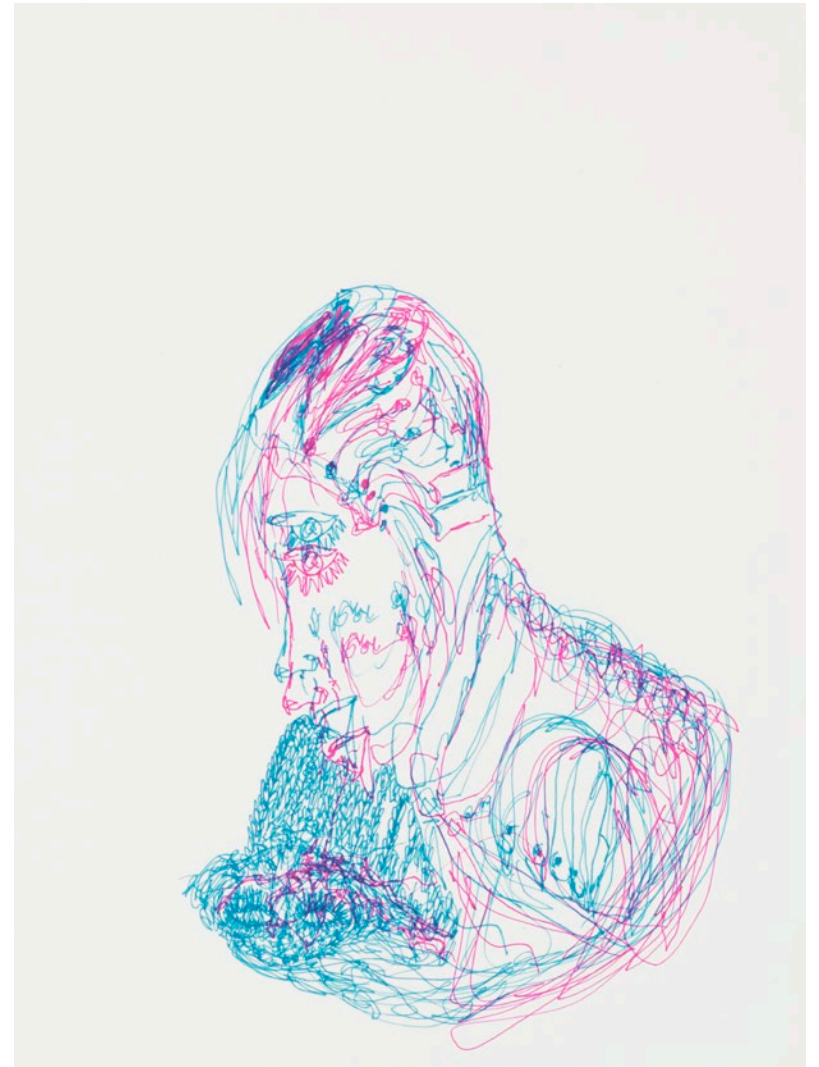
Che: So much at the same time.

Alice: Shortly before Chloe died, the *New York Times* ran a story about the high incidence of suicide among Iraqi war veterans who were on a particular combination of drugs, prescribed for pain and

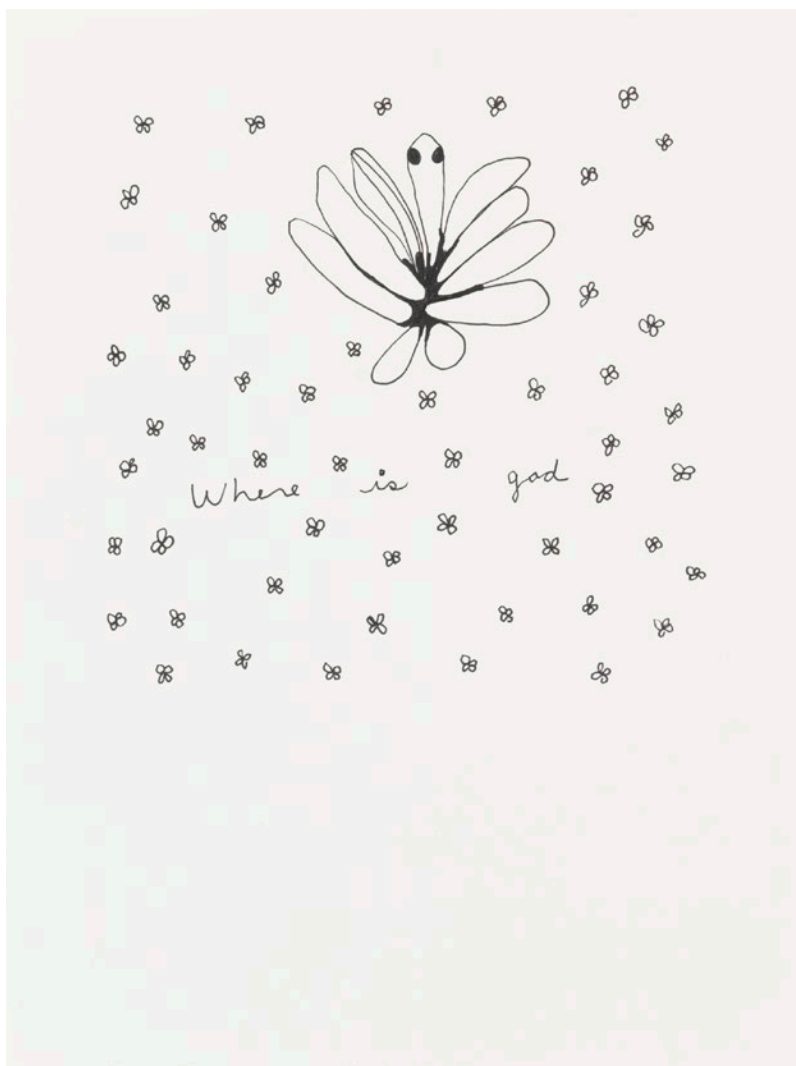




Untitled (Don't Call Me Crazy), 2009; ink on paper, 24 x 18 inches



Amazing Grace, 2009; ink on paper, 12 x 9 inches



Untitled (Where Is God), 2009; ink on paper, 12 x 9 inches

post-traumatic stress.¹⁵ Chloe was on that same combination.

Che: Which tells you how similar her feelings must have been to . . .

Alice: . . . a combat veteran's?

Che: Yes. Reminds me again of her drawing *Untitled (Ain't Nothing Like Knowin')* (2008) . . .

Alice: . . . where she writes: "What it feels like . . . when you slip thru the cracks" of institutional failure, budget cuts, and the fatigue of doctors and friends and still manage the devastating side effects of too many meds—that was Chloe's story and the reason she died under the wheels of a subway car. T called it "pharmacide."

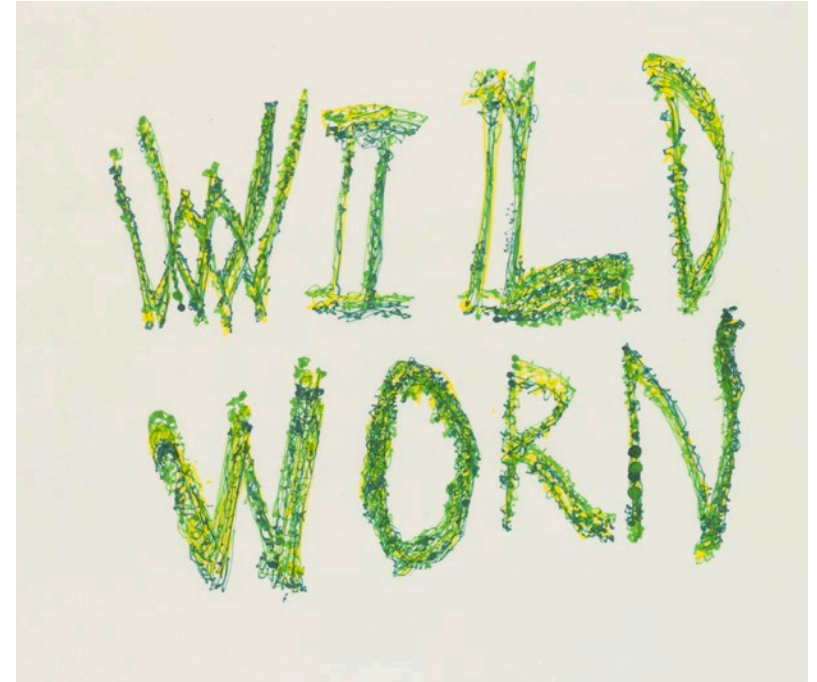
I love her 3-D drawings, the hallucinations, auras, vibrations, energy, transformations . . . it's Chloe. I believe she's watching over us, her little insect babies. [See *Untitled (Where Is God)* (2009).] Ten wings. Ten is the number of completion. I think she had done what she could in that body, and I think she chose her death on her terms.

Che: In 2008, I attended the ten-year-anniversary conference of the prison-abolitionist organization Critical Resistance in Oakland, California. One of the most powerful moments for me was hearing Miss Major speak. She had been not only at the Stonewall rebellion but also at Attica in the wake of the uprising—and the brutal massacre that followed it. She began by saying: "There was a past before all of this happened. I am a part of that past."

Chloe saw the struggle against transphobia as part of a larger struggle against violent "systems, systems, systems." In thinking about the legacy of struggle by trans AIDS activists, how can trans communities and gender self-determination be more centered around HIV prevention and treatment services, and in AIDS

¹⁵ James Dao, "For Some Troops, Powerful Drug Cocktails Have Deadly Results," *New York Times*, February 12, 2011.

activism? How can we create more HIV/AIDS resources in antioppressive ways? Freedom dreamers and freedom fighters like Miss Major, Chloe Dzubilo, and many others have struggled to radically reshape the world and to make it one that we can all inhabit. I am inspired by the legacy of Chloe Dzubilo.



Afterword

Chloe Dzubilo began working with Visual AIDS in 2010 as a living artist with HIV. She was curated into one of their exhibitions, and then Visual AIDS commissioned her to design artwork for a tote bag. Shortly after that, she passed away, and Visual AIDS has supported me through the overwhelming and emotional experience of being the executor of Chloe's estate. They've ensured the continuation of Chloe's legacy by documenting, facilitating, and negotiating her archive to go to New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections and, now, by organizing this book in their Duets series.

Chloe was an artist, writer, poet, HIV/AIDS activist, transgender activist, and transfeminist. She was not afraid to say anything as long as it was the truth, whether or not it was popular and even though it sometimes hurt. Voices like hers have described the reality and injustices of systems and institutions, and without these critical voices there is no hope for change.

Chloe said: "My spirit is a trooper in the fight for the rights of the marginalized and oppressed people, because I can feel for them so much. As long as I continue to be honest and real, I will sacrifice my rights for others if I must. Then that is my purpose: to inspire others to be strong, to stand up against all types of oppression. I want to be useful. We are constantly judged by people who do not or have never faced the very issues over which they hold power. There is a high price of speaking out about the pathologizing of trans people, people of color, immigrants, the elderly, the undocumented, and people in poverty when they are so vulnerable. We are not victims, and we do get crucified by some powers that be. I feel for anyone who has been oppressed. Love. Justice. Service. Transformation."



Portrait of T, 2010; ink on paper, 24 x 18 inches

I first met Chloe in 2007, toward the end of her life. Despite having numerous mutual friends and acquaintances and being part of downtown culture, we had not crossed paths until then. In some ways, we lived parallel lives and could imagine ourselves being best friends as kids. We both were in 4-H and had horses. She came from Connecticut's "horse world" of hunters, jumpers, and pro-circuit riders. In the rural Midwest, I had a two-hundred-dollar horse named Dolly that I taught to jump using plumbing pipe.

I came from a rap, performance, political-art, feminist background and knew very little about HIV, despite the fact that I had friends who died of the virus. The first thing Chloe and I did was to make an HIV-prevention song, and from that point on, for the next three years, we continued to collaborate on music, drawings, sculptures, and performances, and we encouraged each other to express the necessary stories through our artwork. When times were tough, we would sing a duet:

*Can I have your attention
'bout what we never mention
Clarify our intention
HIV prevention*

*transgression
obsession
aggression
progression*

*Can I have your attention
'bout what we never mention
Clarify our intention*

*I've lived this all before
Can't take it anymore
Take a bite of the fight
children of the night
— excerpt from "No Glove/No Love"*

*The louder we weep
the harder we sleep
echoes of the past remain
friends here and gone
how strong must we be to overcome*

*How bittersweet when eyes meet
what to give and what to keep
triggers and scars
how far must we go to overcome*

*Life's taken its toll
you're the sign that saved my soul
through setbacks and breaks
we came to relate
overcome
— excerpt from "Overcome"*

You are the keeper of the flame.
Don't let anyone threaten the light we all see.

T De Long
New York, February 2014

Biographies

Chloe Dzubilo (1960–2011) was an artist and AIDS and transgender activist. A native of Connecticut, Dzubilo moved to New York in 1982. She studied art at Parsons School of Design and received an associate degree in gender studies from the City University of New York, City College. In the 1990s, she became an icon of downtown nightlife, writing plays for and performing with the Blacklips Performance Cult and editing the group's zine, *LeifSux*. As lead singer and songwriter for the punk-rock band Transisters, she performed at CBGB, SqueezeBox at Don Hill's, and other trendsetting hubs of downtown culture. She was a muse for designers Marc Jacobs, Alexis Bittar, and Patricia Field, as well as photographers Nan Goldin, Alice O'Malley, Tanyth Berkeley, David Armstrong, Steven Klein, and Michael Sharkey. Dzubilo also appeared in the films *Wigstock: The Movie* (1995), *Visiting Desire* (1996), *Gang Girls 2000* (1999), and *Rock Star* (2004).

A longtime volunteer for the LGBT Community Center's groundbreaking Gender Identity Project, Dzubilo served on its transgender-HIV-prevention team, conducting prevention outreach in bars and nightclubs and on strolls. She spoke at national and international conferences and in public-service announcements and training workshops for health-care and mental-health providers. Dzubilo was involved with the political-action group Transsexual Menace and, in 1997, went on to direct one of the first federally funded HIV-prevention programs for transgender sex workers. In 2001, she founded the Equi-AID Project, a Manhattan-based riding program that specifically targeted children infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS, as well as other at-risk youth. In September 2002, Dzubilo became the first transgendered person on the cover of *POZ*,

a magazine for the HIV/AIDS community. She graced the magazine's cover two more times. In 2003, Dzubilo was appointed to the HIV and Human Service Planning Council of New York, an advisory body composed of people living with HIV/AIDS, service providers, and government representatives.

Her visual art has been shown in several New York galleries, including Participant Inc. and La MaMa Galleria. In January 2011, she cocurated, with Jeffrey Greene, the exhibition "Transeuphoria" at Umbrella Arts in New York.

Dzubilo died at age fifty on February 18, 2011, in New York City.

JP Borum is a writer and writing teacher living in New York.

Che Gossett is a Black gender-queer and femme-fabulous writer and activist. They are a contributor to *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex*, edited by Nat Smith and Eric Stanley (AK Press, 2011), *The Transgender Studies Reader*, volume 2, edited by Aren Z. Aizura and Susan Stryker (Routledge Press, 2013), and *Queer Necropolitics*, edited by Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco (Routledge Press, 2014). This past summer, they were part of a delegation of archivists and librarians to Palestine. They are currently working on a biography of queer Japanese-American AIDS activist Kiyoshi Kuromiya, as well as an extended essay about legacies of queer Black solidarity with the Palestinian struggle.

Alice O'Malley is a New York-based photographer whose portraits constitute an archive of downtown's most notorious artists, performers, and muses. Her work has been exhibited in museums and galleries in the United States and Europe and published in various art and fashion magazines. Her monograph, *Community of Elsewheres*, was published in 2008 by Isis Editions. She teaches at Parsons and the International Center of Photography in New York City.

T De Long is a New York City-based artist, rapper, singer-songwriter, and poet, who has performed and exhibited in museums, galleries, and festivals around the world. De Long has released both solo and collaborative albums, as well as appeared in and produced art films, performance projects, and videos. In the early days, T was a member of Bedroom Productions and was known as TJ Free. De Long has also produced and curated music and performance-art programs and founded the Warm Up Series at MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York. De Long's lyrics can be heard in such songs as "Business," "Living Among," "Socialism New York City," "Money Star Hustle," and "No Glove/No Love" (with Chloe Dzubilo and Snax).

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