Art: Interview

Gran Fury
by Robert Gober


Fueled by the imperatives of the epidemic, and armed with a healthy knowledge of advertising’s insidious strategies, Gran Fury, barely three-years-old, is on a roll. Taking their name from the Plymouth automobile used nationwide for undercover police work, this collective of diverse individuals grew up in and out of AIDS activism, committing themselves to visual projects that address the subtext of the crisis. Talking to Gran Fury after one of their long weekly meetings was a heady mix of humor, arguments, and very serious issue-talk, as they alternately impressed me, informed me, and took me to task.

Robert Gober I’m surprised to see art magazines on your table.

Gran Fury Oooh! *(laughter)* That’s because we have reviews in them! *(laughter, jumbled jokes)*
GR We know where we’re headed. Now, what’s your question?

RG In the short time you’ve been working together, you’ve achieved great success. I know the art world would like to co-opt your projects, your ideals, and your issues within their parameters. What would you like from the art world, and how much are you resisting it? Or are you resisting it?

GF We want money.

GF We want money and access to public spaces.

GF We should clarify that, we want money for projects.

GF We want the art world to recognize that collective direct action will bring an end to the AIDS crisis. And that collective direct action can mean a whole lot of things across a whole lot of communities: we have already been co-opted, we are complicit with the art world’s institutions in what we hope are strategic ways. We do not only act as an irritant, we also point to what’s going on in society at large. Whenever we can, we steer the art world projects into public spaces so that we can address audiences other than museum-going audiences or the readership of art magazines.

RG But are you aware of yourselves fitting into some sort of art historical continuum? Or do you care?

GF I think some of us are . . . I’m not, ’cause I don’t know art history, but some of my betters do and I’m learning. (laughter)

GF I don’t think the art historical context of Gran Fury is very significant for any of us, is it?

GF We’re very saturated with it to some degree . . .

**GF** Our main beat isn’t with the art world, it’s with the United States government’s lack of response and the political crisis that underlies the medical crisis of AIDS. If we can use the art world as a tool to broadly articulate concerns, then we are glad for that support.
personal seeing is that after the AIDS crisis is over, I’ll be happy to talk endlessly about when we started, why we did this, and how it fits in to what other artists were doing at the time—to analyze it.

GF The problem with being “flavor of the month” of the art world is that it can disempower others from believing they can be doing the same thing. The truth is, any group of individuals could get together, and are getting together, to get information out on the street.

RG Your piece in the Venice Biennale, included images of the Pope and an erection, with texts that exposed homophobia and addressed safe sex. The ensuing scandal almost closed the Aperto section of the Biennale. What happened?

GF We had asked them if we could have a public project, and they said that was not possible. So we decided, given the nature of the exhibition and the amount of public that would be circulating, that we would go ahead and do it at the Biennale.

GF The president of the Biennale, Carandente, said, “You can’t use the Pope’s image in art. There’s no such thing as a political painting with the Pope in it. It’s not possible.” And I said, “Excuse me, go over to the Palace and look at the art on the walls! That’s all it is, propaganda with the Pope.”

GF Or read it as, “We’ve got the monopoly on using the Pope as art.”

GF The most attractive thing about the project seemed to be the fact that we would be in Italy and could address issues surrounding the Catholic Church and AIDS and Choice issues.

GF The circumstances—the scandal and the uproar around the installation of the piece—meant that people in that country who might otherwise not have seen the piece had the ideas of the text introduced to them.

RG When one of your installations causes controversy, do you feel responsible to respond in terms of education or outreach? Or do you choose to sit back and watch the chips fall?

GF In Venice, we fought to get it up. [When warned that the piece would be removed, the majority of the artists participating in the Aperto section, from around the world, signed a petition threatening to withdraw their work from the exhibition if Gran Fury were censored]. Once it was up, the press took over.

GF We did have a discussion amongst ourselves that it was our task to try and focus the press’ attention away from the scandal and on to the real scandal of the AIDS crisis itself.

RG And how did you do that?

GF Well, Mark and I did it by being at the Aperto, being available to talk to people and members of the press—and it worked.

GF The director said “There is no AIDS problem in Italy” to our faces. We said, “Excuse us, but we think there is,” and so we started talking to the press about that.
Sicily and in Northern Italy.

**GF** When we stage demonstrations, we try to provide a context for it. Outreach happens at the same time: speaking to people, in terms of media, in terms of factions—you try to provide as much context as possible. On one hand, there is an image, but on the other hand, you’re providing information and trying to clarify the issues and not be ambiguous, to make sense.

![Image of Gran Fury, Welcome to America, 1989, laserprinted billboard, corner of Houston Street and Broadway.](image_url)

**GF** We very often are censored at the bureaucratic level . . .

**GF** Our first billboard project ever in New York was “When a government turns its back on people, is it civil war?” We had reserved public billboard space, but at the last minute, when the content came up, the company said, “No, absolutely, no way,” and we were forced to put them up ourselves, illegally, on the sides of buildings.

**RG** You guys function greatest as an anonymous collective—why are you doing an interview?

**GF** We felt it was too coy for us to be really anonymous. By not giving interviews, it further mystified the silence around ourselves. Our methodology, is not so extreme or intricate that other people could not be making projects like ours in various new places, so it’s a way to add some context to the work and to also admit that as a group, although the projects have a uniglobal address, the actual discussion that creates those projects is anything but univocal.

**GF** We’re ten different personalities of a symbol, you know . . .

**RG** Speaking of voices. Marlene, you’re the only woman here. It’s inevitable that I ask how that happened or how this functions? Is your voice unique? And someone also told me that you’re the only heterosexual here.

**GF** Yes, I am.

**GF** And we don’t hate her.
crisis, like every other person in here. I always get singled out and it pisses me off because the rest of the group gets to function as a whole. I get a little irritated as to why I have to justify being a part of that whole.

GF It would be reductive to think one has to rely on biological classification to be a feminist, I consider myself a feminist. Nor does that imply that because every ethnicity possibly affected by the AIDS crisis is not sitting in this room that we don’t take a broader spectrum into consideration. The formation of this group happened in that fumbling, erratic, ridiculous way, that collectives are formed. Several women have been in this room. When Gran Fury began, it was an open collective and many people—it was a revolving door—came through. We stabilized in this configuration by chance. Marlene’s irritation, and I share it to a certain degree, is with the fact that we’re crippled in some ways by that membership but we are also empowered by that membership and by the fact that we hold ourselves responsible for examining privileges, entitlements and excesses that we’re afforded.

Gran Fury, Men Use Condoms or Beat It, 1988, offset lithography, 9 x 12 inches.
GF We should say that there have been times when the dynamic tension has been unpleasant or when we have been in very tenuous states. We interact in a somewhat familial way. We argue, we shriek, we interrupt each other. Part of that is a difficulty, and part of that is what makes us feel comfortable and what holds us together like family.

RG What else do you guys want to talk about that hasn’t been touched on?

GF That whole battle that went on with the NEA. Censorship often went on without ever articulating the word homophobia. But then, more disturbingly, for years, many of us who were screaming about homophobia and censorship in the arts have not been quick to name the kind of institutionalized and systemic censorship that happens on the level of access—through class, for instance. Say someone who fills out a NYSCA application and does not understand the process: getting a sponsoring organization, filling out a reasonable budget, and doing the project summary. Things are supposedly open to everybody, but they obviously are not. I sat on a panel for NYSCA and saw the enormous inequity in the sorts of applications that are turned in and turned down. NOT because there aren’t innovative video projects up in Harlem, not because there are no teenagers working to produce at the Educational Video Center and a million other places, but because the system and the way the art world hands out its funding exclude and censor as part of their process. The visibility that we gain as a group is not at the expense of, but often in replacement of other voices, other visibilities. So we’re trying now to collaborate with various organizations dealing with IV-drug use and HIV-related violence. This is something that’s really on the table for us in a big way, for me personally more than anything.

GF As the AIDS crisis continues, the populations of people affected are, more and more, the marginalized members of society. Teenagers, poor Americans, and people of color. We have a responsibility to recognize that we don’t automatically represent those people. So we have to make sure, since we have this opportunity, that we use it to represent people other than ourselves.

GF The issues are: what groups of people have been written off? Who is not being brought to the negotiating table?

GF In many ways, what happens in the art world replicates what happens in society. Women are routinely overlooked in the art world for a variety of reasons and they’re routinely overlooked in medical research. As a consequence, women who go into the hospital with pelvic inflammatory disease are not even HIV-tested because PID is not in the CDC definition...
In the beginning, we thought that the NEA would give us money to do these group
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RG Speaking about the NEA, it was always amazing to me in all that hub-bub that these people who were so interested in censoring were supposedly arguing from a moral point of view. If they are so loathe to dole out dollars to gay Americans, they should also be loathe to accept them—I pay an enormous amount of money in taxes. In other words, democracy’s okay as an idea, it should just be pro-rated. If you want to deny me certain civil rights, that’s one thing, just don’t charge me for them.

Gran Fury, Control, October 1989, Artforum, one page of a 4-page project, 10 1/4 x 10 1/2 inches.

GF The whole question of quality as being some sort of standpoint. Those Western European assumptions of quality, and what quality will be funded, is a euphemism for work that white eyes agree with or understand. (pause)

RG I read my horoscope in the New York Post this morning, it said I shouldn’t engage in any serious discussions. (laughter) But the one in the Daily News said I would find a lover tonight. (Riotous laughter and applause)

GF So just don’t have a serious discussion with a lover tonight.

GF Get serious!

RG Is there anything else that you wanted to . . .

GF No . . .
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