

## Contemporary Quilts: The NAMES Project Quilt



©Judy Weiser, 1990

Terry Goodwin with The NAMES Project Quilt, at the North Park Gallery, Victoria BC

## A Quilt to Comfort the Terrors of the Dark

by Judy Weiser

The arts are the main language of our emotions. When encountering complex, deep feelings, such as those precipitated by grief and loss, people frequently find verbal explanations lacking in intensity, and their healing blocked by unexpressed emotions. Trying to comprehend the death of someone due to AIDS can be tangled, as the disease's stigma, society's marginalization of people with AIDS and their loved ones, and the long slow process of the disease, can bring along social and personal issues that do not usually accompany life-threatening illnesses. In grieving the loss of people who have died of AIDS, a monumental art project has been created. *The NAMES Project Quilt* evolved as a process of mourning and healing through the practice of a

long-traditional folk-art: Quilting.

In the past few years, it has become a tradition that those left behind by AIDS-related deaths have chosen to make a three-foot by six-foot (coffin shroud sized) quilt panel to commemorate the lives lost, to keep the person's memory alive, and to bear witness to each person's importance and connection to those left grieving. These panels are then sewn together in larger sections, and displayed together as *The NAMES Project Quilt*, coordinated by national offices in each country. *The Names Project* began in San Francisco in 1987. By October of that year, over two hundred thousand people had viewed the inaugural display of the Quilt in Washington, DC. Three short

years later, the Quilt is now the largest ongoing folk arts project in the world. It consists of close to eleven thousand three-by-six foot panels, and covers an area the size of eleven football fields. The Canadian Quilt has over four hundred panels. A recent PBS Television special, *Common Threads*, informs us that "each year the acreage re-doubles."

In 1981, there were just over three hundred cases of AIDS reported world wide; three years later there were nine thousand. Last year, the number of reported AIDS cases passed the two hundred thousand mark. As of January 1, 1990, there had been three thousand three hundred and sixty reported cases in Canada alone. Several of these are—or were—my friends.

Whether you realize it yet or not, you likely know someone who is living with AIDS, or who has died from its consequences. This point is very clearly and quietly communicated when you view a local showing of the Quilt. Each one of these rows and rows of soft bright gravestones, colored blankets hugging the walls and floors, is a person whose life will not be forgotten. The massive Quilt they form glows with a terrible beauty.

In July 1989 several hundred panels of the Canadian *NAMES Project Quilt* were shown at the Vancouver Art Gallery. I spent five days at the Gallery as part of the "emotional support" team—the guidelines for presenting the Quilt in any venue require emotional support workers as well as security monitors. I didn't know what to expect, but went as a volunteer to be on hand if people needed someone to talk with, or just to stand by in silent support.

I know that healing comes not from forgetting the lost one, but from remembering them, from acknowledging what has disappeared, but also what stays alive in memory and in artifacts. It is what made the living so special that makes the quilt panels so dear. When we cannot act to effect a change or reverse an injustice, our frustration demands that at least we bear witness—silently or loudly—to what has passed before our eyes. In much the same tradition, I write to bear witness to my experience last July.

*She stood with fingertips lightly touching the young man's photograph sewn onto the quilt: "He was my son, my baby, and I didn't even get the chance to say good-bye..."*

Viewing the hundreds of colorfully decorated soft fabrics is an encounter quite unlike any other, and it brought in a very different—and much larger—audience than the Art Gallery is used to. The personal experiences that the Quilt precipitated in viewers proved to be as individually varied as a quilt's many panels. Yet the whole of it all—the sum of those hundreds of uniquely memorializing details that define and contain the life of a treasured friend, lover, brother, sister, or child—composed a mosaic of raw feelings in people that begged to be articulated, demanded validation.

*As he finished viewing the room full of brightly colored soft fabrics representing our British Columbia deaths, the sixty-ish gentleman said to me, "I haven't spoken to my son since the day he told me he was a homosexual...I warned my wife that coming here today wouldn't change my mind. But I want to tell you that I'm going home to phone him now, and try to talk to him if he'll let me..."*

It wasn't just that he'd had this very private inner understanding, but that he felt he must tell me about it. This has been the most consistent theme of my experience with the Quilt. People not only feel deeply, they also feel a need to bear witness, just as the quilt bears witness to the lives it memorializes.

*The sadness became empowering, reaching through isolation, joining us through its crushing grief into a community of shared experience.*

The anecdotes and explanations people offered not only validated their grief, but also proved that *this* person mattered, that this life was not in vain or lost to anonymity, and therefore could be seen to have had purpose and value that survived the bodily death. It was a salve to those who grieved to see how others were touched enough to pause and read, to know and share the pervasive sadness and the insane waste of life.

I was a stranger, known only by my "Professional Person" ribbon. Offering whatever support was asked for, trying not to intrude and yet also to be available if wanted or needed, I felt powerless to help at more than a surface level. In surrendering to this acceptance, I could join the river of energy flowing about the room.

The cloth panels on the wall were enormously strong in their visual impact. Equally strong were the interactions they precipitated amongst the viewers, with a solitary witness privately encountering a loved one, or with the many viewers quietly interweaving amidst each other.

Complete strangers hugged without speaking. Tears were comforted by people who didn't know they could. People bonded together in the common experience of a moment of the deepest passion: human compassion itself.

*"I have been helping my family make my quilt now, before I die, so that I'd have some choice about what I want to have on it. Also, that way we can talk more easily about my dying as we stitch."*

The speechless horror of this disease and its consequences has been made tangible through the softest of arts—a vital brilliance that must be seen to be understood. Yet the heart's understanding seems wordless, impossible to explain. Fifteen thousand people came in five short days, bearing witness by their presence that the lives the Quilt memorializes have indeed made a difference—a difference with an enduring imprint.

*"They deserved it," muttered one man passing by in the lobby, refusing his daughter's request to join her inside.*

I recognize that AIDS has quickly become pandemic, with no "type" of person untouched, yet my own heart's attention keeps being pulled towards Gay men. For any viewer of the Quilt the heart-shaking consequences of this disease amongst Gay men are terribly evident. It is clear that every individual whose memorial panel appears as part of the Quilt was loved and treasured, and that they are excruciatingly missed. Yet knowing that not all that love could be given and received fully and openly added to the sorrow.

They had all died of AIDS, not just Gay men, but these days just about anyone. Viewing and contemplating, I quickly comprehended that I could just as easily have been infected as the next person visiting or working there, and this random unpredictability I find part of the raw terror AIDS conveys to me.

The names were read each hour. Those who had died were sometimes identified by their full names, sometimes by first name and coded initials only. Sometimes I felt punched in the chest as I heard a name I recognized, but hadn't expected to be dead.

ning of this incredible process (in the truest sense of incredible), at least one answer to the power of the Quilt is that you don't have to be Gay to understand. Once you have encountered the Quilt and its message of love-and-loss, people's differences may not make such a difference any more. It is not just a heavy sadness, but also a stubborn defiance.

We are all grieving our own losses, and in this universality we find a common bond. We are all dying, though few of us are so sure as to its imminence. Five panels were added during the exhibit; two Vancouver people died of AIDS during the five short days it was displayed.

*Sometimes I scream  
When the sorrow and the grief come back  
in huge, treacherous waves  
I tremble, alone in the storm  
I stand up naked and cold  
So fragile  
So wounded  
And I scream like a whale  
for a rest  
for some peace.*

*...from a quilt made for Peter by Gerald Paul-Hus, Montreal, 1989*

*The NAMES Project Quilt wraps us in our vulnerability and human frailty, as we mourn the much-to-early deaths so unjustly imposed. Certainly, tears do not have any sexual politics. □*

*Judy Weiser is a registered psychologist and art therapist, and the Director and Training coordinator of the Phototherapy Centre and Photoexplorations in Vancouver, Canada. She specializes in teaching Mental Health professionals the therapeutic uses of snapshots and photographs. Weiser is the past editor of the journal Phototherapy. She is the author of numerous articles and is presently completing a book entitled The Secret Lives of Snapshots. Weiser is also a photographer who has exhibited her work in galleries across Canada and internationally.*

*Contact Judy Weiser at the Phototherapy Centre,*

Contact: Judy Weiser, PhotoTherapy Centre, 1300 Richards St. (#205), Vancouver, Canada, V6B 3G6; 604-689-9709.

Email: [jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com](mailto:jweiser@phototherapy-centre.com)

Website: [www.phototherapy-centre.com](http://www.phototherapy-centre.com)



Panel made by François Vaillant for his lover Garth, 3' x 6', detail

*She was my lover, my soul-mate, my friend. I am hurting; I am so empty. My heart is wounded and bellowing in pain. I try to breathe, but a knife is slicing my chest. Will I ever be able to go on? This quilt is the only thing I have left of her. I ache so deeply.*

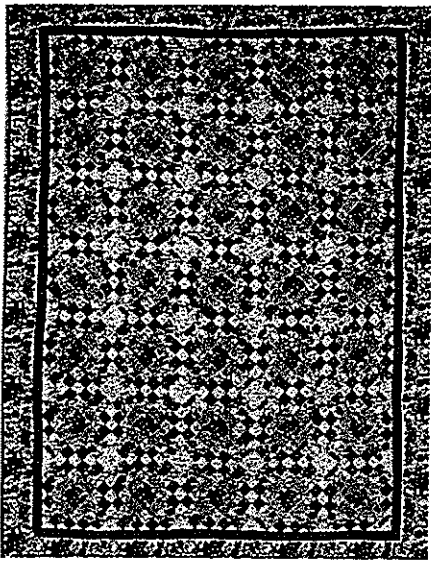
People came to see certain friends' panels, much as one would visit a gravestone to say good-bye again. People went looking, hoping against hope that they wouldn't find a certain name. Some had the occasion (as I did) to go looking for a panel for a dear friend believed to be dead, and then a day later find him wandering through the exhibit, still alive, but deeply grieving. We met with a joyous hug of relief, tinged with sadness that death was only postponed, not conquered.

How can this monumental crystallization of grief be comprehended and discussed? Most viewers were overwhelmed long before halfway around the exhibit. Eyes and hearts saturated, people appeared stunned and muted.

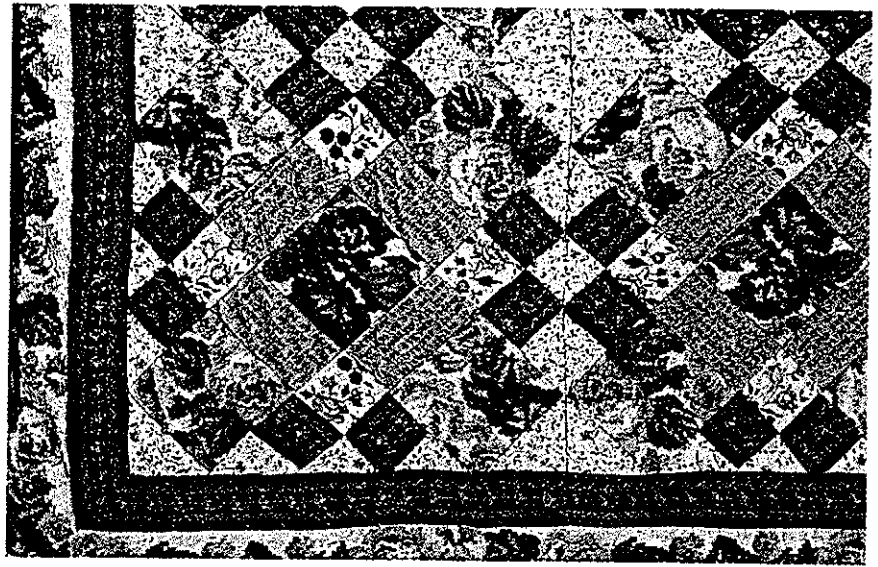
For me it is not just an AIDS quilt; it's also a universal-grief quilt. A quilt to comfort the terrors of the dark, hugging warmth tightly around. I watched as it tucked people into their memories and thoughts. The pervasive sadness reached beyond individual stories. At a deeply subconscious archetypal level the sadness became empowering, reaching through isolation, joining us through its crushing grief into a community of shared experience.

The Quilt originally belonged to people losing lovers, but in its "spread of hope" it has dipped into a common well of sadness, into the very fragility of life and our own mortality. All viewers, including support workers, occasionally found ourselves sobbing unexpectedly—more in grief for all humankind than for just the few individual deaths we had personally encountered.

Without wishing to take away from the right (and validation) of Gay men, who perceive themselves to have been essentially at the begin-



*Heirloom Quilt, front*



*Heirloom Quilt, detail*

Front Cover: Wendy Lewington Coulter, *Heirloom Quilt*, cotton, rayon, polyester batting, typewriting, thread, 51" x 68", photo: Whyte Museum of the Canadian Rockies, Banff, AB. Border: front of quilt; inset: reverse of quilt. When the front of the quilt is examined closely, the typed words in each pink block tell a terrifying story of domestic violence. Coulter writes that the title, *Heirloom Quilt*, refers to "patterns of behavior and codes of silence and acquiescence which families pass on, generation after generation."

GALLERY

WOMEN ARTISTS

Issue Number 9

*Tracing Threads*

*Black Women Artists  
in the American South*

by Malaika Favorite  
page 31

*Women Artists  
Tell Their Own Stories*

36 Danyèle Alain  
40 Sue Rodgers  
45 Maxine Stanfield  
46 Hélène Plourde  
48 Gladys Nieves  
50 Sveva Caetani  
52 Jocelyne Tremblay  
54 Lorna Ritz

39 Nights of Tears  
by Judith Hoffman

42 The Body of Us  
by Wendy Cadden

*Books*  
page 55

*Artists' News*  
page 57

*Women Artists' Registry  
Information and Guidelines*  
page 60

*Special Focus: Contemporary Quilts*

Editorial  
page 2

4 Healing the Past,  
Inventing the Future  
by Wendy Lewington Coulter

6 The Bitter Nest  
by Faith Ringgold

9 A Declaration of Love  
by Deborah Felix

10 Penny Sisto

12 Dreams and Visions  
by Ellen Anne Eddy

13 Three Concepts  
by BACKGROUND Theatre

14 Jeannie Kamins

15 Barbara Todd

16 A Quilt to Comfort  
the Terrors of the Dark  
*The NAMES Project Quilt*  
by Judy Weiser

19 Out of Silence:  
Contemporary Quilts  
by Radka Donnell

22 Randy Frost

23 Jan Harrison

24 The Crystal Quilt: A  
Performance and Its Legacy  
by Patrice Clark Koelsch

25 Footnotes:  
A Conversation Continued  
by Suzanne Lacy