HYPERALLERGIC

Art Review

For Chloe Dzubilo, Art and Advocacy Were Inseparable

As an HIV-positive trans woman and advocate, Dzubilo faced challenges that should have been history by the early 2000s, yet persist today.

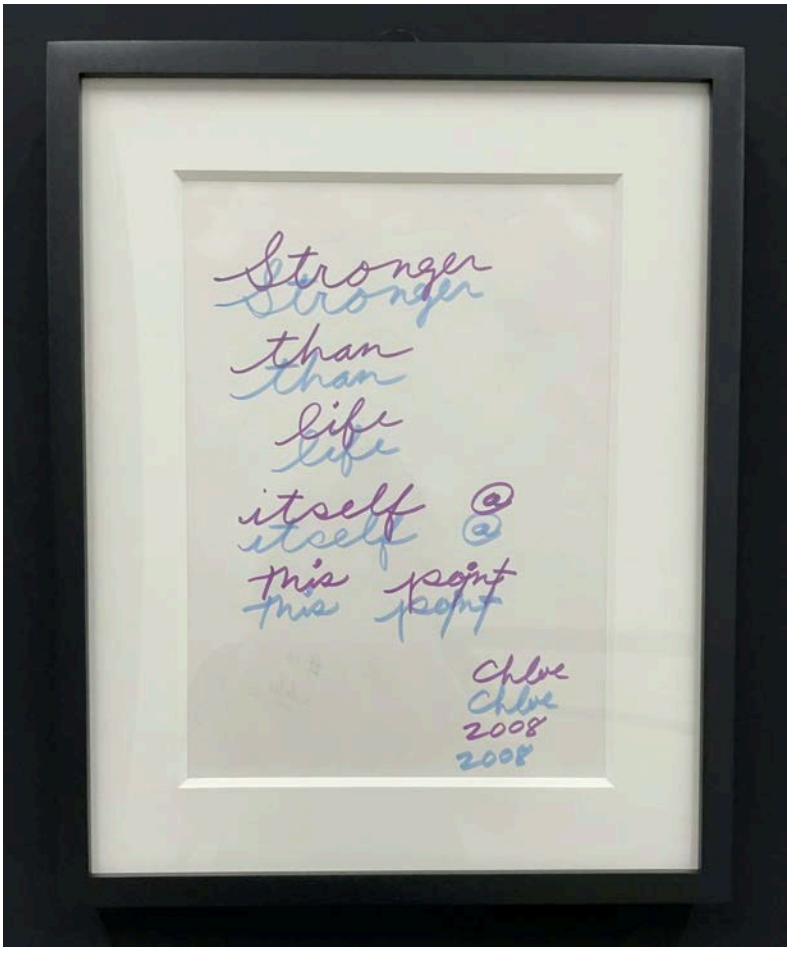
Natalie Haddad July 14, 2025

Chloe Dzubilo, "Untitled (Trans)," detail (c. 1995), feather, photo, paper, marker (all photos Natalie Haddad/*Hyperallergic*)

Along a wall of framed pen and marker drawings in ***Chloe Dzubilo, The Prince George Drawings*** at Participant Inc. is a text work that simply reads: “Stronger than life itself @ this point.” Invoking strength in the face of adversity can read as an empty cliché, but Dzubilo’s work from 2008, with its “@ this point,” posits strength as necessity more than inspiration.

There's no question of the artist's strength here, or her need for it. The exhibition is named for the Prince George, a subsidized housing complex for people with HIV/AIDS where Dzubilo lived from 2000 until her death in 2011. Born in Connecticut in 1960, the artist became a fixture in New York's East Village art scene after moving to the city in 1982, performing with the Blacklips Performance Cult and the band Transisters. After her AIDS diagnosis in 1987, she focused on advocacy for HIV care and prevention and support for transgender people.

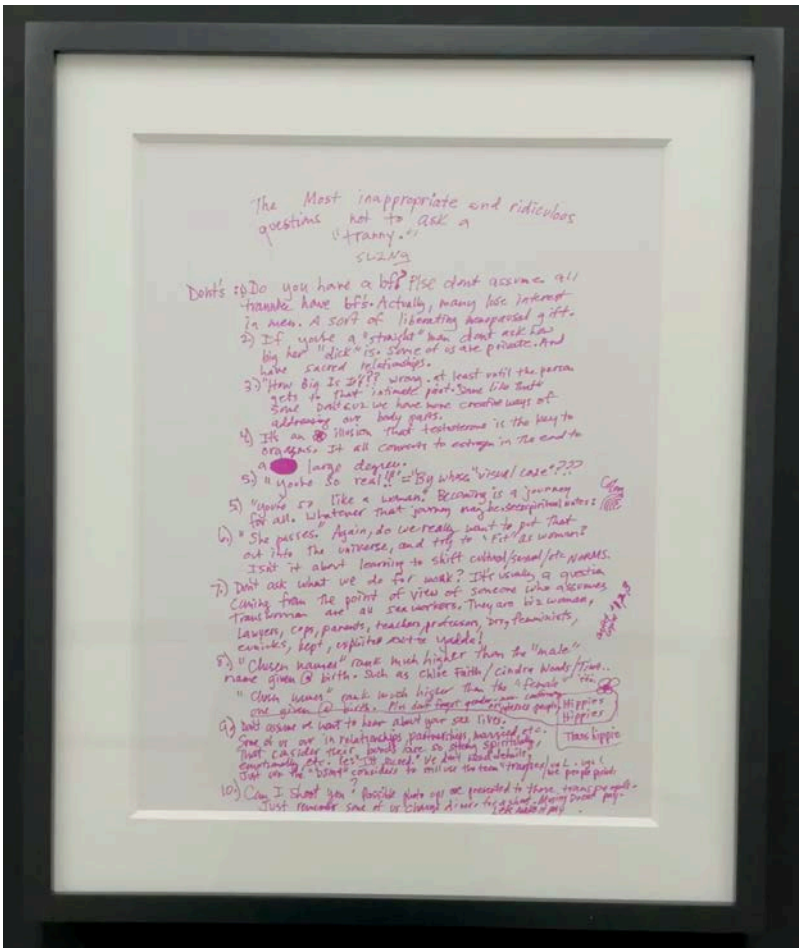
The Prince George Drawings centers diaristic works on paper from 2008 to 2011 that narrate her life as a transgender woman living with HIV. Some have drawings, others are purely text, but all have an intimate tone, as if Dzubilo is speaking to us directly. She addresses both personal obstacles, like bedbugs at the Prince George or her treatment by medical providers, and broader social issues, such as the pathologizing and exploitation of trans women and the debilitating side effects of HIV medications.



Chloe Dzubilo, "Untitled (Stronger Than Life Itself)" (2008), ink on paper

It may seem that Dzubilo was making these drawings long ago, but it was already more than 20 years after the AIDS epidemic began to devastate queer communities in the United States, causing politicians and popular culture to double down on homophobia and transphobia, and around 40 years after the Stonewall riots brought LGBTQ+ civil rights to the streets. Dzubilo faced challenges that should have been history by 2008, yet persist today.

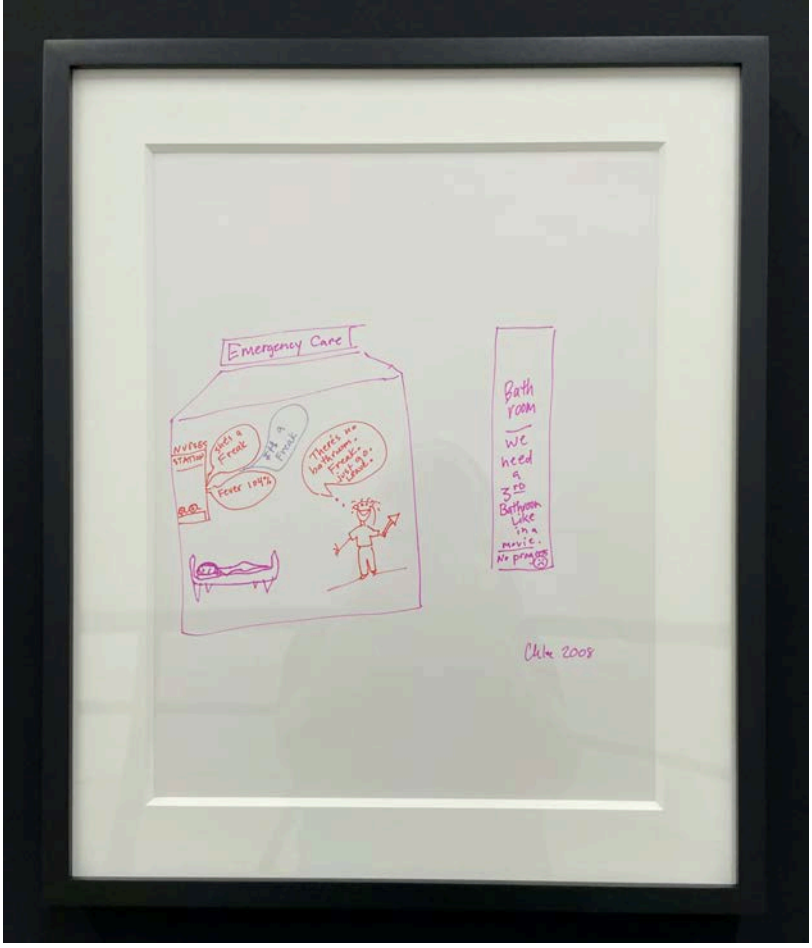
"The Most Inappropriate and Ridiculous Questions" (2008), a list of "dont's" to say to trans women, stands out precisely for this reason. All you have to do is watch TV, go on social media, or talk to random people, and chances are you'll hear some of these comments. I won't repeat those that are blatantly offensive, but even apparently lesser offenses are insidious in their disrespect, such as referring to people by their deadname and using terminology like "passing," which presupposes a standard of what constitutes a woman (or man).



Chloe Dzubilo, "The Most Inappropriate and Ridiculous Questions" (2008), ink on paper

As co-curator Nia Nottage suggests in an accompanying essay, the notion of "passing" has a double meaning: the colloquial sense of appearing to be cisgender or straight and passing as physically healthy. Both reinforce stigmas that rely on a baseline of normativity, and together, they expose the connection between physical health and gender- or sexual (hetero)normativity.

None of this is uncharted territory, but Dzubilo takes it on with exceptional clarity and frankness. One cartoon-like drawing records an exchange in an emergency room between the artist and hospital staff who call her "it" and "freak" and refuse her use of the women's bathroom. The largest work in the show, the 89-inch-tall (226 cm) "Untitled (Stop Pathologizing Me)" (2011), depicts a headless human body sketched on yellow paper, with the title written at the top. Alongside the figure is the text: "It's 2011. Transsexualism in the DSM4 is still considered a mental illness." (In fact, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders only **removed "gender identity disorder"** in 2017, replacing it with "gender dysphoria.")



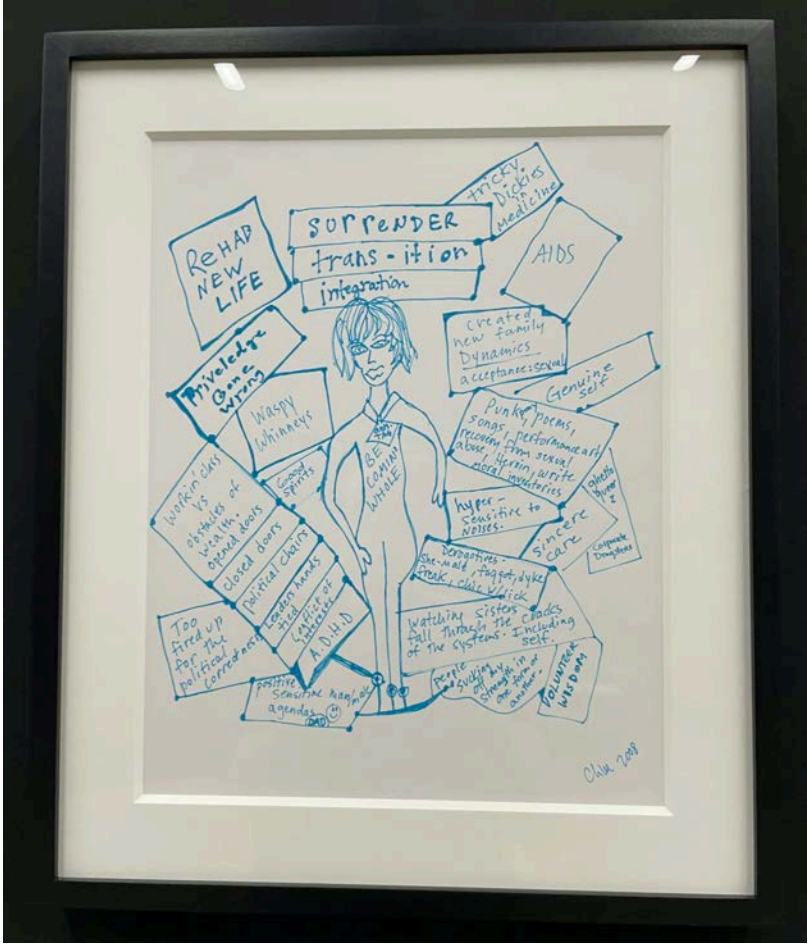
Chloe Dzubilo, “Untitled (Emergency Care)” (2008), ink on paper

The drawings also allude to the resulting suppression when people advocate for themselves rather than wait for government programs to advocate on their behalf. “Untitled (Fashionista on the Cross)” (2008) pairs a drawing of a human figure atop a crucifix with the text: “Sanctify the transperson. Fabulous. Then crucify them if they don’t cooperate with others’ agendas.” Implicit in this is a critique of the systemic condemnation of those who don’t comply with their society’s entrenched gender- and heteronormative roles, which plays out not only in explicit discrimination but also in subpar living conditions and prohibitive healthcare costs. (Though the focus of the exhibition is AIDS medication, the same can be said of much gender-affirming care, even with health insurance, then as now.)

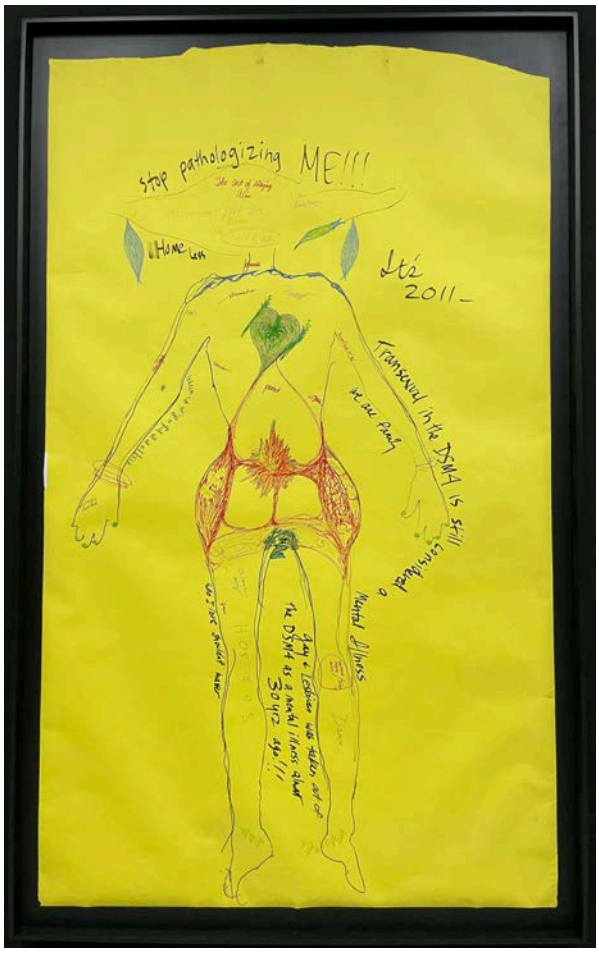
Personal voices make a difference. Dzubilo’s accounts dissolve the distance between life and art and present viewers with her everyday experiences of discrimination, disenfranchisement, and living with a deadly disease — confronting many with these realities, but commiserating with others. One benefit of hosting the show at a sympathetic nonprofit art space like Participant Inc. (whose board of directors includes pioneering LGBTQ+ artists Justin Vivian Bond and Vaginal Davis) is that it ensconces Dzubilo’s life and legacy in an environment of care and compassion. Ideally, a catalog would accompany the show and be distributed broadly enough that diverse audiences — encompassing people who will never make it to the gallery and have no active stake in the subject matter — would encounter it.

The work won't speak to everyone, but Dzubilo's battles for adequate healthcare and living conditions, and yes, her strength, will resonate with unexpected audiences. As rights and respect for LGBTQ+ people regress in the US, any step forward is a rallying cry.

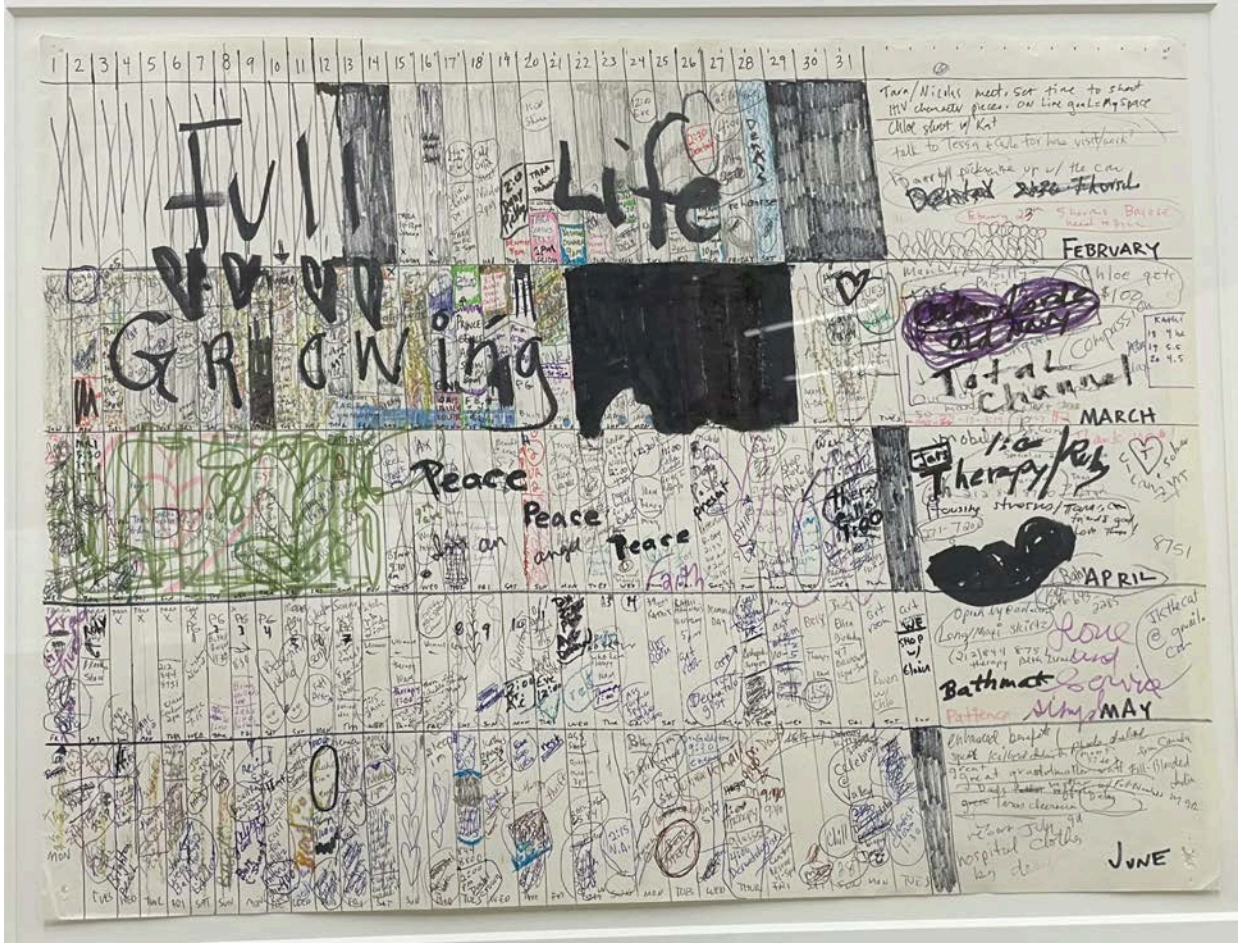
Chloe Dzubilo, "Untitled (Fashionista on the Cross)" (2008), ink on paper



Chloe Dzubilo, “Untitled (Surrender)” (2008), ink on paper



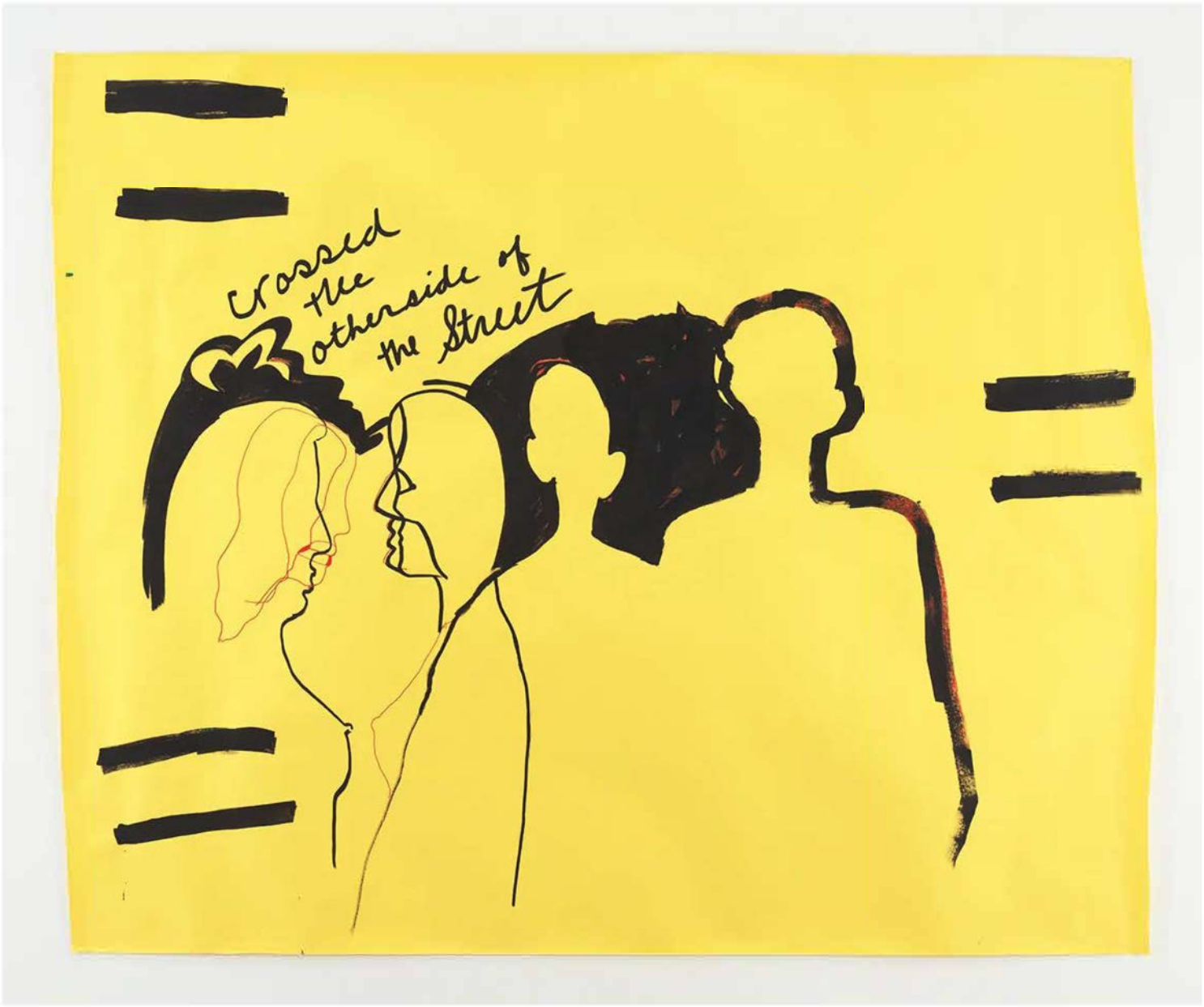
Chloe Dzubilo, “Untitled (Stop Pathologizing Me)” (2011), paint marker, colored pencil ink on craft paper



Chloe Dzubilo, “Untitled (Full Life Growing)” (2009), ink on paper

Chloe Dzubilo, The Prince George Drawings *continues at Participant Inc. (116 Elizabeth Street, Floor One, Lower East Side, Manhattan*) *through July 20. The exhibition was curated by Alex Fleming and Nia Nottage.*

Gavilán Rayna Russom’s Oh Remain*, a live electronic sound work, will take place at Participant Inc. on July 16 at 7:30pm.*



Courtesy Visual AIDS and Estate of Chloe Dzubilo | Chloe Dzubilo & T De Long – Untitled (Crossed the Street)

ARTS AND CULTURE

Chloe Dzubilo And The Perilous Path For

“In 20 yrs, this will all be commonplace.”

These words were first penned in 2008 by Chloe Dzubilo. A trans femme, recovered heroin addict, and long-term HIV survivor who had stayed alive more than two decades after she was first diagnosed with a virus that killed her partner in the late ‘80s, Chloe knew what it meant to play the long game, to endure trials that nobody should have to face. By 2008, she’d lived many lives: champion show-horse jumper, drug addict, lead singer of a band called the Transisters, and advocate for younger trans women and sex workers. Looking two decades into the future—still three incomprehensible years from where we stand today—she envisioned a world where trans life was obvious and indisputable. Still, she knew that the future required a fight. In a life marked by long-term disability and routine dehumanization by medical professionals, Chloe held her head high, the act of daily survival elevated to an artful refusal to accept the world’s hostile terms. The challenges she wove into her life and left behind in her art are ones we still face today, making her a critical teacher for troubled times.

Chloe made a future for girls like me to live in. When I first learned about her in 2023, stumbling upon a Visual AIDS book about her legacy, the significance of her life and its ongoing lessons for today was indisputable. More than a decade after she died at the age of 50, Chloe’s ability to persist through so many painful moments, wringing as much joy from each day as she knew how, was a revelation. I’d already spent a number of years looking back at the lessons of older generations of queer and trans elders, trying to make sense of the growing dissonance between the normalization of our lives and the ever-rising backlash directed our way. But coming into contact with Chloe felt somehow different.

Like so many trans elders, Chloe seemed larger than life. Her accomplishments, and the spirit of community-building she channeled, inspired me beyond measure. Yet the challenges she faced—so many of them a product of inhabiting a complex body that medical authorities simply refused to take seriously—were just as present in her life's story. The hard and scary stuff that I felt got minimized in retellings of our brave and heroic elders was always critical to how I understood her.

As I've gotten to know Chloe better through interviews with her chosen family and visits to her archive of art and writing at NYU's Fales Library, I've felt an intimacy that has at times become confounding. Chloe is so present in my life that I almost forget that she died when I was in 10th grade, years before the uptick in trans consciousness that would come to save my life. She knew others would follow in her footsteps, and she honored those she too had followed in a poem called "Dedication," with photos of Jayne County and Marsha P. Johnson framing the title. "So here's my humble offering for/ all the struggling goddesses yet to walk. / Things change and many things don't."

A new show of Chloe's artwork, currently on display at Participant Inc. in Manhattan's Chinatown, is a fresh opportunity to expose the world to the lessons she learned. The show, on view through July 13 [**UPDATE**: It's been extended one week], captures Chloe grappling with her aging body and the hard work it took to make art through debilitating pain. Yet she kept at it all the same, trusting that others would follow in her wake and knowing we'd need her voice in the future. Vibrant and enduring, heartbroken and hard-working, Chloe reminds us how intertwined all of our liberations must be. Her gift will resonate into unknown futures long after we leave this earth.

. . .

Born in 1960 in Connecticut, the youngest of three kids, it would be many years before Chloe became Chloe, the activist and artist we know her as now.

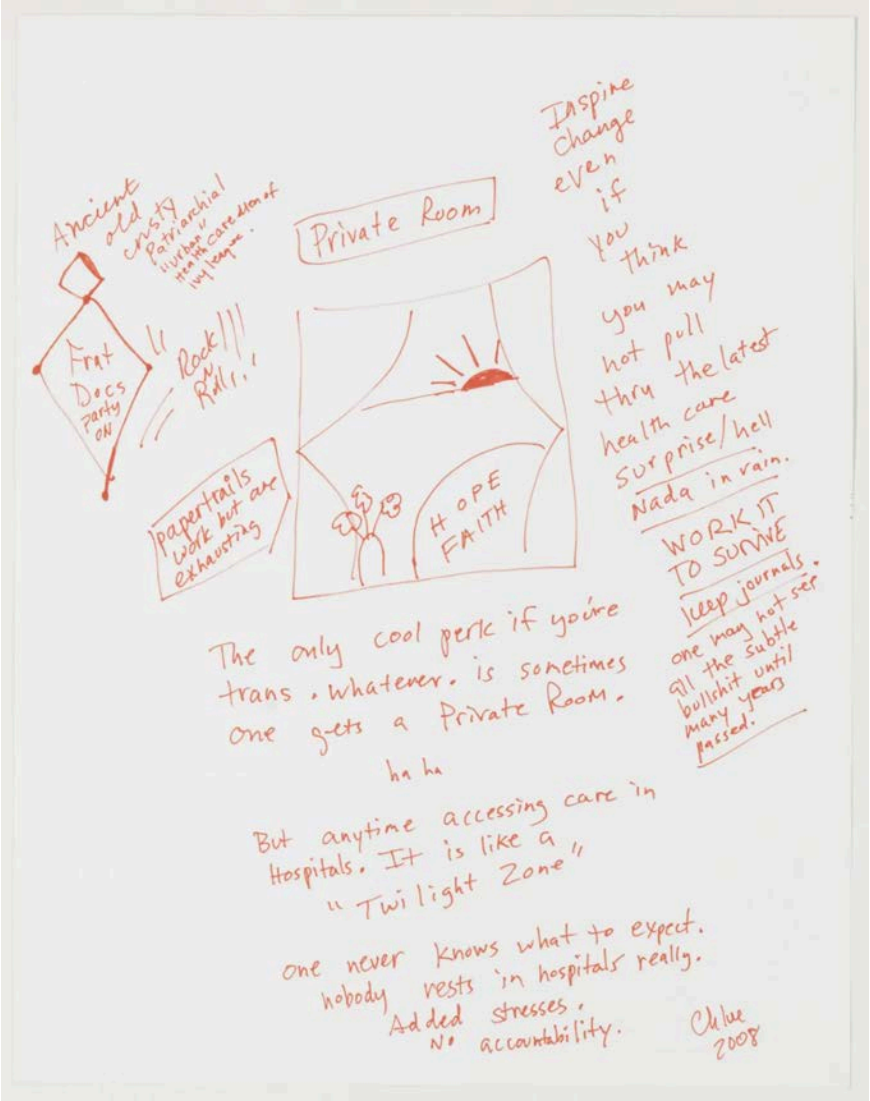
While a youthful love of horses stayed with her the rest of her life, her path took several twists and turns, especially after her career as a professional horse jumper was cut short when nine horses she rode were killed in a fiery car crash in 1980, just before a competition. The next decade was in many ways a blur: stints in art school, working at the club Studio 54, and a job as an art director for *The East Village Eye* happened alongside a debilitating heroin addiction and the mounting impact of HIV/AIDS deaths in her community. The virus took her first serious boyfriend, Bobby Bradley, in the late ‘80s.

The Prince George Drawings, named after the apartment building that Chloe called home at the end of her life, come primarily from the last few years before her death in 2011, though several pieces look back into these tumultuous earlier periods in her life. Chloe created many of them with the encouragement of T De Long, her husband who she met and married in 2007. While it’s not part of the show, a song the two co-produced, “No Glove, No Love,” sets the tone for much of the work on view, speaking to the urgent need to make art that could help others protect themselves from HIV/AIDS. Over a bouncing throwback house track, T raps, “Can I have your attention / 'Bout what we never mention / Clarify our intention / HIV prevention.”

For Chloe, who received her formal HIV diagnosis in 1987 but suspected she had seroconverted as early as 1982 while using a dirty heroin needle, the ‘90s and 2000s were a time to take stock of earlier losses, and then to turn around and apply those lessons to supporting others. Getting into recovery in the early ‘90s allowed her to come to terms with her addiction, and no longer numbing herself allowed her to realize she was trans, offering a fresh path forward to address her own needs and turn those insights into support for others. Her activism work often came in public-facing contexts, particularly when she got on stage to sing tracks she first recorded with her band the Transisters on their 1995 record *Goddesses of Pink Rock*. Yet she created the drawings on display in the show knowing that the many lessons

she'd learned over the years would need to be preserved after she was no longer around. There were so many moments of profound medical neglect, resilient community care, and self-revelation that she could interpret and pass along with just a few colored pens and a long storehouse of memory in her fragile, decaying physical body.

Hospitalization was a recurrent subject in her work. In *Untitled (Private Room)*, she captures a bright orange sun, emerging on the horizon, framed by curtains, flowers, and the words Hope and Faith (her middle name). "The only cool perk if you're trans .whatever. is sometimes one gets a Private Room. ha ha," she wrote, able to find levity even when describing these spaces as "like a 'Twilight Zone.'" "Inspire change even if you think you may not pull thru the latest health care surprise/hell," she scrawled down the right-hand margin of the piece, perhaps remembering a time where she'd been subjected to cruel treatment at Bellevue Hospital—one of the city's largest public hospitals—and then lectured a room of doctors before she even left

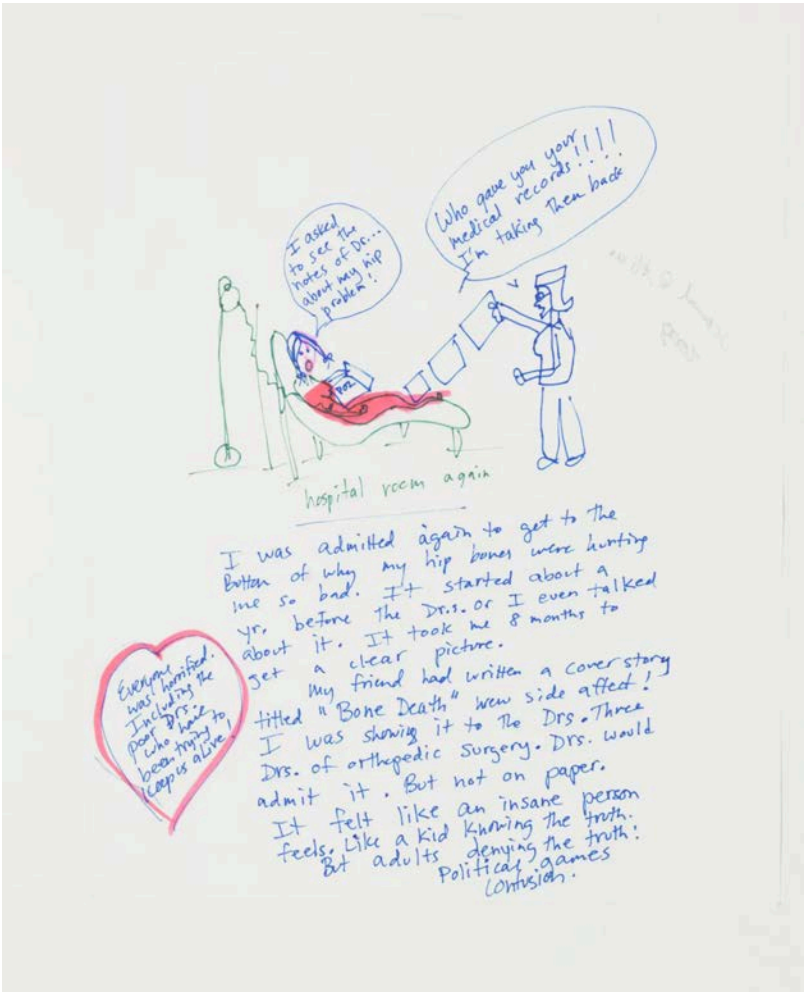


Chloe Dzubilo – Untitled (Private Room) | Courtesy of NYU Special Collections, Chloe Faith Dzubilo Papers (MSS.397), Visual AIDS, and Estate of Chloe Dzubilo, Photo: Christopher Burke Studios

the building, asked to speak up by a sympathetic nurse who knew she would alchemize her painful experience into support for those that followed.

In another drawing, Chloe lies in a hospital bed, holding a copy of *Poz Magazine.* It's a publication she graced three times as a cover model, full of useful information for long-term survivors like herself. In this case, she describes a cover story called "Bone Death," which spoke to recurrent hip bone problems she faced for over a year before receiving proper treatment, still treated skeptically by doctors angry at her for trying to access her medical charts. Even as she built a devoted support team that helped advocate for her in and around these moments of hospitalization, the brute reality of hostile medical workers persisted. "It felt like an insane person feels," she wrote. "Like a kid knowing the truth." In these words, it's hard not to feel Chloe standing at our side, seeing the same heightened backlash making our lives more impossible each day. She reaches out to the children who so often instinctively know they're different from other kids, yet face increasing barriers to basic care. And she speaks to the mental illness that so many of us face—problems we experience not because we're trans, but because staying alive as a trans person in this world means painful compromises at best, and cruelty and dehumanization that makes us crazy if left unchecked.

Chloe's drawing style is unschooled and practical. Its focus is conveying anything she felt like saying, and the images, while sometimes rudimentary, still sing in a way that is uniquely hers. Among the charms in these works is her use of doubled pens or markers, a tactic that gave her more to grip when joint pain threatened to make the work impossible. The words "Stronger than life itself @ this point," there first in purple and echoed behind in light blue, reveal the intense determination that drove her to make so much through the agony. Her focus could override what daily life often entailed: chronic, debilitating pain, hers alone to bear no matter how much help others gave her. While the doubled lines emerged as a practical choice, I can't help but



Chloe Dzubilo – Untitled (Medical Records) | Courtesy of NYU Special Collections, Chloe Faith Dzubilo Papers (MSS.397), Visual AIDS, and Estate of Chloe Dzubilo, Photo: Christopher Burke Studios

see a deeper symbolic meaning in them today: their echoing a reminder that we all make decisions about what we hope might linger on after our deaths. Chloe's choices were always oriented toward making more livable futures for others.

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Chloe was not afraid of aging. She understood the gift of getting older—of living well beyond what could have been expected of an HIV-positive trans femme who seroconverted years before reliable antiretroviral medication existed. The cumulative toll of her AIDS medication prematurely aged her body by 10 or 20 years, and she acknowledged that the medication sometimes made her feel "older than [her] grandparents." But she embraced the effect, telling people she was five years older than she was and that she looked good for her age. Chloe refused to feel shame about her body and made space for others struggling along similar lines—an embrace that helped her advocate for street sex workers and drug users she served while working at Positive Health Project, a syringe exchange she co-facilitated in the mid-90s. Her work there, among so many other roles she played, was honored in a short film called *There is a transolution*, created by her adopted daughter Viva Ruiz.

Old Hi-8 film footage captured her fragile and beautiful body while it still roamed the streets of Manhattan.

In a potential film treatment of her life, Chloe mused that "this film will have a very bittersweet ending and I don't think I can handle giving that to the world." Although they were married, T and Chloe never lived together full-time, because Chloe's housing-voucher apartment refused to let anyone else move into the lease. That meant that in the early morning hours of Feb. 18, 2011, after being put to sleep by her friend Alice O'Malley, Chloe woke up, likely disoriented by the complex cocktail of medications she consumed, and drifted out into the world. She eventually fell in front of an MTA train around 3 a.m. The same week she died, the *New York Times* published a piece about suicides among combat veterans suffering from PTSD, many of them on a similar mix of contraindicating pills. It's no wonder, then, that T has described her death as "pharmacide." Doctors continually disregarded her unique needs, and her years of accumulated self-knowledge about her body, any time she entered a hospital setting.

Though Chloe understood that her physical body would find a painful ending, she poured plenty of herself into the world that would live on in others. Her graceful dance with the body's finicky limits was consequential. In the Visual AIDS book about her life, JP Borum wrote, "Chloe's art isn't about isolated genius, it's about being part of a community." In a moment where governments worldwide are imperiling trans people at a speed that's astounded even those of us who were warning this was coming, Chloe lives on in the circles I inhabit. She is one of so many elders whose legacies I feel fortunate to share in my writing each day. In a list of roles she played throughout her life, written in a spiral notebook I found while visiting her archives, I most loved No. 11: "great connector and its a fav thing for me to do :))." What Chloe has taught me most is that while our bodies place a limit on all we can accomplish, the ability to grow our community, to expand who feels included in our company, is theoretically infinite, even after death.

At the show's opening, I met lots of people who knew Chloe while she was still alive—friends and acquaintances with little tidbits about her to share. So too did I meet others closer to my age, a younger generation stumbling our own way forward and looking reverently to those who have come before for how they managed to survive their own perilous times. The next morning, as I returned to her archives, I flipped through a photo book full of decades-old images of so many who have welcomed me into Chloe's still-present orbit. I felt her sun still burning bright in each of us. It's a radiance that's even more forceful today, and it's there to light the path ahead, no matter how perilous the way forward might seem.

Correction (6/30, 2:53 p.m. ET): The post has been updated to correct the year Chloe Dzubilo met T De Long.

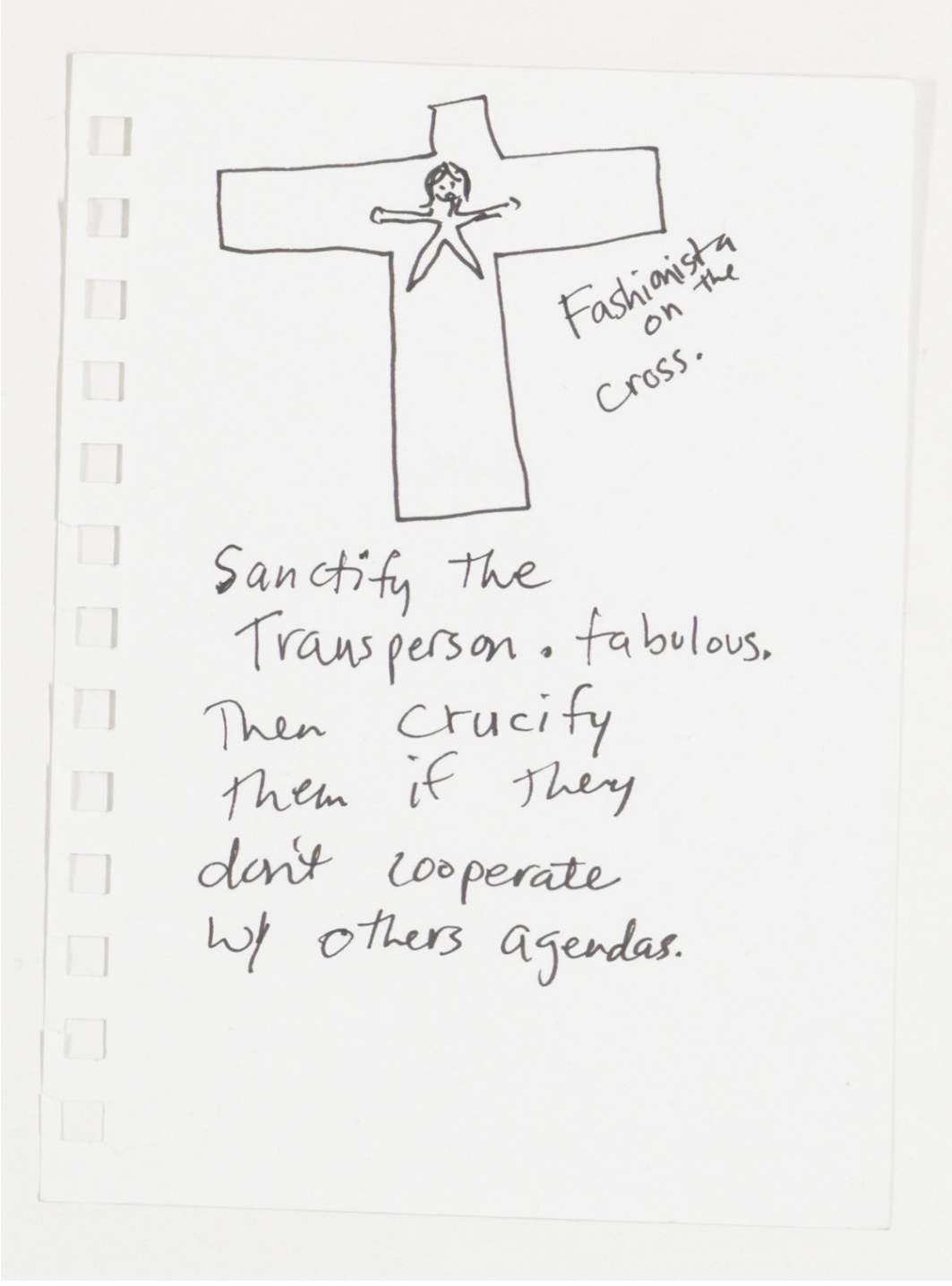
Recommended

IN BRIEF THE CRITICS' TABLE ART

Kissing TVs, an East Village Icon, and a Beloved Whippet: 3 Critics on 3 Must-See New York Shows

Our critics take a look at Sanya Kantarovsky at Michael Werner, Chloe Dzubilo at Participant Inc, and Rosemarie Trockel at Gladstone and Sprüth Magers.

This week, we welcome two new critics to the fold. Joining Johanna Fateman on Sanya Kantarovsky's weird-in-a-good-way new works are Mary Simpson, writing on the acerbic conceptualism of Rosemarie Trockel, and Jeanette Bisschops on a posthumous exhibition of intimate and irate drawings by Chloe Dzubilo.



Chloe Dzubilo, Untitled (Fashionista on the Cross), 2008. Image courtesy of NYU Special Collections.

Chloe Dzubilo
Participant Inc. | 116 Elizabeth Street
Through July 13, 2025

Chloe Dzubilo's first posthumous exhibition "The Prince George Drawings" at Participant Inc. brings together a selection of the artist's diaristic, manifesto-like line drawings, created between 2008 and 2011. Curated by Alex Fleming and Nia Nottage, the show takes its title from the Prince George, a HASA (HIV/AIDS Services Administration) supportive housing site, where Dzubilo lived for more than a decade. After moving to New York in 1982, Dzubilo quickly became a fixture of the blossoming East Village art scene, with jobs at Studio 54 as well as the art magazine East Village Eye, and as the lead singer of the punk band Transisters. Her HIV diagnosis in 1987 thrust her into the frontlines of Trans and HIV advocacy.

Going into the exhibition, I expected the artist's simple drawings—scrawled in pink, red, green, and blue ink on paper, neatly framed and hung interspersed throughout the gallery—to feel like a poignant, but distant, historical record, a time capsule. Instead, Dzubilo's acidic voice, defiantly and humorously captured in her penned narrations, collapses the distance in a chorus of conversations, rants, and hopes that feel urgently current in a time of Trans persecution. Dzubilo's starkly evocative phrases—like "bed bugs in building funded for people w / AIDS," "lost SO much art in the 80's, 90's," "too fired up for political correctness"—are sometimes accompanied by drawings of herself in a hospital bed. For one scene, in which she's shown attending a medical appointment with her friend Lori, the artist has rendered her own body in pink ink; she lies on her side facing us as she's examined by a top gastroenterologist "for people w/ Aids," his eyes wide with excitement as he recounts a story about a "hot transexual blonde" he once knew.

Dzubilo died in 2011 at the age of 50. Her partner, T De Long, would later call it a "pharmacide." The surviving drawings aren't just a testimony to her legacy, they are also depictions of embodied analog resistance from a bygone era of activism, predating the aesthetics of digital self-disclosure. Their power lies in how they resist spectacle, documenting survival without the urge to perform, insisting on unfiltered intimacy.—Jeanette Bisschops