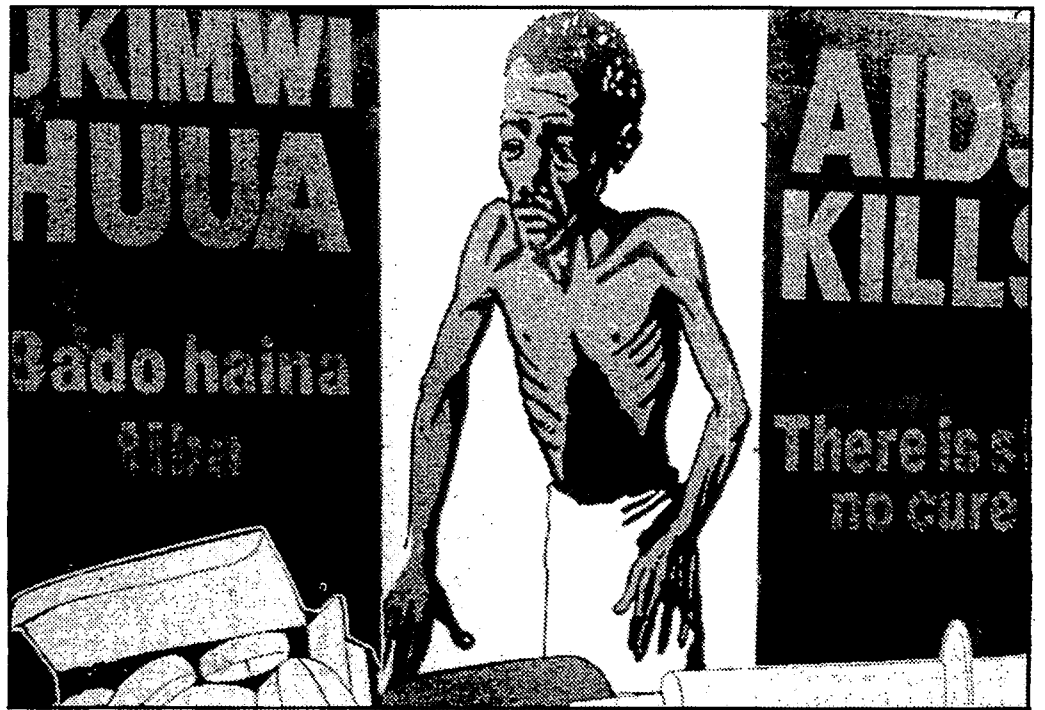


YOUR

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An American musician, Margaret Becker, poses for a photograph with an Aids orphan during her visit to Nairobi last year and an Aids poster in Kenya. Who benefits from all this publicity?

By DANIEL HARRIS

Aids may be the first disease to have its own gift shop - Under One Roof - now at the epicentre of a burgeoning industry of Aids kitsch.

Catering to an upscale clientele beaming with good intentions, the store, on Market Street in San Francisco's Castro District, USApeddles Aids mementos as shamelessly as tourists traps middle souvenirs.

For example there are Keith Haring tote bags; and T-shirts stenciled with the words "We're Cookin' Up Love for People With Aids." The boutique also sells a unique line of Aids-related sympathy cards, including one picturing a seductive man leaning inconspicuously against a tombstone angle.

Inside is a caption that smacks of an undertaker's condolence and reads: "I wonder at times why some are chosen to leave so soon. Then I remember who has left, and I know God must have wanted them home because he missed them."

One of the store's best selling items is a macabre coffee-table book lavishly illustrated and presumably meant for bored guests to casually thumb through while ignoring the presentation of death as political knickknack.

Although Under One Roof donates its profits to a variety of Aids-relief organisations, commercial businesses have not hesitated to wrap their products in the shroud of Aids to promote their own merchandise.

Benetton, in the early 1990s, placed in glossy magazines and ads that featured a skeletal male figure, obviously dying of Aids. Stretched out in a hospital bed, beneath a print of Jesus Christ, he is attended by a sobbing father, who clutches him like a rag doll, and a grief-stricken mother, who sits crumpled in despair.

In the ad's left hand corner, several words sit quietly in mourning, like unbidden guests maintaining respectful silence in the company of the family's anguish. They read: "United Colors

of Benetton For the nearest Benetton store location call 1-800-535-4491."

Aids kitsch now appears in mind-numbing variety - as rap songs and safe sex brochures, enormous airmail envelopes addressed to "A Better Place," and as Andre Durand's painting *Votive Offering*, which depicts an ethereal Princess Di, amid saints and bathed in celestial light, placing her hands on an emaciated Aids patient.

Aids has been so thoroughly sentimentalised that it inspires such publicity stunts as Elton John flying Ryan White to Disneyland or Miss America haunting Aids wards, where she consoles dozens of victims like a beauty among lepers.

Whoopi Goldberg has turned up at displays of the Quilt pushing around a man in a wheelchair, an image that serves as the allegorical emblem of the kitschification of Aids; just as politicians dandle babies, so celebrities use patients in wheelchairs as props for photo opportunities that dramatise their generosity and humanitarianism.

There now exists an entire social circuit of well-advertised benefits - like the dusk-to-dawn dance-a-thons held by a New York City's Gay Men's Health Crisis, each of them masterminded by an expensive breed of charity-ball impresario.

The events provide celebrities on the order of Marky Mark, Madonna and Lisa Minnelli with venues to shore up their credentials for tolerance or holster their flagging careers.

Although terminal illnesses have often been sentimentalised, the Aids epidemic in particular encourages the production of kitsch, inviting the abuse of activists, yellow journalists, New Age healers, pop psychologists, holistic chiropractors and Hollywood producers.

Manufacturers of kitsch use gaudy cosmetics and staggy lighting to make the pathetic more pathetic, the sad sadder, transforming Aids into a trite melodrama a copy bedtime story narrated in a teary sing song for the American public.

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Whoopi Goldenberg, Elton John: Inspired publicity stunts.

The propaganda surrounding Aids has embraced kitsch precisely because of the means by which the disease is transmitted.

Because Aids has ravaged communities of people toward whom Americans have shown little compassion, the marketing of the Aids "product" has involved considerable ingenuity, including a full-scale revision of the image of Aids sufferers.

Unlike less controversial illnesses, like multiple sclerosis or leukemia, Aids is vulnerable to kitsch in part because of the urgent need to render the victim innocent.

In order to thwart the demonisation of gay men, activists have attempted to conceal sexual practices that the public at large finds unacceptable behind a counter-iconography that has the unfortunate side effect of filling the art and writings about Aids with implausible caricatures of the victim as a beseeching poster child.

Among mainstream magazines, *People* has responded most strongly to the imperative to sup-



ply sanitised portraits of Aids victims in the name of fostering an atmosphere of tolerance and understanding.

The magazine played a pivotal role in the beautification of Ryan White, whom its editors transformed into a living Hallmark card, a modern version of Dickens's Tiny Tim wasting away on the heart, racked by chills and a hacking cough. *People's* pathetic accounts included tear-jerking scenes of mother and son kneeling in bedside prayer, and seemed to relish the gruesome decay of his frail body, which was described in detail, from his dainty feet in "huge, furry 'Bigfoot' slippers" to "his tiny blue fingers," which he constantly warmed over the coils of his mother's electric stove.

White appeared in *People's* frequent profiles as an anachronistic piece of Victorian, poet ic wraith who enjoyed wandering among the tombstones of his future burial place, the cemetery in Cicero, Indiana, which he preferred hands down, or so we were told to the cheerless plots of Ko-

komo, the home of those despicable bigots who railroaded him from their ranks because of his disease.

Almost from the inception of the epidemic, Aids propagandists have found themselves in a peculiar moral bind. On the one hand, they attempt to elicit compassion by portraying the victims of the disease as seraphic innocents, as Sylvia Golstaub does in her memoir, *Unconditioned Love*, when after returning to Florida from her son's funeral, she imagines that she sees him soaring like an angel outside of the window of the plane, waving his hand and saying, "Hi Mom! Hi dad! Don't worry! Be happy!"

At the same time, the epidemic's salesman must avoid portraying HIV-positive people as bed-ridden invalids unable to fight for their own interests. Those who die are often embelmed in their obituaries in heroic clichés: "Foot soldiers in the war against Aids" who die after "beautiful battles" and "long and courageous struggles," exhibiting "tenacious spirit" and a "brave refusal to surrender."

The representation of the Aids victim thus oscillates between two extremes of stylisation: The childish image of the guiltless martyr clutching his teddy bear and warming "his tiny blue fingers," and the "empowered" image of the stothearted hero whose gutsy brinkmanship in the face of death is held up as a model of unshakeable resolve and pitiless optimism - a punitively high standard of behaviour, it should be noted, for people suffering from a deadly disease.

One of the masterpieces of Aids kitsch, the independent film *Men in Love*, is suffused with the longing for an Edenic world without science, a peaceful land of docile lotus-eaters where grieving Californians spurn traditional medicine for moonlit healing circles in Maui at which they don grass skirts, mutter incantations, and dance like savages around a bonfire.

Even more appealing is the mindless optimism of the self help and human potential movements. A bizarre dissonance oc-

the victims of the disease collides with the indiscriminately happy-go-lucky, can-do attitudes of pop psychology's euphoric rhetoric, a dissonance perhaps best expressed in the testimonial by gay men with Aids.

They deny the immense of death and even claim that the disease is, as one Bay Area patient put it in an interview in the *San Francisco Examiner*, "the most wonderful thing that ever happened in my life."

This remarkable statement is echoed in a letter that a disciple of the reigning messiah of alternative medicine, loise Hay wrote to an anthropomorphised image of his disease:

Dear Aids:
For so long now I've been angry with you for being part of my life. I feel like you have violated my being. The strongest emotion thus far in our relationship has been anger.

But now I chose to see you in a different light. I no longer hate you or feel angry with you. I realise now that you have become a positive force in my life. You are a messenger who has brought me a new understanding of life and myself. So I thank you, forgive you, and release you.

Never before had anyone given me such great opportunity ... Because of you I have learned to love myself, and as a result I love and am loved by others. I am now in touch with parts of my being that I never knew existed. I have grown spiritually and intellectually since your arrival ... so again I thank you for giving me this opportunity to have insight into my life. How could I not forgive you, when so many positive experiences have come from your visit.

But you have also led me to the realization that you have no power over me. I am the power in my world.

With love,
Paul.
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Why should anyone glorify Aids? - Page 6.