DIVE-IN **2025**, **5**(**1S**): 55–74
https://doi.org/10.60923/issn.2785-3233/23653

To My Dear Friend: Furuhashi Teiji's 1992 Letter and the Subversion of AIDS

Marco Del Din
Heidelberg University – Università Ca' Foscari Venezia

Abstract AIDS activism in Japan was long suppressed by silence among activists and officials after the virus first emerged in Japan in 1985, owing to fears of social ostracization for its initial association with Japan's then-marginalized gay community. As attitudes shifted and AIDS became a more mainstream concern – a move prompted by the rise in cases among the heterosexual Japanese, as well as misogyny and xenophobia – stereotypes about women, male homosexuals and foreigners came to be associated with the virus. Concurrently, new modes of activism emerged through art and performance. In this context, Kyoto-based artist Furuhashi Teiji's 1992 letter, in which he 'came out' with his HIV diagnosis, sparked discussions within Japan's queer community. Connecting the letter to the wider artistic production of Furuhashi's final years, such as *S/N* (1994) and the drag show Diamonds Are Forever, this study examines the artist's reaction to his new status as HIV-positive, as well as his reframing of the virus as an agent of counterculture. Through his reading of AIDS, Furuhashi subverted the categories and stereotypes imposed by Japanese society on non-conforming bodies and individuals, offering an alternative to popular narratives on AIDS and an outlet of resistance against stigma. Examining the letter in combination with Furuhashi's activity, both within and without Kyoto, this work thus also hints at how the artist's impact extended beyond the 1990s, surviving to this day in the spaces and events that he set up in the last few years of his life.

Keywords Furuhashi Teiji; dumb type; drag; HIV; AIDS.

1. Introduction

The Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and the Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) were first diagnosed in the United States in 1981, signaling the start of an epidemic that would soon ravage the world. The crisis reached Japan in 1985, when the first official case was recognized in a Japanese homosexual artist who had been living in America. The early Japanese reactions to the spread of the infection were rooted in misogyny and xenophobia, framing the disease as 'imported' from abroad and shifting the blame to women, sex workers and foreign male homosexuals, whose response was one of both strategic and enforced silence. Critical here was the role of both

© 2025 The Author(s)
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons BY License.
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

the government and the media. These deployed stereotypes that crafted precise images and identities for the infected and, concurrently, created divisions leading to a failure in recognizing the pervasiveness of the pandemic. In this environment, in 1992, Furuhashi Teiji, a Kyoto-based artist particularly active in Sakyō-ku, member of the collective dumb type[1] and drag queen pioneer, announced his coming out as HIV-positive to his friends through a letter which sparked a number of initiatives combining activism, art and entertainment. Among these, particularly relevant are the 1994 performance *S/N* and the numerous clubbing and dancing events organized by Furuhashi and his peers, which challenged the media's stereotypical depictions and offered individuals a way to live with and through the crisis.

This article, therefore, investigates how Furuhashi and the artists surrounding him responded to the AIDS crisis through an analysis of the 1992 letter, as well as its materialization in S/N and in the drag and clubbing activities organized by the Sakyō-ku group. First, an overview of the early stages of the pandemic in Japan is presented, detailing the 'landing' and spread of the disease, as well as the government's and media's responses. These, through the creation of stereotypical images of the foreigner as a dangerous, hypersexual being, created a binary opposition between them and the Japanese, depicted instead as docile and relatively safe, as long as they upheld the divisions and categories in which they were pigeonholed. This paper, then, delves into Furuhashi's 1992 coming-out letter, where the depiction of AIDS differs diametrically from the one prevalent at the time. Here, the virus is a friend, a countercultural actor able to disrupt and subvert Japanese sexual mores and all types of categories. AIDS thus has a productively destructive power, one allowing a proliferation of identities and the rise of a new consciousness, and calling for togetherness, rather than division. Finally, this study proposes an analysis of the theater piece *S/N* and the clubbing activities peripherally linked to it. Both were tangible manifestations of Furuhashi's thought as expressed in the 1992 letter and directly opposed the stereotypical representations plaguing the early stages of the AIDS crisis. This work demonstrates how *S/N*, in both its performance features and content, questions the labels and categories imposed on individuals and instead calls for a borderless utopia where one can live label-free togetherness. Furthermore, it reveals how the drag performance in the piece, a feature usually overlooked, is critical to the creation of pockets

[1] The spelling for dumb type is incoherent, with some texts capitalizing both words. In this paper, I follow the convention proposed by The Dumb Type Reader (2017).

of sovereignty and freedom Furuhashi advocated for, and which materialized in the parties and events he and his peers organized.

2. A 'Black Ship' Landing: Early Responses to AIDS in Japan

June 5, 1981: U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) publishes an article describing five cases of a rare type of pneumonia in previously healthy homosexual men in Los Angeles. On the same day, a New York dermatologist reports a cluster of Kaposi's Sarcoma cases among gay men in New York and California (HIV.gov n.d.). Although the doctors could not yet name the disease underlying these conditions, these cases would later be known as the first reported instances of HIV/AIDS in the West, marking a watershed moment in the history of contemporary pandemics and global biosecurity. The virus rapidly spread worldwide, eventually reaching Japan officially in 1985.[2] The first case of HIV infection was reported in a gay Japanese man living in the United States, who had tested positive during a stay in Japan. Soon after, the case of a hemophiliac man infected by contaminated blood products imported by the US was discovered. As cases of AIDS positivity remained at first fairly contained, the Japanese response to the virus was lukewarm, merely framing HIV/AIDS as a problem of homosexuals and as a 'Black Ship' which could land in Japan (Miller 2002: 5–6). The Japanese government and the public's stance on the matter, however, would soon change.

Starting from 1986, three cases popularly referred to as the 'Three Big Commotions' heightened the awareness of the government and the general population toward the virus. The first (1986) involved a Filipino woman, who tested positive in the Philippines but reported to have worked in Japan as a hostess; the second, referred to as the 'Kobe incident' (1987), had a Japanese woman as its protagonist. According to the Ministry of Health and Welfare, she had been involved in intercourse with over a hundred men, among whom was an allegedly bisexual Greek sailor thought to be the vector of the disease. This was the first case of AIDS infection involving a Japanese woman, with the press speculating on the sexuality and lifestyle of both her and the Greek sailor, and framing the incident as the landing of the 'Black Ship' in Japan; the third Commotion occurred shortly after the Kobe incident and involved a pregnant

[2] Cases of HIV infection from contaminated blood products had already been discovered before 1985 and a research unit was set up in 1983 to investigate the disease. Nevertheless, these were never publicly recognized as AIDS infections and the unit was dismantled in 1984.

woman positive with HIV in Kōchi. She had had relations with an HIV-positive hemophiliac, and her apparent dismissal of medical advice to avoid marriage and pregnancy contributed to the framing of the case as one of irresponsibility and bad womanhood/motherhood, as well as the entrance of AIDS into the household (Miller 2002: 6–9). The three cases led to a shift in the framing of the virus in Japan, which had until then focused on homosexuals and hemophiliacs. As the Commotions saw three women as protagonists, the infected woman as the main threat to innocent Japanese men and public welfare became the dominant figure and target of both the press and governmental measures (Miller 1994: 30–1). The steady rise of infections through heterosexual contact, which surpassed those through homosexual contact in 1990 in the case of HIV and in 1992 in the case of AIDS (Kihara et al. 1997), further contributed to the shift of attention from homosexual men to heterosexual individuals.

This change in perception fostered a false sense of security among the Japanese male homosexual. This feeling was supported by a public narrative opposing the docile Japanese to the hypersexual foreigner and actively undermining effective risk prevention. The framing of AIDS as a foreign threat led, in most cases, to discriminatory policies that did not affect the Japanese homosexual population. For instance, entertainment and gay cruising venues simply limited or forbade entry to foreigners (Miller 1994: 116). Such measures, clearly rooted in a misconception of the infection and in xenophobic discrimination, were ineffective in containing contagion and contributed to the invisibilization of the Japanese homosexual subject in the AIDS crisis.

This erasure is also reflected in statistics regarding the spread of HIV. Clearly assessing the actual dimension of the contagion among gay men, indeed, was particularly difficult due to the reticence and the unwillingness of homosexual individuals to even get tested due to strict governmental policies and the social pressure exerted on non-conforming sexualities and lifestyles. Reports of the first unit tasked to investigate AIDS, as early as 1983, show how the researchers were unable to effectively trace and provide numerical data about 'the Japanese homosexual,' and simply relied on and aligned with the media narrative of the Japanese gay as docile and thus less dangerous and at risk (Shigae 2013: 67). Such narratives arguably hindered an effective response to the crisis. As Takeda also contends, the framing of contagion through a binary of, on the one hand, the innocence and victimhood of the infected hemophiliac[3] and, on the other, the irresponsibility and fault of the homosexual

[3] Discussing the depiction of the infected hemophiliac goes beyond the scope of this paper. For the sake of the argument presented here, it suffices to know that the HIV-positive

and the sexually promiscuous created a dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' AIDS. This, in turn, potentially heightened the risk of contagion (Takeda 2009: 47–8) and contributed to driving individuals who feared social repercussions away from testing and reporting. As a result, the Japanese homosexual man remained a nebulous, elusive figure left to be defined by the media and popular narratives, rather than a fully self-defining subject.

Since the beginning of the infection, indeed, the media deployed a precise stereotypical image of the Japanese gay, one that was constructed in relation to an equally stereotypical image of the gay foreigner. Early news and opinion pieces on AIDS infection presented it as a direct result of the American mentality and its liberated sexuality (Shigae 2013: 61), which made the gay foreigner, regardless of his actual place of origin, inherently dangerous. The Japanese gay, instead, was presented as docile (otonashii おとなしい), with fewer partners, and therefore less exposed to the risk of infection (Shigae 2013: 62). This view was not exclusive to the official channels, but was also shared by a significant portion of the Japanese gay population. Some gay magazines, such as *Barazoku* 薔薇族, published, since the 1980s, articles mirroring the popular narrative opposing the Japanese to the foreigner. This position was also evident in the readers' letters to the magazine, which expressed not only their distance from their foreign counterparts, but also their desire for invisibility (Shigae 2013: 103–4). Invisibility was not simply a result of governmental policies or of the pieces of media outlets, but also a strategy sought after by the majority of gay Japanese themselves.

To state that all Japanese were silent and that no activism emerged would be reductive and false. Organizations such as ILGA Japan and OCCUR, a branch separated from ILGA in 1986, were established and have been active in HIV-related activism since the beginning of the epidemic in Japan. Nevertheless, the climate among the general gay population was characterized by both strategic and enforced silence, meant to protect the infected homosexual and shield him from social suicide (Miller 1994: 129–30). Concurrently, the lack of information and the misinformation about HIV and homosexuality available to the gay Japanese contributed to his invisibilization and isolation (Kazama and Kawaguchi 2003: 191). Furthermore, his nebulous status and the popular narratives eventually linked the Japanese gay to the woman rather than to other gays around the world. The characteristics attributed to the Japanese male homosexual, prominently those of docility and

hemophiliac was constructed as the helpless victim of contamination through infected blood products and therefore presented as a 'good' and innocent carrier of the virus.

moderation, were – and still are – features primarily assigned to women, thus resulting in a 'feminization' of AIDS with pronounced (self-)orientalistic undertone.

Therefore, the picture emerging from these early depictions of AIDS in Japan is one dominated by a xenophobic, misogynistic discourse that created the Japanese homosexual, the HIV-positive woman, and the 'bad infected' more generally, in reference to a foreign, dangerous 'Other' – the (gay) foreigner. The two figures are inextricably intertwined, as one defines the other: there is no docile gay Japanese without a hypersexual foreigner to set the curve of deviance. Similarly, for women, all three Commotions involved foreignness to some extent: the Filipino woman was the direct foreigner; the Kobe infected was first-hand involved with the foreign in the figure of the hypersexual and allegedly bisexual Greek sailor; the Kōchi woman, on the other hand, was guilty of bringing the foreign disease directly into the innermost domain, that of the household. The result of these discursive practices was an extremely biased and limited understanding of HIV/AIDS. All the stereotyped figures, despite being linked to each other, were depicted as separate categories that should not come into contact with one another, lest they be punished with the disease. The act of categorizing also produced identities, crystallized them, and fixed them as labels on the bodies of the infected. It was within this vacuum of lived narratives and the proliferation of stereotypes concerning the experience of AIDS in the affected communities that the role of artist-activists from within them in Japan became all the more pertinent in redirecting attention toward the more marginalized elements of society.

3. Breaking the Silence: Furuhashi Teiji and His Coming Out Letter

Amidst popular narratives and silence, the artist Furuhashi Teiji opened up the discourse on AIDS in radically different terms, questioning the categories devised by Japanese society to frame the crisis, as well as the sexual mores of the Japanese. Born in Kyoto in 1960, his father was a *nihon-ga* painter and kimono designer, and introduced him to painting and art from a very young age. His interests, however, gravitated toward music, and after high school, he enrolled at Kyoto University of the Arts. Here, his interest in video art and his involvement with different types of artistic media began. In 1984, he co-founded, with other students of that university, the mixed-media group dumb type. In 1985, during a stay in New York, he incorporated drag into his artistic

practice by attending and performing at the renowned Pyramid Club alongside drag legends such as Lady Bunny and Lypsinka. Subsequent trips to New York with other members of dumb type, such as Yamanaka Tōru/DJ LaLa, made the artists aware of Japan's lack of drag parties like the ones they experienced in the city. Therefore, in 1989, together with DJ LaLa and the Shanghai Love Theater performer Simone Fukayuki, Furuhashi founded Diamonds Are Forever, the first drag show organized by Japanese people, which later became involved in AIDS activism. In 1992, dumb type was working abroad in Europe, with Furuhashi unable to join due to what he then described as health concerns. On this occasion, on October 11th, he sent the collective and his friends in Japan a letter, tellingly titled "Furuhashi Teiji's New Life – LIFE WITH VIRUS: Celebrating the Announcement of HIV Infection." As the title makes explicit, Furuhashi here came out as HIV positive, prompted by the further decline of his health and justifying his silence about his condition it owing to a sense of denial (Furuhashi 1992). The letter had a tremendous impact on the artistic community of Sakyō-ku, the Kyoto ward where dumb type operated, sparking initiatives that blurred art, activism, education, and entertainment.[4] Involved until the very end in his art with both dumb type and the cast of Diamonds Are Forever, Furuhashi died in 1995 of sepsis complications resulting from AIDS.[5]

Though other gay activists had previously come out with their own diagnoses (see, for instance, Takeda 2011: 125–8), Furuhashi's emotionally complex and personal use of prose in his letter, wherein he delves extensively into potentialities seemingly afforded him by the virus, proved to be particularly impactful. While Furuhashi's announcement of HIV positivity is undoubtedly the central theme of the letter, and he does not hide or mystify the painful bodily reality of being infected with the virus, he avoids framing the disease as the defining feature of his identity. In fact, he states: "it could be hard for me to think that total strangers might only know me by the label 'infected'" (Furuhashi 1992). The rejection of labels as devices crystallizing the self into a singular, essentialized being is a central theme in Furuhashi's AIDS-related production, as also revealed by a 1995 interview with Carol Lufty on the 1994 performance *S/N*. Here he stresses:

> I want it to be clear to the audience that I am living with AIDS. But I didn't intend it as a heroic gesture. I've never gone out of my way to advertise it

[4] For a more detailed description of these activities, see Tsubaki et al. (2019).
[5] Furuhashi's biography was compiled by combining the information available in several sources, such as Visual AIDS n.d.; Dumb Type (2000: 52–63); Tsubaki et al. (2019: 26–44).

> because it's not my primary identity. [...] I don't have a primary identity. I'm just saying that being HIV positive is not it. I want to stress this because people who get to know me let the fact that I am HIV positive dominate our interaction. This has a particularly strong impact on people who don't have a lot of HIV-positive friends; it immediately becomes my first identity in their eyes. The point is that I don't want this to be the only criteria for how people respond to me (Dumb Type 2000: 109).

As will be shown in the next section, the issues of identity and identification, as well as their overcoming, are central themes in the dumb type's piece S/N, a work that deals with Furuhashi's experience as an AIDS-positive individual.

HIV is presented in the letter as a painful and unsettling experience that invests and reorganizes the entire body, but not in an annihilating or completely negative fashion. With the infection, Furuhashi states, comes a new attachment to life and awareness of his own body and its potentialities (Furuhashi 1992). AIDS produces a split in his self-perception and his temporality, marking the end of the old Furuhashi and the beginning of the new one. This new self, as he poetically points out at the end of the letter, has a new perception of his own body: "[e]ven now, when I close my eyes, I can hear the loud rush of blood flowing through my body. This sound that I never noticed until now continually awakens me to the existence of my new self" (Furuhashi 1992). As HIV produces a shift in the body and consciousness of Furuhashi, it also provides new potentialities to his previous identities, which continue to exist in dialogue with the infected self. In particular, 'Furuhashi as artist' gains heightened consciousness and awareness of what art can do for himself and Japanese society. As also Takeda (2009: 50) points out, art becomes for Furuhashi an "effective means of healing the underlying mental ills that we who live in modern society must inevitably deal with" (Furuhashi 1992). It thus becomes a tool through which to address the social inequalities and the discrimination faced by marginalized categories, as well as to break apart and overcome the categories created by Japanese society. The appearance of the new self in Furuhashi's body also directly counters the monolithic depictions put out by the government and the media, where AIDS infection overrides any other identity the carrier might possess and effectively rewrites them by attaching labels and moral judgments. In Furuhashi's letter, instead, AIDS has a multiplying power, one facilitating the birth and proliferation of new identities and selves that do not rewrite the previous ones, but rather enter into conversation with them.

The same way AIDS' destruction of the body entails an act of production within it, so, in Furuhashi's thought, it can cause an equally productive destruction in Japanese society. AIDS, he states, is much more than a simple disease, much more than an illness that can be ascribed to individual categories while absolving others.

> The virus renders meaningless any distinction between man-to-woman sex, man-to-man sex, woman-to-woman sex, socially approved sex or unrecognized sex. Heterosexuals, homosexuals, and bisexuals alike have to bear unflinching witness to how the virus is tearing down any such distinctions and with them the droning undertones of modern Japan's ugliest sexual mores. AIDS is the last counter-culture. It's already laughing at us if we think it's a mere disease (Furuhashi 1992).

Furuhashi's view of AIDS echoes that of Douglas Crimp, who stresses the subversive and revolutionary character of AIDS by pointing out that

> AIDS intersects with and requires a critical rethinking of all of culture: of language and representation, science and medicine, health and illness, sex and death, the public and private realms. AIDS is a central issue for gay men, of course, but also for lesbians. AIDS is an issue for women generally, but especially for poor and minority women, child-bearing women, and women working in the health care system. AIDS is an issue for drug users, for prisoners, and for sex workers. At some point, even "ordinary" heterosexual men will have to learn that AIDS is an issue for them, and not simply because they might be susceptible to 'contagion' (Crimp 2002: 41).

Crimp's last point sounds even more poignant when one notes that 1992, the year in which Furuhashi wrote his letter, also marked the moment in which AIDS infection in heterosexual individuals surpassed that in homosexual ones. As a countercultural and barrier-breaking agent, AIDS thus has the productive potential to favor a rearranging of Japanese society, flattening those differences that are socially constructed and that create an illusion of distinction between categories. Furuhashi's letter explicitly counters the stereotypes set forth by the government and the media, envisioning instead a borderless utopia where all categories are rendered meaningless. Concurrently, 'art with AIDS' takes on an equally productively destructive character in pointing out and addressing those meaningless distinctions and the violence that comes with them.

One final aspect of Furuhashi's letter is that of friendship. Before being released to the public, the letter was first sent privately to a handful of friends, addressed as "my dear true friend" (*shin no yūjin-sama* 真の友人様). The main

aim of Furuhashi's coming out is, admittedly, to repair what he perceives as a rift in their mutual trust, deriving from his reticence about his status. Surprisingly, however, the title of 'friend' extends to the virus as well, which is Furuhashi's "most passionate friend" despite eventually killing him (Furuhashi 1992). Both human and viral friends coexist within Furuhashi in a deeply embodied experience, where bodily separation is overcome, and unity within the infected artist is also achieved through the art they, as friends, have created together. Takeda calls this a "rhetoric of fraternity/friendship" (*yūai no retorikku* 友愛のレトリック) and contends that it was crucial, together with the predominance of the 'artist' identity over gender and sexuality, to foster a sense of commonality among Furuhashi's friends (Takeda 2011: 129). Takeda's thesis is not fully convincing, as it relies at least partially on a sort of identity politics that is at odds with Furushashi and the Sakyō-ku group's striving to overcome all kinds of labeling. Furthermore, it obscures the role of AIDS in uniting the group and the importance of homosexuality in Furuhashi's experience with the virus and in the creation of works such *S/N*, which required considerable explanation and communication in a group formed predominantly by heterosexual individuals, as Lunsing recalls (Lunsing 2017: 101). Nevertheless, the sense of fraternity and commonality expressed in the letter's rhetoric was undoubtedly fostered by Furuhashi and the artists surrounding him. Club parties grew in number and frequency (Lunsing 2017: 101), and community was cultivated through dancing and finding fun and connection in adversity, an ethos well-represented by the play on the acronym 'AIDS' Furuhashi and the group devised for the 10th AIDS Conference in Yokohama, "**A**nd **I** **D**ance with **S**omebody" (Tsubaki et al. 2019: 62–3). As further elaborated in the next section, community, partying, and drag are closely intertwined in Furuhashi's activity, and to this day, they carry on Furuhashi's legacy through yearly events on his birthday and initiatives related to HIV.

4. Subverting the Stereotype: *S/N*, clubbing, drag

Even though the letter remained private until 2000, when it was published in the book *Memorandum Teiji Furuhashi*, it had a profoundly impactful effect on the artistic activity of dumb type. The work that best materializes the letter's content is probably *S/N*, a theater piece composed of seven independent scenes connected by the same theme – Furuhashi's experience with AIDS. Describing the performance in full would not only go beyond the scope of this paper but

also be an almost impossible task. The performances of dumb type, indeed, present a mixture of genres, performance types and technologies that exceed usual artistic classifications. Peter Eckersall describes dumb type's performance style as New Media Dramaturgy, which he defines as

> a turn to visuality, intermediality, and dialectical moves in performance that show these expressions embodied and visualised in live performance space and time. […] Like dumb type's work, this is a field of performance in between theatre, dance, music and visual arts. […] NMD [New Media Dramaturgy] is the name we use to designate both the *composition* of this kind of performance in and through new media art works, and its *effects on an audience* (Eckersall 2014: 4, italics in original).

Visually and in terms of performance, therefore, *S/N* already disturbs any attempt at clear categorization, also favoring interaction with and direct address to the viewer that challenge the divide between actor and audience. The disruptive form of the performance thus mirrors the message underlying the entire piece, as well as the main point Furuhashi advances in his 1992 letter: the overcoming of all kinds of boundaries and the disruption of any attempt at categorization.

Before delving further into *S/N*, it is useful to outline a few theoretical and methodological principles that guide this reading of dumb type's work. To fully grasp the complexity of *S/N*, a shift away from a logocentric conception of theater and performance is required. The collective's performances compel the viewer and the scholar to decenter language, both as spoken word and as meaning easily intelligible from movement, as the primary and only channel of understanding. It instead prompts attention to the body, to how it acts within space, and how space in turn acts upon it. The performer's body should therefore not be viewed as a unified, 'natural' whole, but as polysemic and unstable, in constant relationship with the environment of the stage. Especially in *S/N*, but more in general in all of the 1990s dumb type's opus,

> the physical presence of the dancers on the stage […] is both fundamental and precarious. While they are essential to bringing these stunning environments to life, the performers' bodies are often shown on the verge of erasure. They are inscribed and moved, they undergo. However, they are also shown in the act of revealing, exposing and resisting these so-called 'mute processes.' The movements, gestures and actions of dumb type's performers always embody this tension/duality as they are simultaneously triggered by the situations and environments in which they find themselves, and by powerful 'gestures of refusal and dissent' (Jansen 2017: 22).

The body, then, does not exist in a vacuum, nor as separated from the space in which it moves. Rather, it performs in dynamic tension with it, simultaneously shaping the stage and being shaped by it. As explored below, this perspective is especially relevant to *S/N*, where questions of visibility, invisibility, and the celebration of the outcast often take forms that exceed the spoken or written word.

Abandoning a logocentric perspective, however, does not mean disregarding (written) language altogether. In *S/*N, the issue of the written word and its relation to the body remains crucial, particularly in how the performance exposes the media's tendency to inscribe categories and identities onto bodies. As Michel De Certeau, analyzing the relationship between language and power, points out,

> the law constantly writes itself on bodies. It engraves itself on parchments made from the skin of its subjects. It articulates them in a juridical corpus. It makes its book out of them. These writings carry out two complementary operations: through them, living beings are "packed into a text" (in the sense that products are canned or packed), transformed into signifiers of rules (a sort of "intextuation") and, on the other hand, the reason or Logos of a society "becomes flesh" (an incarnation) (De Certeau 1984: 140).

De Certeau's analysis thus shows how bodies become the surface on which power and violence are inscribed, and through which they are propagated. Yet, to simply treat the body as a 'vessel' of texts and signs might obscure its potential to generate meaning through movement. As Susan Leigh Foster argues, the body is always in a process of writing in relation to the inscriptions on itself (Foster 1995: 6), thus becoming not only a recipient, but also an agent of signs and texts. Dumb type's performances should thus be read within this tension: between the external inscriptions society imposes and the embodied counter-writings created through movement and the corporeality of the performer.

S/N, in its structure and aesthetics, plays with the binary and categorical constructions in Japanese society, simultaneously mirroring, opposing, and troubling them. The scene is constituted of four different layers – a large front acting stage, a horizontal screen, an additional narrow acting stage above it, and the invisible space behind the screen where actors occasionally fall – where projections, actors, and dancers appear and disappear, disrupting the otherwise frontal scene and offering the audience multiple viewpoints. The lighting and projections, which alternately and at times schizophrenically illuminate and

conceal parts of, or the entire bodies of, the performers, as well as the dancers' appearance and disappearance from the top stage, create more than a purely aesthetically disturbing game. Instead, they call on the stage the question of visibility and invisibility in Japanese society. As Fujii observes,

> *S/N* is about questioning the aesthetic and political relationship between the visible (the valuable, the powerful) and the invisible (the valueless, the powerless) and possibly reversing this relationship. The performance brings to light what otherwise remains invisible, or at least marginalized. […] More strikingly, however, the visible is used to put into question the power politics that define what should or should not be socially visible (Fujii 2017: 206).

The work thus both reflects the government's and the media's power to obscure and opposes it. The disappearance of the genitalia and the face of the naked performers, hidden by shadows, as well as the projection of anonymous headless torsos, mirror the way the government and the media policed the lifestyle and the representation of the woman and the homosexual. Thus, this artistic choice underscores the profoundly political character of the acts of showing and seeing. On the other hand, however, the very presence of those otherwise invisibilized subjects through the actors confronts the viewers exactly with what should not be seen, thus escaping the power of images and the control of representation.

A crucial yet often overlooked dimension of *S/N*'s exploration of (in)visibility of the infected subject and of the outcast is its use of drag. The first extensive conversation about Furuhashi's life with AIDS occurs indeed while he applies drag make-up. From that point on, he only appears as his drag persona Miss Glorias, with different outfits and in different roles. Incorporating drag, specifically the style of Diamonds Are Forever, into the performance means bringing the drag ethos of the show into *S/N*. Diamond's drag goes beyond the simple female impersonation, combining gorgeous costumes and make-up with a pronounced passion for the grotesque, ugliness, and the subversion of roles and categories (Mitsuhashi et al. 2022: 167). The taste for the grotesque not only influences the character and artistic direction of the show, but is also closely related to the artists' understanding of what a drag queen is. As a manifesto compiled by Simone Fukayuki and D.K. Uraji – drag queens of Diamonds Are Forever and friends of Furuhashi – states, "[the drag queen's] value system has a sense of inversion, and she places the highest value in playing a contradictory undertone. Complexes in mainstream society become

strengths, ugliness becomes beauty, the sacred becomes the profane, she turns around the cheap into the gorgeous" (Mitsuhashi et al. 2022: 167). Drag performance thus allows for a celebration of all that society deems ugly and cast aside, proposing an inverted worldview in which what should be hidden and disregarded is instead put into the spotlight.[6] Inserting this kind of ethos through the Diamond drag performance in *S/N* thus reinforces the subversion of categories and identities the piece proposes, while offering a space for the infected to escape invisibility. While Japanese society demands the HIV-positive individual to seek invisibility to avoid social suicide, it thus itself avoids, as Furuhashi hinted at in the letter, to face its own hypocrisy and regime of silence. The importance of the ugly and the silenced afforded by the Diamonds Are Forever drag, on the other hand, opens up a space to confront the hypocrisy and discrimination of society, escape invisibility, and find not tolerance, but celebration. Thus, drag has the power to effectively overturn those stereotypical representations that plagued the Japanese homosexual and open to alternative representations that challenged the hierarchies and categories that Japanese society tried to impose on its people.

The power and oppression of representation are also directly voiced by the actors, and the discussion concerning them becomes even more concrete and tangible with direct references to the media. Around twenty minutes into the performance, Peter Golightly provocatively addresses the audience, stating that we can escape the infection with safe sex, but also asking how we can protect ourselves from words and images. In the meantime, statements on AIDS, extrapolated from both Japanese and foreign newspapers and publications, are projected onto the black screen while Furuhashi applies drag make-up. "Nobody can escape from those images," continues Golightly, "Like 'tragedy,' 'victim,' 'certain death,' 'plague,' 'punishment,' 'incurable,' 'hopeless'" ("S/N :: DUMB TYPE" n.d.). Furuhashi continues detailing how his life with the virus continued ordinarily, and Golightly brings the perspective of the US too, where heterosexual infection has surpassed homosexual one. The reality of the infected Japanese is thus brought on stage beyond the fiction/non-fiction character of the piece. In *S/N*, however, the perspective is subverted. While death is certainly a main theme, here the focus is also on how to live and love while being infected, beyond accusations of promiscuity and false images of docility – the performers do not hide their own sexual activity, but present it on stage as something completely ordinary. Thus, the piece offers a much more

[6] For a more extensive analysis of the Diamonds Are Forever drag ethos, see Del Din 2025.

realistic representation of the homosexual than those offered by the media and the government, at the same time allowing to reclaim one's own agency in defining and living as oneself beyond stereotyped images.

The power of words and representation, as well as the consequent creation and imposition of identities as labels, is a central theme in *S/N*. In the opening scene, the actors are shown with labels such as 'HIV+,' 'homosexual,' and 'deaf' literally attached to their clothes, and dumb type member Peter Golightly addresses the audience by pointing at the labels and stating: "I'm sorry to tell you, but we are not actors. We are this. [...] And, how are you?" ("S/N :: DUMB TYPE" n.d.). The question of whether the labels are reality or fiction due to the theatrical nature of the work, as well as Golightly's question breaking down the divide between the performers and the public, problematizes the reductionist act of labeling and coming out as 'something' or 'someone,' framing instead identity as fluid and multifaceted (Takeda 2017: 114). The performance, then, brings to the stage what Furuhashi had already hinted at in the 1992 letter, where the singular identification as HIV positive instead gives way to his identity as an artist, as well as to the new selves that the infection affords him.

One final aspect of Furuhashi's letter that materializes in *S/N* and his drag activity is that of relationships and community. A twenty-minute-long conversation between Furuhashi, Golightly and sex worker and performer BuBu De La Madeleine on love, sex and relationships with and without AIDS ends with pictures of naked men and women kissing and hugging. At the same time, Furuhashi lip-syncs to *People* by Shirley Bassey (1965). The song choice and the first three lines of the song – "People / People who need people / Are the luckiest people in the world" – are incredibly poignant and illustrate the *yūai no retorikku* so central to Furuhashi's letter. In a Japan where stereotypical representations and the government's misguided action divide and pigeonhole its citizens, the piece invokes community and togetherness. The fact that Furuhashi performs in drag and lip-syncs to the same diva whose song, *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971), gives the name to the drag show he co-founded is not a pure aesthetic choice.

Since his 1992 coming-out, drag and clubbing had been central to Furuhashi's and other dumb type performers' activity. Clubbing and dancing became major platforms through which Furuhashi/Miss Glorias and the queens of Diamonds Are Forever opened up spaces where people, HIV-positive and negative alike, could not simply survive the crisis, but find new ways to live together and imagine themselves. As Pendleton points out, "[d]rag acts and club spaces such as Diamonds provide one such space to construct the past and

present of queer communities through what happens on the stage and the dancefloor" (2021: 307). Clubbing and dancing, while apparently mere entertainment, can thus become forms of community-building and political participation. Riley et al., in their investigation of Electronic Dance Music clubbing communities, highlight this political potential, revealing how such events enable participants

> to create temporary moments in which to live out alternative value systems to those, which for them, represented the dominant culture. This living-out of alternative value systems enabled participants to create (temporary pockets of) sovereignty over their own existence (Riley et al. 2010: 358).

Spaces such as the club parties organized by dumb type members thus created pockets where one could elude binary oppositions such as that of 'Japanese' and 'foreigner' created by the media, and envision new realities free from their constraints, however briefly.

Furuhashi and dumb type's call for a utopia without borders and categories, temporarily materialized through their clubbing activity, is also exemplified by two elements of *S/N*. The first is the recurrent catchphrase "I have a dream, that my status will disappear. I have a dream, that my gender will disappear. I have a dream, that my nationality will disappear" ("S/N :: DUMB TYPE" n.d.) This call for the dissolution of all those elements that create categories and divisions stands in stark contrast to the society envisioned by the media and the government, rendering meaningless all those man-made distinctions. The connection to localized and material practices such as partying and dancing becomes evident when one examines the posters created for the Love Ball at the 10th International AIDS Conference, where the slogan "And I Dance with Somebody" is coupled with the aforementioned catchphrase from *S/N* (Tsubaki et al. 2019: 63). The second moment is the drag act that concludes *S/N*, in which Miss Glorias lip-syncs to *Amapola* as sung by Nana Mouskouri (1986) while drifting away on an inflatable boat – perhaps signifying his decay and death – and BuBu pulls out a long string of country flags out of her vagina. In a simultaneously moving and almost comical moment, the piece trivializes the distinctions between nationalities and dissolves the borders between countries, at the same time reminding the viewer that the AIDS crisis involves everybody, regardless of their labels, and that community and togetherness are what must be sought after to live with and through it. In the context of the AIDS crisis in Japan, therefore, dancing together beyond diversity as advocated by Furuhashi could represent effective tools of political action through which

to open spaces of resistance and opposition to the media and governmental regimes. Although a more thorough exploration of this aspect of Furuhashi's legacy is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to point out that this type of activities continues to this day through both Diamonds Are Forever and other initiatives organized by ex-dumb type members, thus keeping alive spaces in which to invent and reimagine oneself, and concurrently resist the representations and labels society forces upon us.

5. Conclusions

Through an examination of Furuhashi Teiji's 1992 coming-out letter, the piece *S/N*, and the drag and clubbing activities organized by the artist, this article has shown how Furuhashi subverted the stereotypes deployed by the Japanese government and media in the early stages of the AIDS epidemic. This study first delineated the early responses and depictions of AIDS, unveiling the xenophobic, homophobic and misogynistic characters of these representations. The government and the media, in most cases with the support of the Japanese homosexuals themselves, created a binary opposition between the hypersexual, dangerous foreigner and the docile Japanese, thus furthering divisions in society. The analysis of Furuhashi's letter provided by this article elucidated how the artist actively sought to subvert these representations by portraying AIDS as a friend and the ultimate countercultural agent. The virus, in the letter, does have a destructive power, but this is a productive one, allowing for the proliferation of identities, the countering of monolithic, stereotypical depictions, and the disruption of all categories and sexual mores. Furthermore, AIDS makes Furuhashi aware of the importance of friendships and relationships, the only instruments he sees fit to live through the crisis. Finally, this paper analyzed the theatrical performance *S/N*, as well as the drag and clubbing activities pioneered by Furuhashi, as tangible materializations of the letter's content. Disruptive in both form and content, *S/N* calls into question the power of words and representation, as well as that of visibility and invisibility. In doing so, it reverses the stereotypes deployed by the media and the government, allowing what society wants to hide to be not only seen, but also unapologetically put into the spotlight. In this regard, the drag of Diamonds Are Forever plays a major role due to its subversive power, operating a reversal of values and enabling the celebration of the outcast. Concurrently, drag and the clubbing activities organized by Furuhashi go beyond mere

entertainment, acquiring a strong political connotation and creating pockets of freedom where all individuals, positive and negative alike, can find togetherness during the crisis.

This brief exploration of Furuhashi's thought and activities still leaves many aspects of Furuhashi's art and legacy unexamined. Japanese society has certainly changed since Furuhashi's death, and medical advancements have turned AIDS from a death sentence to a condition that still allows the positive individual to live an ordinary life. This, however, does not mean that discrimination toward HIV-positive people has disappeared, nor that new categories and binaries have stopped being created. Further research within the "pockets of freedom" that Furuhashi helped create – such as *Diamonds Are Forever* — would be invaluable for assessing his enduring legacy. It could also reveal whether his ideas still offer tools for confronting crises like the AIDS pandemic today. Furthermore, placing Furuhashi's letter in conversation with dumb type's production after his death would perhaps enable new and deeper analyses of the collective's activity. Such studies would not only shed further light on Furuhashi's activity and thought, but also contribute to complicate our understanding of the history of the AIDS pandemic in Japan, as well as of how art and community can be effective means to live not in spite of, but with and through the crisis.

References

Crimp, Douglas. 2002. "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism." In *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 27–42.

De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Del Din, Marco. 2025. "Diamanti nel metrò: un'analisi dei ruoli e dell'identità di genere nel Giappone contemporaneo tramite l'arte drag di Kyōto." In *Sguardi sul Giappone di Ieri e di Oggi*, Samantha Audoly, Francesco Eugenio Barbieri, Christian Pallone & Marco Taddei (eds.). Venezia: Cafoscarina [forthcoming].

Dumb Type. 2000. *Memorandum Teiji Furuhashi*. Tokyo: Little More.

Eckersall, Peter. 2014. "Dumb Type – The Birth of New Media Dramaturgy: Points of Departure for the Interweaving Performance Cultures Symposium." *Textures: Online Platform for Interweaving Performance Cultures*, 1–8.

Eckersall, Peter, Edward Scheer & Shintarō Fujii (eds.). 2017. *The Dumb Type Reader*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press.

Foster, Susan Leigh. 1995. "Choreographing History." In *Choreographing History*, Susan Leigh Foster (ed.). Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 3–21.

Fujii, Shintarō. 2017. "Turning Catastrophe into Art: On Dumb Type's S/N and Tadasu Takamine's *Cool Japan*." In *The Dumb Type Reader*, Peter Eckersall, Edward Scheer & Shintarō Fujii (eds.). Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 203–214.

Furuhashi, Teiji. 1992. "Teiji Furuhashi's New 'Life with Virus': Celebrating My Announcement of HIV Infection." Translated by Alfred Birnbaum. *October* 11. https://visualaids.org/blog/furuhashi-letter [Last accessed 10 Nov 2025].

HIV.gov. n.d. "Timeline of the HIV and AIDS Epidemic." *HIV.gov*. https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline [Last accessed 28 Jan 2025].

Jansen, Sara. 2017. "Dumb Type as Dance: Reflections on the Politics of Gesture." In *The Dumb Type Reader*, Peter Eckersall, Edward Scheer & Shintarō Fujii (eds.). Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 19–48.

Kazama, Takashi & Kazuya Kawaguchi. 2003. "HIV Risk and the (Im)Permeability of the Male Body: Representation and Realities of Gay Men in Japan." In *Men and Masculinities in Contemporary Japan: Dislocating the Salaryman Doxa*, James E. Roberson & Nobue Suzuki (eds.). London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 180–197.

Kihara, Masahiro, Seiichi Ichikawa, Masako Kihara & Shudo Yamasaki. 1997. "Descriptive Epidemiology of HIV/AIDS in Japan, 1985–1994." *Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes and Human Retrovirology* 14, S3–S12.

Lunsing, Wim. 2017. "The Creation of S/N and the Debate about Sexuality in 1990s Japan." In *The Dumb Type Reader*, Peter Eckersall, Edward Scheer & Shintarō Fujii (eds.). Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 97-107.

Miller, Elizabeth. 1994. "A Borderless Age: AIDS, Gender, and Power in Contemporary Japan." Cambridge: Harvard University. (Doctoral dissertation).

Miller, Elizabeth. 2002. "What's in a Condom?: HIV and Sexual Politics in Japan." *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 26, 1–32.

Mitsuhashi, Junko, Itsuho Niimi & Miyako Nishi (eds.). 2022. *Yosooi no Chikara: Iseisō no Nihonshi* 装いの力：異性装の日本史 (The Power of Clothing; History of Cross-Dressing in Japan). Tokyo: The Shoto Art Museum.

Pendleton, Mark. 2021. “And I Dance with Somebody: Queer History in a Japanese Night Club.” *History Workshop Journal* 90, 297–310.

Riley, Sarah C.E., Christine Griffin & Yvette Morey. 2010. “The Case for ‘Everyday Politics’: Evaluating Neo-Tribal Theory as a Way to Understand Alternative Forms of Political Participation, Using Electronic Dance Music Culture as an Example.” *Sociology* 44(2), 345–363.

Shigae, Akitomo. 2013. *Nihon no “Gei” to Eizu: Komyuniti – Kokka – Aidentity* *日本の「ゲイ」とエイズ：コミュニティ・国家・アイデンティティ* (The Japanese Gay and AIDS: Community – Nation – Identity). Tokyo: Seikyūsha.

“S/N :: DUMB TYPE.” n.d. *Dumb Type*. https://dumbtype.com/works/s-n/ [last accessed 28 Jan 2025].

Takeda, Keiko. 2009. “Nihon ni okeru HIV/AIDS no Gensetsu to Furuhashi Teiji no ‘Tegami’ 日本における HIV/AIDS の言説と古橋悌二の〈手紙〉 (Dominant Media Discourses on HIV/AIDS in Contemporary Japan and the Discourse of Teiji Furuhashi).” *Ningen Bunka Sōsei Kagaku Ronsō* *人間文化創成科学論叢* 12, 45–53.

Takeda, Keiko. 2011. “1990-nendai Nihon ni okeru HIV/Eizu wo meguru Taikō Kureimu no Retorikku Bunseki: Furuhashi Teiji no Gensetsu wo Chūshin ni 1990 年代日本における HIV／エイズをめぐる対抗クレイムのレトリック分析—古橋悌二の言説を中心に (The Analysis of the Rhetorics of Counterclaim on HIV/AIDS in 1990’s Japan: From the Discourses of Teiji Furuhashi (1960–1995) and Other ‘Male Homosexuals’).” *Nenpō Shakaigaku Ronbunshū* 24, 121–32.

Takeda, Keiko. 2017. “Teiji Furuhashi: On ‘Coming Out’ in S/N.” In *The Dumb Type Reader*, Peter Eckersall, Edward Scheer & Shintarō Fujii (eds.). Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 109-120.

Tsubaki, Reiko, Mimi Nakajima, Momo Takeuchi, Haruhiro Ishitani & Atsushi Fukai (eds.). 2019. *Kuronikuru Kyoto 1990s: Daiyamonzu Ā Fōebā, Ātosukēpu, Soshite Watashi wa Dareka to Odoru* *クロニクル京都 1990s: ダイヤモンズ・アー・フォーエバー、アートスケープ、そして私は誰かと踊る* (Chronicle Kyoto 1990s: Diamonds Are Forever, Art-Scape, And I Dance with Somebody). Tokyo: Mori Art Museum.

Visual AIDS. n.d. “Visual AIDS | Teiji Furuhashi.” *Visual AIDS*. https://visualaids.org/artists/teiji-furuhashi [Last accessed 29 Jan 2025].