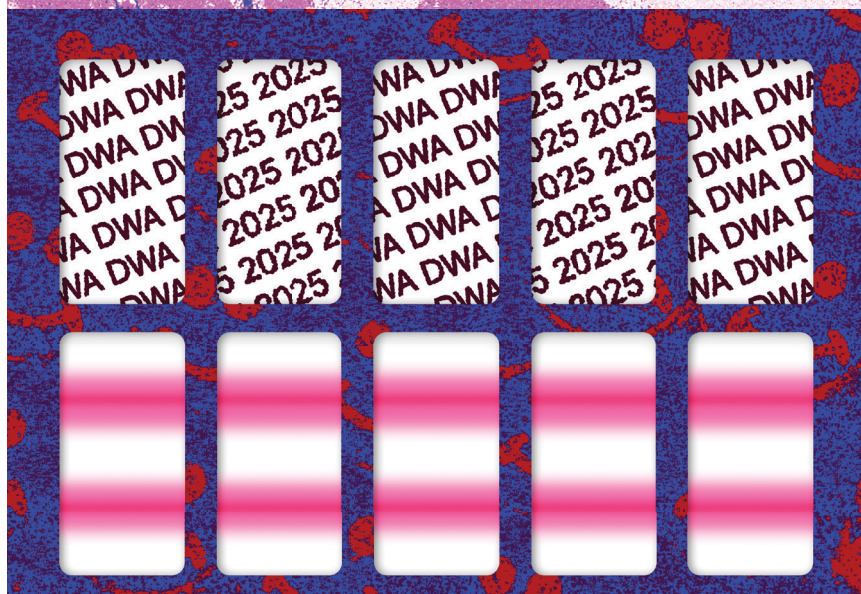


MEET US WHERE WE'RE AT ☒



DAY WITH(OUT) ART 2025
Presented by Visual AIDS

Meet Us Where We're At

To introduce Meet Us Where We're At, we invited Charles Ryan Long—artist, activist, and one of the jurors who shaped the program—to reflect on the six videos. Throughout this guide, you'll find interviews between each artist and Blake Paskal, Visual AIDS Programs Director, that provide supplementary knowledge and context to their videos. Lastly, the back cover provides a QR code to access the digital version of this guide.

What does it mean to be 'sober' as fascism and authoritarianism rises globally, as the legacy of pandemic level AIDS deaths are erased, hard fought safety nets are dismantled, and the planet begins to make us pay for years of neglect?

I'm not sure I'll find out... but I'm glad I'm not alone.

As I watched this year's Day Without Art commissions I was struck by a few things; a return to an earlier Visual AIDS tote bag I designed *Only Our Love and Rage Will End This* and the idea of community survival it was ultimately calling for. The films present a nuanced visual tapestry of experiences illustrating what it means to be alive and porous right now, by which I mean "a feeler" as Octavia Butler described in the Parable series. Executed with levels of care and tenderness, and rejecting the public pariah lies that capitalism often puts on people who use drugs, the films portray people in the throes of what it means to be alive in this moment and hurting. The shorts point to the 'our' of it all. Said differently they point to an 'us', demarcating the often invisibilized necessity of community to survive. We are invited to indeed uphold one of harm reduction's key principles in these films to "*Meet Us Where We're At*", and, in the going, we see as they see and are better for it in the end.

In *Realce*, **Camilo Tapia Flores** performs as DJ Deseo alongside Fernando Brutto, guiding us through their Rio Carnival escapades. Adorned in chemsex crowns, glitter, and harnesses, we are allowed an intimate portrayal of what it means to be a publicly, unapologetically, undetectable drug user. Fun, upbeat, erotic, and tender, the video reveals questions of desirability and loneliness, asking why we seek refuge in the haze of it all.

In *Ghost in the Park*, **Camila Flores-Fernández** scrapes away at rather than haunts us in her animation and depiction of Gorkitz Park in Berlin, a safer haven for people who use drugs in the city. We see and feel the park's inhabitants confronting their gentrifying surroundings interplayed with the introduction of "drug consumption buses" sent to allow people to practice safety. The characters, only identified by name, back story, and shape, move about amongst the filmed backdrop, bringing us viewers into the scene somehow, as if simply sitting on a bench as observers. We hear how the bus has prevented death and begun to reshape the feeling of the park and its people, and are reminded of the reality and limitations of an intervention that runs only during the weekdays.

The Sisters' Journey takes us to Vietnam where **Hoàng Thái Anh** documents the life of Chi, a trans woman drug user, and her community. Set mainly in her apartment the film gives the viewer a generous closeness as she describes her transition, the struggles it brings, and the chemicals/community it took to survive it. Woven together like the fiber pieces she uses to make a living, the film vibrates with the community care that is required in harm reduction.

Through *Voices of Resilience*, **Kenneth Idongesit Usoro** brings us to the streets of Lagos, Nigeria, into a dark and brooding film exploring the lives of its queer drug user residents. The film's low frequencies read almost like an advocacy campaign, through interviews with folks discussing stigma to the stories of harm reduction workers being stopped and frisked for extortion. Usoro seems to want the viewer informed and prepared to discuss the lives of a highly invisibilized group and recent efforts to save lives in Nigeria's still underground needle exchange.

In *Por que tanto dolor? (Why so much pain?)*, **José Luis Cortés** intimately provokes us to consider what it means to have heart in a society as brutal as ours. As we bounce from Puerto Rico to The West Side Club in New York City through Cortés' vivid recollection, documented performance, and story telling, we are asked to directly tie the rise of meth use amongst gay men to the pain and internal suffering inflicted on them. Cortés documents how harm reduction functions as a tool to save our lives even in the midst of the pleasure/pain tornado of coping.

Gustavo Vinagre and Vinicius Couto turn us over and fully out in *chempassion*, a magic realist erotica that recreates a nightdaynight orgy of chemsex and boundary pushing dancing at the edges of love, passion, overdose, chemical ecstasy, and primal desire. We are allowed behind the scenes of a night that few besides those who participate have seen previously. Possibly turned on and frightened, heart racing to the chaotic scenes, we see light saber depictions of injection drug use and a growing cast of characters. The final scene lands us in what feels like a staged production, both therapist office and kitchen, where our main character recalls the nights he lived and what the future holds. Devastating, lonely, intimate, and poetic, the film pulls at us to understand and witness.

In this year's programming we traverse the globe, traveling to places that have been touched by the claws of imperialism, even if to different measures and impacts. Racialized, capitalistic greed has produced a population of tender inhabitants who are deeply and directly impacted, who have decided that it's all a bit much. Rather than pretend to be ok, we witness people who refuse (even if by a hair) to allow this moment to push them into the isolation globalization requires. And I don't blame us, as the traumas of homophobia, white supremacy, trans malice, and a world fueled on extraction and genocide close in around us...it's hard out here. This year's selections fill me with gratitude; for having an opportunity to truly see other members of the global citizenry, who for me are doing the most human of acts, existing as they are.

—charles ryan long

Camilo Tapia Flores

Realce



Realce is a documentary short following two HIV-positive friends, DJ Deseo, played by Tapia Flores, and porn actor Fernando Brutto, during one of their performances at Rio de Janeiro's Carnival. The duo move through the streets of Rio and Carnival "blocos," sharing their reflections on friendship, undetectability, their relationship with sex, and drug use within their own community.

Blake: Why did you choose Carnival as the setting?

Camilo: Carnival is a moment of collective freedom in Brazil—no sleep, nonstop music, and heavy drug use. It felt like the perfect backdrop to talk about harm reduction, HIV, and the rise of "Tina" (meth), which has become a growing concern in Rio. Carnival is joyful, and that joy is usually missing from conversations about HIV, drugs, and harm reduction. I wanted to show that reality through the lens of the electronic music scene I'm part of.

Blake: What was it like filming in the middle of Carnival? How did people react?

Camilo: Total chaos haha. Filming was tough because everything moves so fast. But bringing our "undetectable = zero transmission" messaging into that environment worked. People asked questions, wanted to know what "undetectable" meant, and we realized we were educating people who rarely hear about HIV in that context. Mixing activism into the street party felt meaningful.

Blake: How did people respond to the drug and harm reduction themes?

Camilo: A lot of people didn't immediately register what we were talking about because drug use still isn't something people openly discuss, even within the gay community. There's curiosity, but also shame. People hide it, even though chemsex and Tina are becoming more normalized. So reactions ranged from surprise to a kind of quiet recognition. Drug use is both part of the reality here and still quietly hidden.

Blake: What was your intention by structuring the video into three parts?

Camilo: The film naturally split itself into three movements. First, the performance at the bloco where we brought the U=U message into the street party. The second section centered on desire, what happens emotionally before and after drugs enter the picture. It shows the seduction and the way people slide into these encounters. The final section is about freedom, showing drug use unapologetically. It shows how Carnival lets people drop their boundaries and open up, ending with the sex party. For me, the three parts flow together as a portrait of how people move through seduction, release, and this intense sense of liberation that Carnival makes possible.

Blake: Can you talk about Fernando's role and what his perspective adds to the video?

Camilo: Fernando embodies that sense of freedom in a very raw way. He lives without many boundaries, especially during Carnival, and that energy is what he brings to the video. Filming him was tough, as he often went off script, but that spontaneity ended up expressing the exact spirit I wanted. He represents the part of the community that dives in without thinking about consequences, which is both part of the reality and the tension around harm reduction.

Blake: Anything else you want to add?

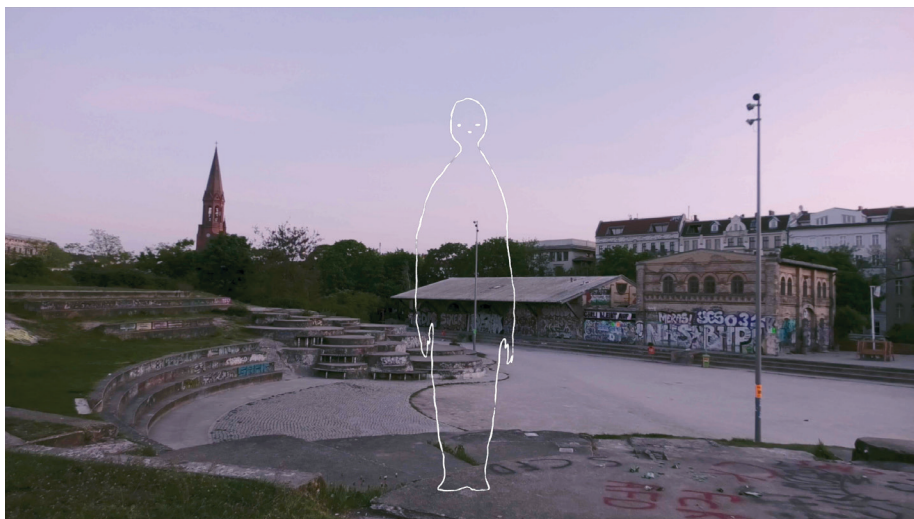
Camilo: The film changed constantly during production because shooting in Carnival is unpredictable, but the result feels organic and true to Rio. I'm not even Brazilian, but I feel like a Carioca (native of Rio). I feel like I belong to this city, so it feels good to give something back to the city. I'm happy it captures the joy, the chaos, and the real lives of the people who make this scene what it is.

Camilo Tapia Flores (he/him) is a Latin American queer artist, journalist, and DJ whose work reflects his experience as HIV-positive, focusing on bringing HIV discussions into the spaces he inhabits. From 2019 to 2022, he actively collaborated with the JEVVIH association to promote HIV awareness on Chile's public agenda. Now based in Rio de Janeiro, he continues his activism within the underground electronic scene, raising awareness through his art and presence in the community.

[@djdeseeo](#)

Camila Flores-Fernández

Ghost in the Park



Ghost in the Park traces the narratives of the community of Görlitzer Park, an area in Berlin known for public drug use and trade. Highlighting “drug consumption buses” that promote safer use and aim to reduce HIV transmission among drug users, the space of the bus is taken as an axis through which the experiences and feelings of the community around the park are amplified.

Blake: What drew you to this story and this location? How did being a foreigner shape how you saw or were seen in the park?

Camila: Since moving to Europe, I always map out places tied to social justice and marginalized communities. In Berlin, I explored gentrified, migrant-centered neighborhoods, which led me to Görlitzer Park. Its shift from a migrant hub to a heavily gentrified but also drug-associated space interested me. Most coverage I found was sensationalist, so I wanted to tell the story differently, focusing on the people working on the ground and those who rely on the buses, not the usual authorities.

My presence definitely affected the dynamics. I stood out, didn’t speak German, and people reacted strongly in both directions. Some were more open to me; others, especially social workers, were closed off or wary of researchers. But being a migrant myself helped me connect with people living in the park, including Spanish speakers. My approach had to constantly shift because the way I was received changed day to day.

Blake: That perspective is part of what drew us to your original proposal. I loved the inclusion of the Chilean man in the film.

Camila: He was the first person who really talked to me just when I was losing hope. He'd lived there over a decade. I wanted to honor him, but when I returned after filming, I didn't see him again.

Blake: How did your relationship to the park evolve?

Camila: Over time, I became a familiar face. I got to know residents, social workers, and neighbors. The park felt less intimidating, and I grew more emotionally comfortable there. My understanding didn't change dramatically, but it deepened.

Blake: The narrator calls the park "haunted." Can you describe that history?

Camila: I made the narrator a ghost so it could embody the park's layered history without speaking for anyone real. The ghost represents both unresolved trauma and unfinished work, like HIV care and sustainable drug policy, stalled by political apathy. The park's history of migration, gentrification, policing, and Berlin's permissive drug culture all intersect there. The ghost could move through these histories without exploiting people.

Blake: What challenges are the buses facing, and what's their prognosis?

Camila: They're underfunded, understaffed, and constantly adapting to political changes. Workers are overworked and very cautious about confidentiality, so I learned mostly through observation. Their presence is vital for the community, but the model isn't sustainable long-term. Without 24/7 consumption rooms, currently impossible with available resources, the problem is only contained, not solved. And politically, it's not a priority.

Blake: How do you think the public nature of the buses relates to their reception?

Camila: They have an almost urban-myth aura, fascinating to outsiders, normal to locals who coexist with them daily. Their visibility draws curiosity, tourists, and also dealers, which shapes public perception. Some residents are open and accepting; others are angry and push for restrictions. Meanwhile, inside the buses, the tone is completely different. It's quiet, supportive, and intimate. That contrast is central to the story.

Camila Flores-Fernández (she/her) is a Peruvian researcher and artist currently based in Berlin. She holds an MSc in Cultural Anthropology at KU Leuven with a VLIR-UOS scholarship, and an MA in Media Arts Cultures with an Erasmus Mundus scholarship. Her work centers around marginalized communities and employs ethnographic and collaborative methodologies.

[@cmlflrs](https://twitter.com/cmlflrs)

Hoàng Thái Anh

The Sisters' Journey



Through a documentary style, *The Sisters' Journey* explores the daily life of a transgender woman in Vietnam using drugs. The film delves into her fear of stigma, struggles she faces, and the vital role of harm reduction services and healthcare available to her.

Blake: What led you to Chi, and why did you want to help tell her story?

Thái: It was hard to find someone willing to participate because drug use is considered a social evil in Vietnam. But once we met Chi, everything became clearer. Her openness and the natural chemistry we had made us realize we could tell a story that breaks stereotypes. People usually portray drug users through struggle and victimhood. We wanted to show joy, resilience, and humanity. By focusing on her everyday life, we hoped to inspire empathy and connection.

I am a social worker, and I've spent many years supporting communities of trans women in Vietnam. When making this video with my team, the message that I wanted to deliver is that support and resources are actually available. The most important step is to be open and willing to connect, as human connection is the core of transformation.

Blake: Can you describe the current state of harm reduction services in Vietnam, especially for trans women?

Thái: Vietnam has made real progress. Harm reduction is part of national public health programs. But trans women face extra barriers, stigma, and a lack of gender-sensitive services. These prevent them from accessing support that technically already exists.

Blake: What would more comprehensive support look like?

Thái: The services exist, but they aren't tailored. Truly comprehensive care would be gender-sensitive and more human-centered. That needs to include mental-health counseling, safe spaces, peer-led programs, and respect for identity and dignity.

Blake: In the film, Chi says she assumed she couldn't seek help because no one would support her. It seems outreach and stigma are still big issues.

Thái: Yes. Here in Ho Chi Minh City there actually are friendly, accessible services for trans women, but many don't know about them. Fear of discrimination keeps them away until they're seriously ill. Stigma is real, but so are trained professionals who can help. The key is better connection, more information, and helping people make decisions without fear.

Blake: What does it mean for Chi's story to be shared globally?

Thái: Our message is simple and gentle, like the film. Sharing her story worldwide shows that no matter where people live or what challenges they face, joy and resilience are universal experiences.

Hoàng Thái Anh (he/him) is a social worker dedicated to advancing health rights for marginalized communities in Vietnam. With a passion for storytelling through video, he collaborates with advisory boards, community members, and stakeholders to create impactful short films that highlight the challenges these communities face, focusing on healthcare access and harm reduction. His work ensures that their voices are heard and their experiences are authentically represented.

Kenneth Idongesit Usoro

Voices of Resilience



Voices of Resilience follows the lives of queer individuals and drug users living with HIV in Nigeria. Through personal interviews and experimental visual storytelling, the film shows the protagonists' worlds as they seek out underground harm reduction services.

Blake: I know through working with you that harm reduction is still developing in Nigeria, and the first needle exchange only opened in 2022, so it's a fairly new system. What does it mean to share this developing process with an international audience?

Kenneth: Since needle exchange is still very new in Nigeria, especially in Lagos, sharing it on a global stage feels powerful. Harm reduction is something that is rarely discussed openly. Usually, conversations are limited to side discussions, but presenting it through this project allows people to hear directly from users and the organizations working within this space. It highlights the struggles, the needs, and the challenges they face, while also giving the world a clearer picture of what needs to be done to support harm reduction here.

During the process of making the film, I realized that most organizations providing these services don't have fixed spaces or clinics where users can come freely. Instead, they go out to meet people where they are, distributing and later collecting needles. If there were safe, permanent spaces offering harm reduction services along with counseling and other forms of support, it could significantly improve access and the effectiveness of these programs.

Blake: How is harm reduction and needle exchange perceived by the public in Nigeria, and what risks do providers and users face?

Kenneth: Harm reduction is heavily stigmatized. Many people automatically assume it encourages drug use, which creates fear for both users and those providing services. Service providers often face harassment, including police stops, even when they have official authorization. Sometimes they have to bribe officers just to continue their work. Despite these risks and widespread misunderstanding, there are still organizations and individuals committed to providing services, showing remarkable dedication to their communities.

Blake: What did you personally learn through making this film?

Kenneth: I learned the importance of patience and the value of listening without judgment. Working with users who were initially hesitant, often changing meeting times or locations out of fear, taught me to be flexible and empathetic. Seeing people simply as human beings, regardless of their circumstances, shifted my perspective. It helped me appreciate that harm reduction is most importantly a public health approach, and at its core, it's an act of care and respect for human dignity.

Blake: What is your hope for harm reduction services in Lagos moving forward?

Kenneth: I hope harm reduction becomes integrated into the national health system. Right now, it's overlooked and often treated as controversial or hidden. For it to thrive, it needs consistent funding and supportive policies. Communities need to recognize the importance of protecting vulnerable groups, including people who inject drugs, people living with HIV, and queer individuals. When services are accessible and supported, it not only helps individuals get care but also builds stronger, more empathetic communities. My hope is that harm reduction is seen as a necessary public health intervention, not a moral issue, and that more people understand its value in creating safer spaces for everyone.

Kenneth Idongesit Usoro (he/him) is a young Nigerian filmmaker and Executive Director of The Colored Space, a studio championing LGBTQ+ voices. Specializing in documentary and experimental storytelling, Kenneth tackles stigmas faced by marginalized communities, particularly queer people. His work emphasizes resilience and harm reduction, using film to inspire dialogue, foster understanding, and drive social change.

[@the_coloredspace](#)

José Luis Cortés

¿Por qué tanto dolor? (Why so much pain?)



Instead of asking, “Why so much meth in the gay community?,” Cortés’ experimental film provokes the deeper question, “Why so much pain?” The film delves into the emotional and social wounds that fuel addiction and risk-taking behaviors.

Blake: Can you say more about why you framed your video around the question, “Why so much pain?”

José: That idea came from a conversation with Rick Shupper, a wiser, older gay friend who’s been sober for 22 years. He works in the community and speaks without judgment. He suggested asking, “Why so much pain?” instead of focusing on meth itself. It shifted the conversation. I didn’t know exactly what harm reduction was. I’d heard about it, but this made me understand. I think it’s an important issue because it’s an epidemic of meth use in the gay community for sex. I think it’s a necessary message.

Blake: That question changes the focus.

José: Yeah, it’s like, go deeper. Ask a different question. Maybe you/we can understand better.

Blake: Can you talk about the moment with your doctor that changed your view on harm reduction?

José: One day I used a very small amount intravenously. I was with a guy and I suggested I use less. Later, I shared that with women at the clinic, and they commended me. They said: "No, because in that situation where you were at the moment, you did a great thing because it was very difficult." That recognition shifted my perspective. It also changed my relationship to drug use in a positive way. Before, it was always goal-oriented, focusing on sobriety. But now I see that progress isn't linear. What if you're living 30 years between sober and not sober? Is it just discarded? No.

Blake: How does your video fit into conversations about drugs and harm reduction in Puerto Rico?

José: Harm reduction is growing here, at least in the spaces I'm in. One time I was giving out test strips, and with the strips, you can test the coke and see if it has fentanyl. I gave it to this guy who was drunk and high. He saw me and was like "Oh, thank you." He felt taken care of.

Blake: Why did you choose to frame your video through your poetry?

José: Those stories are written right after the drug use and hookups happened. When I was well enough to write, I would write about it, especially if there was some connection with the person or if it was really intense. It's like a chronicle of my escape. Sometimes I would write about the men, and they were there. Right there. He just arrived. He's lying on the bed. I'm writing, and suddenly he's leaving. I worked through the issues in my poetry. By sharing the poetry, I'm sharing what I feel, and my voice is maybe more dramatic, stronger. There's more repetition and acceleration.

I had to do the video in Spanish. It was an easy decision because I wanted it to reach my people. They're going to understand it better. I'm from Puerto Rico. I'm an addict. I speak in poetry.

José Luis Cortés (he/him) is an artist who works across painting, performance, and video, best known for artwork inspired by his time in New York City in the early 1990s. Based in Puerto Rico, Cortés' very personal work reflects the underbelly of gay life, documenting a life on the fringes of society: of sex workers, addiction, and of a rapidly-changing landscape. Through his work he validates his world and voices his identity as both a gay man and as a Puerto Rican.

Gustavo Vinagre and Vinicius Couto *chempassion*



In the magical realist film *chempassion*, a gay man reminisces about his orgy days and chem sex, contemplating what the future holds for himself and his close relationships.

Blake: What motivated you to create *chempassion*?

Vinicius: My motivation comes from my own experience with chemsex. We tried to recreate a party according to the way I conduct my own encounters.

Gustavo: My motivation also comes from my own experiences with chemsex, and with my concern of how not talking about it is leading our community to vulnerable places. It's a very difficult dichotomy to approach: health (in a broad way) versus freedom of choice, and I think many times the capitalistic logic just wants us to consume more and more, whatever it is, no matter the cost.

I've questioned myself a lot how can harm reduction be real in a world where life and wellbeing is so undervalued. I've asked myself if drugs are not just an illusion of freedom to disguise yet another genocide of our community. And of course, I have no answers to those questions.

Blake: Can you share more about the relationship between the two very different halves of the film?

Vinicius: When I spoke to Gustavo about the feeling of passion that the drug GHB creates, we decided to highlight that passion, keeping it present for the first part of the film. For the second half, we approached the rebound as an internal exercise reflecting the repetition of drug use. Often, we wake up saying “never again,” and a week later we find ourselves thinking, “I want more.”

Gustavo: I think when you have sex or drugs, or both together, you are not only trying to open yourself to the world, but also wanting to go deeper in yourself, to find out something about you that you didn’t know. I think that the second part is about that inner conversation you end up having subconsciously while you are experiencing that deep exchange that comes with sexual energy.

Blake: In the film, sex is shown directly and without censorship, but the drug use is abstracted. Can you say more about this decision?

Vinicius: In our case, we preferred to treat the drugs in an abstract way, thinking in terms of harm reduction, so as not to reinforce what is already a battle for our peers. The team was fully sober during the shoot, and one of the main intentions was to explore, through performance, how to reach a state of arousal and intoxication—without the actual use of drugs.

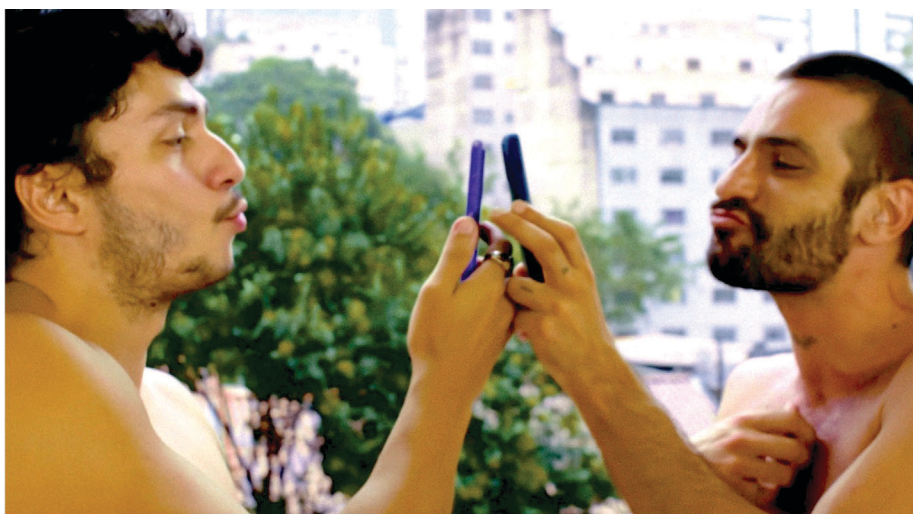
Sex, on the other hand, is something that is already implicit in us, and for several years now I’ve noticed, and I see many others experiencing the same, that it’s difficult to separate sex from drugs. Finding pleasure in sex without drugs has become a real challenge.

Gustavo: I think that was part of the challenge, imagining what it is about the drugs that makes the sexual bond stronger. It was an essential part of the performance to have the “invisible drugs,” to make it an artifice, to have our co-creators/actors recreating this stage rationally instead of actually living it, as if in a documentary. I think that’s what makes the film closer to a performance rather than an observational documentary. That was also a choice because all the people involved were willing to change the way they use drugs.

Blake: In the conversation in the second half, your character breaks down while reflecting on past drug use, relationships, and political events. How do you see all these realms related to a conversation about harm reduction?

Vinicius: Many times, I felt that numbing myself was the best way to escape the monsters I needed to face. Yet they always returned, stronger, and often I had to face them alone. For years, we've been reflecting on the lack of affection available to people living with HIV. In chemsex, I sense that we create a fantasy of possible love, intensified by the substances' effects, yet as fleeting as the high itself. It's essential to be conscious of when and how to use, to be in a safe state to use, and not to use as a way to fill a void that will only grow deeper once the effect fades.

What I feel, in light of the history surrounding drug use, is that sometimes escaping reality is important. Especially in a world that is so harsh and full of rejection, which we still experience today. We need to be attentive to our community, to observe each other's presence, and above all, to acknowledge when and members of our community have become withdrawn.



Gustavo Vinagre (he/him), writer and director, studied Literature at Universidade de São Paulo and Scriptwriting at EICTV, Cuba. He has written and directed 14 short films and 6 feature films, which have won over 100 national and international awards. Vinagre holds a prolific career spanning over 10 years, with films that are known for their vibrant queerness and their intimate approach to image and sound. Notable works include *The Blue Rose of Novalis* and *Vil, má*, both premiered at the Berlinale. His latest feature, *Três Tigres Tristes*, won the Teddy Award for Best Film at the Berlinale 2022.

[@gustavo.vinagre](https://www.instagram.com/gustavo.vinagre)

Vinicius Couto (he/him) is a Brazilian artist and creative director based in Portugal. Couto develops a poetic and disruptive narrative orbiting post-structuralist inquiries and subjective experiences. His artistic practice explores the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class, and LGBTQIA+ migrant territoriality. At the core of his work lies the questioning of the collective imagination surrounding non-normative bodies, using desire as a tool for deconstruction, resistance, and creation.

[@poseativa](https://www.instagram.com/poseativa) | visualaids.org/artists/vinicius-couto-ribeiro

GLOSSARY

The QR code on the back cover links to a digital copy of this resource guide which allows quick access to the resources connected with the following terms.

CHEMSEX or PARTY AND PLAY (PnP) refers to using drugs as part of your sex life. Chemsex can refer to a number of drugs including methamphetamine (also known as crystal meth, tina, or T), GHB, cocaine, ketamine, and MDMA. [Read more here.](#)

For more critical cultural production about drug use and chemsex, check out the [Mephisto Texts published by Love Lazars](#) and [The Infernal Grove](#). Watch [Mikiki's Red Flags, a love letter](#), from Day With(out) Art 2022, for an unapologetic take on representing substance use outside the framework of harm.

HARM REDUCTION refers to strategies that aim to reduce the harms associated with activities deemed by the culture to be dangerous, such sex and taking drugs. The contemporary concept of harm reduction emerged in the early 1980s when healthcare workers started to provide clean syringes to people who inject drugs rather than insisting on abstinence. Other examples of harm reduction include condoms, PrEP, and Narcan, which is a life saving medication that reverses the effects of opioid overdose. It only works on opioids (heroin, prescription painkillers, fentanyl). [Read more principles of harm reduction here.](#)

People who use drugs have long been at the forefront of AIDS activism. From developing needle exchange programs and safe consumption sites, communities of drug users have popularized harm reduction models and a collective mindfulness around how the logics of public health and criminalization intersect with risk, personal autonomy, and pleasure. Learn more in the zine that Visual AIDS and What Would an HIV Doula Do? created for MoMA PS1 in 2021: [Harm Reduction is not a Metaphor.](#)

HUMAN IMMUNODEFICIENCY VIRUS (HIV) is a virus that attacks the body's immune system, reducing the number of CD4 cells (T cells), making people more vulnerable to other infections or cancers. If not treated, HIV can lead to AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome). People are diagnosed with AIDS when their CD4 cell count drops below 200 cells/mm or if they develop certain types of illnesses. [Read more here.](#)

NEEDLE / SYRINGE EXCHANGE is a process where people exchange used needles for new needles. Needle exchange is an example of harm reduction, which focuses on reducing harm, rather than enforcing abstinence. Needle exchange programs often link to other essential services such as HIV screening and counseling, STI testing, mental health care, primary medical care, and housing support.

One of the earliest examples of a needle exchange program was the Mersey Model, developed in Liverpool in 1986. Click here to watch [a video from Danny Kilbride for Day With\(out\) Art 2021](#) that tells the story of the Mersey Model.

To learn more about the history of needle exchange efforts in the US, read Hannah Gold's essay [Bold Fury](#) and Dont Rhine's essay [Below the Skin: AIDS Activism and the Art of Clean Needles Now](#).

PRE-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS (PREP) is a preventative medicine for HIV-negative people to lower their chances of getting HIV. It is either taken as a once-a-day pill or injectable medication administered every couple months. To learn more about PrEP, including where you can find a distributor in the US, visit: [PrEPLocator.org](#).

POST-EXPOSURE PROPHYLAXIS (PEP) is an antiretroviral medicine that greatly reduces chances of HIV transmission if taken within 72 hours of exposure. In the US, PEP should be available in all emergency rooms. [Read more about PEP here](#).

STIGMA is a mark of shame or prejudice. People living with HIV and people who use drugs experience stigma in many ways, including in their intimate, familial, and community relationships. When something like HIV or drug use is stigmatized, it can distort factual information and trigger certain behaviors and attitudes, such as:

- Thinking that people deserve to get HIV because of their choices or that a person who uses drugs should expect negative consequences
- Refusing to provide care or services to a person living with HIV or a person who uses drugs
- Socially isolating a member of a community because they are HIV positive or use drugs
- [Read more about HIV stigma here](#). [Read more about drug use stigma here](#).

UNDETECTABLE refers to how regularly taking HIV medication can lower the amount of HIV in your blood (aka your viral load) to an undetectable level. People who are undetectable cannot transmit the virus to others. This doesn't mean you no longer have HIV—it means that by continuing your plan of treatment, you can live with HIV by managing your health on your own terms. [Read more about undetectability here](#).

DAY WITH(OUT) ART

In 1989, Visual AIDS presented the first Day Without Art, organizing museums nationwide to cover up their artwork, darken their galleries, or even close their doors as part of a day of action and mourning against the AIDS crisis. Since 2014, Visual AIDS has commissioned artists and filmmakers to create new short videos responding to the ongoing crisis. Each year we work with over 100 screening partners to premiere a new video program on December 1, Day With(out) Art / World AIDS Day. The 50+ videos that we have commissioned are available to view at video.VisualAIDS.org.

VISUAL AIDS

Founded in 1988, Visual AIDS is the only contemporary arts organization fully committed to using art to fight AIDS, while assisting artists living with HIV and preserving the legacy and artistic contributions of those lost to AIDS.

This guide was written by Blake Paskal, Programs Director and producer of *Meet Us Where We're At*, with additional editing by Kyle Croft, Executive Director. It was designed by Isai Soto with cover graphics by Rush Jackson.

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Links to more information are available in the digital version.
Scan the QR code to access this guide on your phone.



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