Torch '72/2020

University Art Museum, University at Albany, State University of New York
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Organized by Shane Aslan Selzer and The Social Action Archive Committee (SAAC)
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Shane Aslan Selzer, who lives in Brooklyn, New York, and teaches at Parsons, The New School for Design in New York, is a practicing artist, editor of two books on art and curatorial pedagogies, and founding editor of Social Action Archive Committee (SAAC), a networked collective of individual researchers who have worked with Visual AIDS artist archives and UAlbany’s archives.

For this exhibition, SAAC worked with archives for the Torch ’72 yearbook. Both of Selzer’s parents graduated from UAlbany in 1972, and thus Torch ’72 is their yearbook. Having grown up with Torch ’72, Selzer describes it as the first artwork to have a profound effect on her, ultimately shaping much of her practice. The artist writes: “My story, my parents’ stories, are very much entangled with Ron Simmons’s story as seen in the yearbook, just as so much of white and Black America is inextricably entangled in ways we are only just beginning to speak about.”
The Social Action Archive Committee (SAAC) is a group of researchers studying images from SUNY Albany’s campus archives starting in 1910 in an ongoing effort to understand what social action looks like, in this place over time. The committee is connected to this place through family history, University legacy, adjunct teaching and student learning. We are looking back to gain insight to the time and circumstance of a collective now.
The exhibition focuses on the 1972 UAlbany yearbook *Torch*. The yearbook serves as a visual prompt to speak about the trajectory and lineage of intersectional justice efforts on the University at Albany campus.

- Student leaders on campus have been interviewed and discussions are centered on the work of UAlbany alum Ron Simmons ’72 as an early leader in intersectional social justice fights.

- Simmons’ work provides an important lineage for current students working with urgency in this current moment.
Who was Ron Simmons?

• Activist, photographer, writer, and professor, Brooklyn native Dr. Ron Simmons (1950-2020) made an indelible mark on the lives of countless Americans. He cofounded the organization Us Helping Us, specializing in HIV/AIDS care and prevention for Black gay and bisexual men. A selection of his writings can be found in the Ron Simmons Reader accompanying this exhibition. In 1987 he received his Ph.D. in mass communications from Howard University, where he also served as a professor from 1986 to 1992.

• Dr. Simmons’s start was here, at the University at Albany, as an undergraduate student in Afro-American studies, class of 1972. He later completed two master’s degrees here, in African history (1978) and educational communications (1979). During his senior year, Ron was the editor-in-chief of the university’s yearbook, Torch. An editorial tour de force, Torch ’72 broke with traditional yearbook formats, giving voice to emerging Black, gay, Puerto Rican, and women’s liberation movements, drawing attention to environmental degradation, and protesting the Vietnam War. Today it is recognized as an invaluable photo essay and documentation of its era.
MW: Where did you first attend college?

SIMMONS: State University of New York. I went there from ’68 to ’72. It had a profound effect on me. One, I came out. Two, I was involved in the student strike of 1970, and that profoundly changed my life. It was when Nixon started secretly bombing Cambodia and word got out. That’s the time that Kent State happened, when the military shot people on campuses. We shut down the campus and then we opened it the next day, so basically the faculty senate agreed to end the semester and gave everyone a pass/fail. We opened the campus the next day to our “liberation classes,” so we had classes about the war, classes about civil rights, classes about the Black Panthers. We offered childcare so that women in the neighborhood could attend the classes, so that was one wing. The second wing of students, I think we did like three publications, like weekly newspapers.

The third arm, which I was part of, was progressive faculty would invite us to their homes for dinner, and they would invite their friends over, and we would talk about why we were on strike and about the war and about student life and that kind of stuff. We’d go maybe 50 miles out up in Leyden, in upstate New York, where people probably hadn’t seen many black people. It would be me and maybe 20 students there and they would have dinner, then afterwards we’d all sit around and debate about the war and other issues. I remember, one time, I was confronted by a Catholic priest about welfare queens and this, that. You had to know your stuff, of course. That’s when I became an activist and became serious about my education.

“Ron Simmons [is] a towering figure in African American history. Through UHU he made HIV-AIDS legible to Black men who were not in relation with white gay male politics and community, and who were justifiably skeptical of traditional medical institutions.”
- Kwame Holmes, historian

“His legacy is so large I don’t want to start listing. And Covid-19 makes it feel like 1984 all over again when enormous deaths become so small because there is no space to grieve them.”
- Colin Robinson, poet and activist
Torch ’72 includes representation of women’s liberation and sports; Black, gay, and Puerto Rican narratives; oil spills; scenes of local poverty juxtaposed with the New York State Plaza—still under construction in 1972 and displacing the area’s Black and immigrant residents when it began in 1965—Simmons called on his contemporary readers to think of their yearbook not simply as a volume for posterity but as a present call to action.
"The yearbook was dedicated to what I called the silent majority, and I said that includes blacks, homosexuals, prisoners, and poor people. That’s where I was coming from."
- Ron Simmons, The Washington Blade
The exhibition includes facsimiles of pages from the Albany Student Press (ASP)—still published today—many advertising the yearbook or providing a slice of the 1971-72 social landscape.
The editor and some of the staff of Torch '72 assume full responsibility for the choice of pictures, theme presented, language used and total development of the Torch. The content of this had not been developed with the knowledge or approval of the Student Association, nor the student body. It is our desire to assume complete responsibility for Torch '72. All we ask is that no one individual take what we say as a personal affront.
"In 1971, we witnessed the first "gay liberation" march in the history of Albany. So naturally Torch ’72 has the first "gay" section in the history of the yearbook. Since no one on the staff would admit to having first-hand knowledge we decided to interview Lauren Simone, a gay guy on campus."

- page from the Torch ’72 yearbook
Middle Earth: More Than a Switchboard

The editor and staff of TORCH '72 sends their greetings to all the Black Students and Black Visitors, and wishes them the best during their
Black Cultural Weekend

New Course Offered

Workers' Elections

The editors of the Albany Student Press, April 14, 1972, page 17
Facsimile reproduction
Courtesy of Student Newspaper Collection, 1916-2019. M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University at Albany, SUNY
TORCH: I guess we’ll begin with the question of the worst aspects of “gay” life.

Lauren: Well, if you’re not “liberated”, that is if you worry about people finding out, the worst part is hiding it...it’s hard for “straights” to imagine having to hide something like being gay...You’re on your guard 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, from everybody: your closest friends, your family, your parents...everybody. You watch everything you say and do, afraid that you’ll drop a clue about yourself...The pressure is unbelievable, and unless you find some way to relieve it, you’ll probably crack up. If you are “liberated”, the worst part is convincing yourself each morning. You have to shut out society’s constant brain-washing, telling you that you’re no good and “unnatural”...a freak...It’s one thing to admit that you’re gay by marching in a parade with 7,000 other gays. It’s another to ride home alone, in a crowded subway car with a “gay is good” button...Know what I mean?
This exhibition contains images from the Vietnam War depicting death, and discussions about these images.
Torch ‘72 includes violent photographs of The Vietnam War, including one of a Cambodian soldier holding the decapitated heads of two unidentified North Vietnamese soldiers, originally published in Time magazine and widely circulated in 1971 in protest of The Vietnam War.
Simmons repeatedly interspersed one of the heads among the senior portraits. He wrote: “...look at these pictures, and ask yourself: why? Look within yourself, and see if you feel any emotion, any ‘discomfort’...and if you do, try to imagine how they must feel.”
But is it exploitive to use someone else’s death to make one’s own political point? Is it justified if doing so sparks social change and justice? The spectacle of death is a concern running through this exhibition, particularly in the issue of violence against Black people expressed by students in Selzer’s two-channel video, the history of which includes lynching photographs and the recent viral video footage of a police officer slowly killing George Floyd.
The slides in this carousel reproduce spreads from Simmons’s *Torch ’72*. The intimate scale of the projection relative to the videos in this exhibition, the steady pace as we flip through page by page, and the slide projector, a didactic tool common in the 1970s, slow us down as we witness campus life and social revolution documented in the yearbook.
Some people think the Yearbook is a bit strong...

Well, so is the war.

Only difference is you can take or leave the Yearbook...

No one can take or leave the war...

We designed this book to relate to your emotions...all of them. Happiness as well as sadness. We designed this book to make you react...just plain react. If you don't like the book, write us, or cut out the pictures you don't like, discuss it with your friends and strangers, or burn it (feel free to mail us the ashes).

But for once in your life, feel the joy of reaction.

Torch '72
the ultimate in yearbooks
This dual screen video remix of the Torch’72 yearbook brings together images and voices of 1971-72 UAlbany students with those of today. We hear Simmons talking about producing the yearbook as a university senior, as well as voices of five current UAlbany students, including poet Fanta Ballo, and one alum.
Today’s students read and respond to Simmons’s yearbook, verbally think through the ethics of Torch ’72, and present original work. As the video addresses the fight for Black, gay, and women’s rights in 1972 and today, its larger-than-life scale visually amplifies the images, as its audio does for spoken voices.

Video still
TORCH ’72/2020 *feat. Fanta Ballo, 2021, 2 channel video projection, 13:25; color; sound
Courtesy of the artist
The footage moving us through the campus architecture raises questions about space and belonging. In Torch ’72 Simmons wrote: “At first, you react to this place depending on where you’re coming from. If you’re rich, you marvel at the architecture. If you’re middle class, or from a prosperous farm, you feel lucky to live in America. And if you’re poor, or black, you feel as if you’ve been slapped in the face.”
Contrasted with the active campus scenes in *Torch ’72*, the largely vacant campus in this video also reflects the realities of moving through the architecture during today’s pandemic.

**Video still**  
*TORCH ’72/2020* *feat. Fanta Ballo, 2021*, 2 channel video projection, 13:25; color; sound  
Courtesy of the artist
We Demand Power Over Our Bodies, page from the Torch '72 yearbook
We Demand Power Over Our Bodies, 2021, printed silk, printed chiffon 58 x 78 inches
Courtesy of the artist

The photograph from Torch ’72 reproduced here on silk shows an abortion rights protest in downtown Albany, prior to the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision legalizing abortion in the United States.

On a transparent chiffon layer draped over the photograph, Selzer has printed the words “We Demand Power Over Our Bodies.” In the context of this exhibition, the meaning of this phrase expands to include anybody who sees themselves as part of a legacy struggling for power and agency and fighting against shame, oppression, or control.
Together Our Resistance Channels Hope (TORCH), 2021
Printed nylon
5 x 3 feet each
Courtesy of the artist

Pennants, traditionally a symbol of campus pride waved to rally fans at collegiate sports events, here become part of the visual language of protest.

The repeating color scheme and inverted triangle shape unify the five pieces, but within them digital collages of images celebrate the multiplicity of people in Torch ’72 engaged in parallel liberation struggles, many of whom formed student clubs still active in the work of social justice on campus today.
Present-day images layered with photographs from the 1972 yearbook suggest solidarity across liberation movements and generations—an idea reinforced by the work’s title.

The chaos of our current pandemic and climate crisis forms the backdrop for this work—the orange skies from the 2020 wildfires in California loom in some of the pennants.

Together Our Resistance Channels Hope (TORCH), 2021
Printed nylon
5 x 3 feet each
Courtesy of the artist
Selzer’s video project presents a stream of subtly altered images of the UA lbany campus from 1910 to the present, culled from the University’s M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives by researchers and the artist. United in their effort to understand the pictorial shape of social action at a public university over time, Selzer formed the Social Action Archive Committee (SAAC). For the past three years the SAAC has also been working with the archives of Visual AIDS, an organization raising AIDS awareness and supporting HIV-positive artists.
A range of educational, cultural, and social events are reflected in this inaugural SAAC video, including 2014-2015 Black Lives Matter protests after the New York Police Department killing of Eric Garner. The sounds of a slide projector advancing resonate with the slide projector elsewhere in the Torch ’72/2020 exhibition, bringing us back to an earlier time period. Simultaneously, the large-scale projection in this space among current student voices suggests that the roots put down by the university’s past activist students still support the vital work being done today.

Video stills
Social Action Archive: University Libraries, University at Albany, SUNY, 2015
Digital video projection, 11:19; black and white; sound
Courtesy of the artist
Social Action Archive Committee: Torch ’72/2020

Editor: Shane Aslan Selzer
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Camera: Chelsea Knight
Additional Camera: Adam Muro
Photos: Patrick Dodson
Additional Footage: Courtney D’Allaird, Jude P. Washock, Saraina Robertson
Audio Contributors: Ron Simmons, Melissa Bunni Elian, Ian Callahan, Amy Zhang, Brandy Aly, Simone Hassan-Bey, *Fanta Ballo (featuring original work titled, Pain)
Childcare: Allison Marie Walsh
Works Cited


The University at Albany, State University of New York. Torch '72 . M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and Archives, University at Albany, SUNY.