

Exhibition Checklist

Together Our Resistance

Channels Hope (TORCH), 2021

Printed nylon

3 x 5 feet each

Courtesy of the artist

*TORCH '72/2020 *feat. Fanta Ballo, 2021*

2 channel video projection, 13:25; color; sound

Courtesy of the artist and Social Action

Archive Committee

We Demand Power Over Our Bodies, 2021

Printed silk, printed chiffon

78 inches x 58 inches

Courtesy of the artist

Torch '72, 2020

Plastic mount slides projected from slide carousel

Photographed by Patrick Dodson for

Social Action Archive Committee

Courtesy of the artist

Social Action Archive: February 2015

Broadsheet, 2015

Ink on paper

33 x 22 ¾ inches unfolded

Social Action Archive: University Libraries,

University at Albany, SUNY, 2015

Digital video projection, 11:19; black and white; sound

Courtesy of the artist

Torch '72 Yearbook, 2 copies, published April 1972

9 ¼ by 12 ¼ inches (closed)

Courtesy of the Yearbook Collection, 1900-2014.

M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and

Archives, University at Albany, SUNY

Albany Student Press, April 28, 1972, page 3

Albany Student Press, April 28, 1972, page 12

Albany Student Press, April 18, 1972, page 12

Albany Student Press, April 14, 1972, page 17

Albany Student Press, April 14, 1972, page 12

Albany Student Press, April 11, 1972, page 2

Facsimile reproduction

11 ½ x 17 inches

Courtesy of Student Newspaper Collection, 1916-2019.

M.E. Grenander Department of Special Collections and

Archives, University at Albany, SUNY

TORCH '72/2020

January 20 – April 3, 2021

University Art Museum

University at Albany

State University of New York

UAM
University Art Museum
University at Albany

TORCH '72/2020

Shane Aslan Selzer

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 photoessay and documentation of its era.

The Social Action Archive Committee, a collaborative project guided by artist Shane Aslan Selzer, pays homage to *Torch '72* in this exhibition and amplifies the voices of modern-day UAlbany student activists, such as poet Fanta Ballo (class of 2021), who continue Simmons's legacy.

About Shane Aslan Selzer

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."

Special Thanks To:

Ron Simmons

Sekou Ross-Selzer

University Art Museum Community and Staff:

Darcie Abbatiello, Berly Brown, Gil Gentile,

Catherine McTague, Sydney Pennington, Tzu-Yun Wei,

Corinna Ripps Schaming, Robert Shane, Christine Snyder,

Jeffrey Wright-Sedam

UAlbany Gender and Sexuality Resource Center:

Amberly Carter, Courtney D'Allaird, Ekow King

Social Action Archive: University Libraries, University at Albany, SUNY, 2015, digital video projection, 11:19; black and white; sound

Shane Aslan Selzer’s video project presents a stream of subtly altered images of the UAlbany 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 2014–15 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.

**Social Action Archive Committee:
TORCH ’72/2020**

Editor: Shane Aslan Selzer

Photo Editor: Esme Loke O’Connor

Senior Video Editor: Shane Aslan Selzer

Senior Video Editor: Daniel Carroll

Camera: Shane Aslan Selzer

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 Chang, Brandy Aly, Simone Hassan-Bey, *Fanta Ballo (featuring original work titled, *Pain*)

Childcare: Allison Marie Walsh

Torch ’72, 2020, plastic mount slides projected from slide carousel, photographed by Patrick Dodson for Social Action Archive Committee

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.

The pages in these slides also include 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 exploitative 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.

**TORCH ’72/2020 *feat. Fanta Ballo, 2021,
2 channel video projection, 13:25; color; sound**

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 of 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.

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.

We Demand Power Over Our Bodies, 2021, printed silk, printed chiffon

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. Simmons’s yearbook includes documentation of women’s liberation movements on campus, in Albany, and in Washington, D.C.—as well as, for the first time in the yearbook’s history, photographs of women’s sports teams, in advance of Title IX’s June 1972 passage mandating that women athletes have equal opportunity in sports within educational institutions that receive federal funding.

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

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. Thus, while linking past and present, the piece also poses unanswered questions about where our future will lead.

**Torch ’72 Yearbook, published April 1972;
Albany Student Press, April, 1972,
facsimile reproductions**

In these four vitrines we see two copies of the 1972 yearbook that inspired this exhibition, as well as 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. Through the yearbook’s 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. Protesting the Vietnam War, he included violent photographs of the Vietnam War, for instance, interspersing the picture of the beheaded North Vietnamese soldier among the senior portraits.