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Interviewee: **Hunter Reynolds**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Hunter Reynolds  
June 2, 2012**

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Ready?**

HUNTER REYNOLDS: I think so. How do I look?

**SS: You look beautiful.**

HR: Okay.

**SS: So, look at me, not at the camera. Okay, so we start – if you could tell us your name, today’s date, how old you are, and where we are.**

HR: My name is Hunter Reynolds. I am 53 years old. We are here in Bushwick, in my apartment, in Brooklyn.

**SS: And today’s date?**

HR: Today’s date is July 2<sup>nd</sup> –

**SS: June!**

HR: June 2<sup>nd</sup> –

**SS: Two thousand –**

HR: – 2012.

**SS: Thank you. So, young man — since we’re the same age —**

HR: We have history.

**SS: That’s right. Where were you born?**

HR: Rochester, Minnesota.

**SS: Oh, okay. And had your family been there for a long time?**

HR: No. My father was a Minnesota Viking. And we moved to Minnesota for him to be on the team. That’s where I hit the Earth. He didn’t survive in

the Vikings; he only lasted three years. And so, we moved to Florida after that, and I grew up in Florida – southern Florida.

**SS: And did he get out of the sports business after that?**

HR: No – he did eventually. But back in the '50s, there was a B football league that was professional. And he wasn't quite good enough for the major league, so – he got contracted to a team in Jacksonville, Florida – the Gators. So, we went there first, and he played there for a couple years, and then he got out of it, and became a traveling salesman.

**SS: And what did your mom do?**

HR: My mom was a housewife.

**SS: So, when you were growing up, when did you first become exposed to the art world, or to artmaking?**

HR: Well, my grandmother, on my father's side, was a – both my grandmother and my grandfather were hobby painters. And art and music go back to the 1800s on both sides of my family, mostly music. And like really professional music: my great-grandmother was a concert pianist, who played at the Orpheum Theater in New York for silent films. She played for silent films, and she recorded two recitals with Caruso. She studied at the conservatory in San Francisco. She lost her whole entire family in the earthquake and moved back to New York to become – she lived outside the city; she'd come in on the weekend, Friday night, and play Friday and Saturday night at the Orpheum.

And then my grandfather, her son, had a jazz band in the 1930s and '40s. And he was an amazing guy. He was an engineer for IBM, and he actually invented

the typewriter ball. But he was like a musician and an artist, a photographer. He was like this creative guy. And my grandmother, too. So, I had both – that side of the family was all from upstate New York, the southern tier, and they were all amazing, creative people.

**SS: So, your parents were the anomaly.**

HR: Yes.

**SS: You had all these women professionals, and then your mother was a housewife.**

HR: Right.

**SS: And why was that? Why did they reject that?**

HR: Well – my mother was a very talented young woman. She was –it’s a whole story with my mother. She was a beauty queen, she was a runner-up Miss Wisconsin in 1957. She was from Wisconsin. Where my parents met was in Minnesota, when my dad went to the Vikings. And she wanted to be in theater. She was actually born in Hollywood, California, and she’s actually an illegitimate child of a Hollywood movie star. Her story is kind of amazing. And she was talented. But she, and all her sisters and cousins, who are all these beautiful women — like classic ’50s women — my father, too – where they – that late ’50s entitlement to the American dream; my parents embodied both of those things. She married my dad literally to get away from the abuse she was suffering from her father. And that whole story is – so she gave up everything that she wanted to be. She was sent to Wisconsin, the University of Wisconsin, studying theater. But she, my grandfather, her father, didn’t know that that’s what she was studying. And he found out that she was hanging out with all the beatniks, and he pulled her out of school. And then she met my dad and married him three weeks later – in a

marriage that was totally, you know, born under abuse and just was bad from the beginning. And I was the result of the first, I came out nine months later.

**SS: So now we know where the artist came from.**

HR: Yeah.

**SS: So, you were growing up, in the '60s, and you turn on the TV, there's Martin Luther King, and student rebellion and Vietnam. What was the conversation in your family about all of that?**

HR: Pretty much nothing. My awareness of social anything – my childhood was filled with, I was severely learning-disabled. I was visually impaired. So, I was one of these kids who functioned as a – I learned everything backwards. So, my reality was quite unusual. I couldn't speak, I was one of those kids that lived in my own little world. So, art was the thing, one of the things that kind of saved my life. In the first seven years of my life, we moved 17 times. So, I didn't process anything except daily chaos, and how to get through it, and how to survive it.

So, art – my grandmother taught me how to paint in oils when I was four. And she would – she taught me the discipline of taking a little paint box of the studio out into nature, usually. We'd go outside and paint together, and she taught me all the functional things of painting. And that skill became something I became really good at really quick. And so, it was my refuge.

And I would build forts out in the Everglades, where we lived, finally. And I would just live in my forts. My world was in my fort, and I would even sneak out at night, and spend the nights in them. Anything I could do to get out of the house, was what I did.

And I was the oldest of all the children, so there was – I remember watching TV and seeing Vietnam happen on the TV. We had lots of people in my neighborhood who were going to war. And there was the wristbands, and all that. So, I remember, probably 1968 was the year where I became conscious of all that. I was like eight years old. But I had already known I was very different, and I was already, I already had an awareness that I was gay. And I was actually already having sex –

**SS: When you were 10?**

HR: Between eight and 10, yeah. I was the boy who created the – I found that if I got people to get naked, or take their clothes off, somehow we all had a good time – and people came back to my forts. And it was all with girls, at first. I was like the only boy, and I could play doctor, and I would always be in my fort, and the girls would come with their dolls, and we'd play, and I'd play with them, and my grandmother was into – we'd make clothes for her dolls out of her lingerie. She knew I was weird, and she would like say, I know you're different. And she supported me through all this stuff. She was my – she saved my life.

I had this clear awareness, when my dad asked me, when I was gay; he said, when did you know you were gay? I said, well, remember when you took me to the locker room for the Minnesota Vikings, and I was two and three years old? I would be crawling around under the benches, in the shower room; and I literally was crawling around under them with the intention of touching as many legs, asses, dicks, and whatever I could. And I did.

And they'd, "oh, Hunter, you know, you're just a little boy."

I said, I knew then.

**SS: What did he say?**

HR: He said, oh, oh yeah, yeah. The thing about my dad – even though he’s a total fuckup, my dad – I thought it would be the opposite, when I came out. I thought my dad would be freaked out, and my mother would accept it, because my mother was more cool on the surface. But it was the opposite. My dad totally accepted me, without question. It wasn’t even a big deal for him. Maybe because I think he might have some bisexual tendencies. But my mom freaked out. They were divorced by the time I came out.

My coming out was a whole – ended up being my first political, real political thing that I did. I was the first out high school student in my high school – West Palm Beach. And I came out just really hardcore, among a large school, of 3,000 kids. I was on the football team, I was kind of a jock. I was kind of navigating – I was the only kid that went to the – white kid that went to school dances. I had a lot of black friends. I was a person who could – felt as an outsider and moved through a variety of groups within high school. So, when I did come out – a gay club – between 12 and 13, I went to the library and look up the word “homosexuality.”

And because I lived in West Palm Beach, and my mother worked at the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach, which is – she was the social director of the Breakers Hotel, and all these Stonewall queers, fresh off of Stonewall — ’72, ’73 — coming down to Florida to work in the bars and restaurants, seasonal gays, working down there; these guys, who had their own gay beach, three blocks from my house, which I found immediately; suddenly I was like, whoa, you know, what’s going on here? All these guys hanging out.

And some of them would – I looked much older than I was, so I'd always walk the dog to that beach, and be there with my dog, and be going something's up with this. And I'd already had sex with boys, but never men. And there was a gay beach right next to the hotel, which a lot of the dorms with these guys, and there were some cottages that they were living in. So, it was like a '70s gay beach, in 1972, '73. And it was there that meeting these guys, having sex with them, that I experienced this whole new world, for myself. It was like a refuge from the abuse I was getting, the lack of love from my mother, and all that stuff. Suddenly I was desired by these guys. And I had fun with it, and – I would do anything.

But I learned – they would talk to me. And then they would freak out when they found out how old – because they could rationalize, I was older — like maybe 16 or 17 — when I knew I was 13. And I'd tell someone, and they would freak out.

But it was there that I learned about the revolution that was going on, the gay revolution. And so, I went to the library, and started reading books. And the sense I got from it was oh, this is a stage that boys go through, and grow out of. So, I was waiting to grow out of it.

**SS: You're still waiting.**

HR: Waiting a long time. Then I had this six-month period where I kind of blossomed, grew up; got more good-looking; got not teased; I got more accepted by a lot of different people. And so, my first year of high school was great.

At the same time, a gay club opened up in our town, called The Cabaret. And I'd heard about it, and I loved to dance, and I loved to go out. There was a club called The Electric Lightbulb, and all the kids went there, and I was a disco diva – into



glitter rock and disco. And this club opened up, and I was having a lot of conflicts in my personal life, and some very intense things going on in my life. And I got the courage up, because some of the girls from high school would go, and I started hearing that it was a cool place to go, but it was a gay club.

So, I got the nerve up one Friday night to go in. And I sat out in the parking lot for three hours, watching people go in. And one of the first things that I noticed was there were young people. Really, from this early teenage thing I was having sex with men, and I thought I was the only kid that was really like this, and I didn't know any other kids in school. I even tried to find some.

And I walked in. Donna Summer, "Love to Love You Baby." Light, flashing-light disco floor. Big club. All these young people. And got out on the dance floor and started dancing. And I was looking around, and I thought, okay, this is it: I am gay. I'm gay; it's not growing out of it. I'm not going to grow out of it. And I'm just going to accept it, right now. I'm gay.

And right after that internal moment on the dance floor, that I had listening to Donna Summer; I saw a girl from school; even a girl that I was kind of – had a little romance with. And she looked at me, and I looked at her, and I was like, oh, god; you know, like, no breath. I knew it was just going to be okay, this was going to be it. And a couple days later, I saw her in school, and she said, what were you doing there? And it was really like – and she looked at me, and she said, you know it's a gay club. And I said, yeah, I know; I'm gay. And I said it to her. And she just looked, she said, you are?

I said, yes, I'm gay. I've been gay for a long time. And that was the first time I was there. And I just said that to her.

And within two weeks, it just got all around school. My friends were— is this true, what we're hearing?

And I was like — yes, I'm gay. I would say it, like that: I'm gay.

And there were like a couple guys, effeminate guys, who got teased. But no one was out.

So, a teacher pulled me aside and said, are you — you know, I've heard this rumor, and blah blah blah. And I said, it's not a rumor, I'm gay. And then — weird things started happening. Like, people started talking to me, going, wow, I think I'm bisexual, and my boyfriend's bisexual. And I just sort of started becoming — and I never got — the thing was that I had some of the most powerful people in school, popular people in school, in all the different groups of the school, were friends of mine. So, the most popular surfer dude, the most popular black activist woman, who was — she was our class president, junior high, she was this Angela Davis Afro girl, and she was overachieving black girl, and she was my best friend. I had all these people that were really good friends of mine already. So, they accepted it. And I think them accepting it caused — I never got teased, not even to my face did I hear anyone call me a faggot. I knew they were talking behind my back.

So, about a month went by, and slowly, people started coming out. They would seek me out, and go, I'm gay. And then this monumental moment happened. Everyone would gather at lunchtime, on the lawn, and eat lunch and smoke pot and stuff. And there was this big arch-bench thing. And this horrible girl, who I hated anyway: she got up on the bench, and she called over all the — hey hey, everyone listen up, listen up! I got this letter that I want to read to you. It's going to blow your mind!

And she started reading a letter written from one girl – a love letter that she had found, written from one girl, lesbian girl in school, to another.

And it was this beautiful letter of love, and erotic, and sex. And she was waiting till the end. And she goes – now you're going to die! And she read the name. And everyone, I was like oh, my god – the cheerleader, the prom queen girl, was having an affair with this athlete girl.

And it was pretty explicit, this letter. And she was reading about five feet away from me. And I jumped up; I grabbed the letter from her hand. Because she said she was going to Xerox it and put it up all over the school. I tore it up. I said, "you fucking bitch! You have no right to do this." I just like really stood up, and I screamed, and everybody was looking at her, and I said, "you're all, fuck, I'm, I'm gay, and you fucking, you're going to deal with me if you do anything with this!"

Well, that just did it. That was the end, or the beginning, of an avalanche of coming out. So, the next month, there were – so many kids came out that we started this club, called The Breakfast Club, which actually got into the yearbook, because one of the lesbians was on the yearbook committee. And we would skip school first class, and go to Denny's, around the corner, and all hang out. And we just called it The Breakfast Club. And she got it into the yearbook. The next six, seven months, we all would go to the club, and hang out. It was really this whole coming-out thing.

I wasn't aware of it as a political thing in my life then. But I had found *The Front Runner*, just in this time period. Somebody, one of these guys had told me about *The Front Runner*. And I was on the verge of committing suicide, really. There was a moment when I –

**SS: Why?**

HR: Because I had a very abusive home life. I had been raped by a policeman – which I was not telling anybody about.

**SS: Right.**

HR: I had all this trauma going on at the same time that I was coming out. And just before – and I had no intention of telling my parents, and my life in school was very separate from my life at home. And there was a moment, just in the roughest period of all this, at the beginning — like right before the avalanche of coming out happened, before I got the confidence from that — there was this month, where this policeman, who picked me up at the gay cruising area and raped me, in the police station; and a whole other story. So, this was going on. And I was on the verge of committing suicide. I got *The Front Runner*. I'd heard about it from somebody, and went to the bookstore in Palm Beach, and stole it, and read it, cover to cover, like in a couple days. And this book saved my life. When I saw Patricia Nell Warren at the Center a couple years ago, I had to tell her that – her book saved my life.

Why am I crying?

**SS: It's okay. What did she say?**

HR: Well of course, a lot of people say that to her. Because it did. In that time, that year, coming out, two gay kids who came out killed themselves.

**SS: In your school.**

HR: Yeah. So, this whole, suicide is still the second largest – it still hasn't changed, really. But I think kids have much more positive influence and access to

information than we did at all. So, I think more lives have been saved, but it's still such a high rate.

**SS: Yeah. So, did you leave town soon after high school?**

HR: I did. So, what happened was – six months into second semester of high school, I was feeling very bold and confident. I had basically been a pretty good kid. My friends were all doing drugs when they were 12, and drinking, and skipping school completely. I was moderately good, except for going to the cruising area every day and trying to have sex, which I pretty much did every day.

I did something, and my stepfather grounded me one weekend, on the weekend that I had a date lined up at the club. And I just decided that I'd sneak out of the house, and without permission, take the car, and go to the club.

So, I had this big wing of this house in Palm Beach, with kind of, not my own entrance, but I had this balcony that I could climb over the bougainvillea, and get out, and no one would see me. So, I was trying to do that, but I fell, and my stepfather heard me, and he looked – so what the fuck are you doing? Get back in the house. And he was on to me; he was totally on to me. He'd say things – I know you like a book. He put me in my room, and said, you're not coming out of your room until you tell us where you were going.

So, I stayed in the room. And I was like – really, for almost a day. I didn't even go to school the next day. And I walked in, finally, to my mother's room. They'd bring the food to the door – they brought dinner to my door, I ate it, and I went, finally, into their bedroom. She was watching TV. And I sat there next to them and watching TV for another hour. And they said, do you have something to say to us?

And I turned to them, and I said, yes, I do. I'm gay.

And it was like, my mother was like, what? What? You're what?

I said, I'm gay.

And my stepfather looked at me and said: I know.

And she, very calmly, started asking me questions. How do you know you're gay?

I said, because I have sex with men.

She said, you have sex with men?

I was like – yeah.

Where do you meet them?

At the gay beach, down the street.

It was really funny, because she was very calm and collected. She just—and I was stupidly answering all her questions. But then suddenly she started shaking, and – she got out of bed. She said, well, obviously, you don't want to be this way. And she went into the bathroom. And when she was in the bathroom, he looked at me, and he said: Do you remember when I told you I know you like a book?

I said, yes.

He said, this is what I meant. He said you have chosen a very difficult life.

And I looked at him — I don't know what gave me the thought to say this — but I said, I did not choose this. Do you think I would choose to be gay? No. I wouldn't choose to be gay. I was born this way.

He said, well you've got a rough life ahead of you.

And she came back hysterical; weeping; screaming; like just, like a banshee.

And they immediately cut off all of my privileges. They send me to a shrink and made my life a kind of hell. I couldn't go anywhere, I couldn't see my friends – it was really oppressive; already an oppressive life with her, my mother. And so, I suddenly just rebelling. Fuck you, I'm going out, and I'm stealing the car, and I did this probably two-month time frame of major rebellion – you think I'm bad now? Fuck you.

The worst thing I did was – remember the Doublemint ads, in the '70s? Well, I was dating a Doublemint twin, who thought I was 18. And I brought him home one night and had him in my bed. And my stepfather opened the door. And I pushed him down into the crack of the wall. And I said, “oh, you have to get out now.” I said, “I'm only 14!” He was freaking out. And two nights later, I went out to the club again. And I came home. The door locks had been changed. I couldn't get in. I slept on the front porch. In the morning, my stepfather came over and said, “we've had enough.” And I said, “I've had enough.” He handed me my cash, bank-account cash. And he said, “we're taking you to your grandmother and goodbye. Pack a bag.”

And I went to my grandmother's, in the next town, and finished high school. And called my dad up. And said — he lived in California — and said, “Dad, I'm gay. I want to come live with you.” And I hadn't seen him in four years. And he said, “oh, great. I have a lot of gay friends. Come on out.”

So, I had a plan, which was to go live with Dad, and stepmother and my, my half-brother and -sister. And finish school. And on the last night of the last – we had a going-away party at the Cabaret Club, and all these friends came. And they all wrote in

my yearbook. And so, my yearbook, 1975 yearbook is, when I read it a couple years ago, I was looking at all my archives and everything, I was like, whoa, this was like, they wrote about this. And I even had some of the kids on Facebook contact me; people that I was with at that time, and said, you saved my life.

But I went to California and lasted with my dad for about two months. And became what they call out there an independent adult, at 16. I got my own apartment and had a job; reinvented my entire life. Lived on the streets for some time, had the whole hustling thing going on, and street-life thing in Hollywood. But basically, within six months, I was what they call in California an independent adult, supporting myself. Never finished high school – and went on from there.

**SS: So, did you get involved in any kind of gay community politics?**

HR: I was aware – I kind of like thought, gee, what I ended up starting in high school was the first gay student union in the state of Florida. There was nothing like what actually ended up happening. Not officially. But that's really, we'd talk, and we'd meet, and people would talk about their problems. We had no official thing that was going on. But that's, in the end, what kind of happened.

So, by the time I got to California, I was going to gay prides. The first year, the gay community center there, which had just opened up — it's one of the oldest ones in the country — that place really saved my life there, because it gave a place for you to be, and find out stuff.

But I had a very schizophrenic life there. I had a job. I worked. I had an apartment. So, I wasn't like one of the street kids. But I was going out every night to all the clubs, and hanging out with Joan Jett at Geno's, and going to the Odyssey and seeing



Diana Ross, and Studio One. So had this really crazy, amazing life. It was just kind of crazy.

**SS: And that was in L.A.?**

HR: Yeah, I was in L.A.

**SS: And when did you first become aware of AIDS?**

HR: Well – I went back to school and got my GED at Hollywood High School. I wanted to, at first, be a fashion illustrator, so I went to fashion school first. And I was pretty backward, in that I was this weird, awkward kid. I knew how to reinvent myself and present myself in different ways to adapt to situations. But the learning curve for – anyone who knew me now could never imagine that I couldn't communicate. So, reading and writing; at one time, I was functionally illiterate. And it wasn't until I was in high school, and I had adapted to all these learning disability things on my own, and figured out that, oh, this is what works for me, and this doesn't work for me, and I'll do this, so I knew all that kind of already.

So, by the time I was going to college – at 19, I applied to Cal Arts. Well, first I went to fashion school, and I realized in fashion school that I didn't want to do fashion, but fine art. And I had met my first lover, who was older than me. He was a dancer and a theater person – an English lit major. And so, he was the final link in fixing all my verbal quirks, and learning – helped me put sentences together, and get them out of my head in a sentence, and all that.

So reading was something that was very difficult for me. Even still –I've learned how to do it, but it's a three-part process.

So, by the time I got to school, I felt like, I was still feeling stupid. But we moved downtown, and suddenly I was in this, first loft scene, in 1979, in downtown Los Angeles, and I was just in it, meeting these amazing people, going to Al's Bar, and getting exposed to amazing artists. And that's where I met Ray Navarro. Most people don't know but I knew Ray since he was 16. And he came into Otis. So, I went to Otis Art Institute. And I was working a full-time job, so I got accepted to Cal Arts, and couldn't go there. And my world was not in the gay world, at all. I didn't go to gay bars; I didn't hang out in gay clubs. I didn't – suddenly, from age 19, I had a lover. We had a scene that was artists. But the gay world, I was not in – other than having gay art friends. But it wasn't like I was hanging out anywhere. And I was basically in what I thought was a monogamous relationship. So, when I first heard about AIDS was one of my artist – I mean, not even AIDS — was one of my artist friends had gotten sick, with Kaposi's sarcoma. And then he died, of pneumonia. And it was –

**SS: Who was that? What was his name?**

HR: That was – oh god, what was his name? I'm blanking on his name.

**SS: Okay.**

HR: It was similar to Anthony Ledesma, Ray's boyfriend's name; he was a Latin guy – Ramon something. Ramon something.

So, I just remember – and then we started hearing about the gay plague. But I was part of the L.A. Men's Study. So, 1979, I joined the L.A. Men's Study, because they were offering some moderate healthcare, and I was in art school. And so, I thought, "oh, this is cool, I'll do this study." So, every six months – it started out as a sociological study of gay men, and then suddenly it was turned into a study of this,

whatever disease was happening, this condition. And so, I became aware of this disease that was hitting people, and sexually, maybe, transmitted. But I was with my lover, and it really didn't come up. We didn't talk about it; it didn't come up. I never used a condom with him. School was just my world, and I worked.

So, I would start hearing more and more about sick people that I didn't know. I heard more about the disease. And then once it became AIDS, I was aware that I was in this study, I was aware – I didn't know that my lover was having affairs with people. I was consumed by school and my life. I wasn't totally monogamous with him, in terms of – I never took anybody home. I would go hang out in the public rest rooms of the Arco Towers at lunchtime; jerk off or watch people in the toilet.

But I wasn't having sex with people.

He was. But I didn't know that.

So, it really didn't become something that was part of my psyche – on, like, oh, I need to have safe sex with people, because I wasn't having sex with people. It was just a peripheral thing, really, for a while.

Until I moved to New York, in 1985. Then it was like an avalanche. Then it was like – just – and I moved without him. And I suddenly was free to have sex. I started going to the piers, and I started going to the movie houses, and all of it. And I was being totally fucking wild. And I did not have safe sex at all. I didn't think about it. I didn't worry about it. I was just an exploding 25-year-old, who had been in a relationship for six years.

There was a moment where I was really aware of the language, the information that was coming out in that time. That it was big red flags. But it didn't stop

me from fucking doing whatever I wanted on the floor of the sex club. But it was there.

It was like –

**SS: What clubs did you go to?**

HR: Oh, god, I went to all of them. My favorite was Man's World. And there was a pier – I tend to like voyeuristic situations, that I can see things, not total dark rooms. And I'm very voyeuristic. So, I was discovering all these things about my sexuality in that time. I went to the Mineshaft just before it closed, and all my kinks – because I was like, "whoa, they do that?" It all just like happened in that time frame.

Ray moved out – there was a whole wave – I lived with Aldo [Hernandez]. I knew Aldo in L.A. – not as a friend. I kind of knew him as somebody on the scene. And Ray, I went to school with. And he was such an amazing human being. At first, we didn't – he was – I didn't like him. He was so precocious. He was everything I wasn't. He walked in, and he just took over everything. He was 16 years old. He skipped over two years of high school to go to art school. He came into Otis Art Institute at 16. And I was like, who the fuck are you? And he was like, when I was going through my archives from that time, I found all, because he was running the gallery of Otis, within the first two months he was there. I was going through all my stuff, and finding letters from him, and I thought, god, who is this guy? Video, photo-, you know, he – it wasn't that I didn't like him; he just scared the fuck out of me, and I was just like – I wanted to be him, right?

And then we became friendly and would hang out. Then I moved to New York first, and he and Anthony came shortly after, and Aldo came, and we all kind of were this group of people from L.A.; Kathe Burkhart, a lot of artists from Cal Arts, and

so on. And so, it was like this little L.A. wave that came to New York all at the same time. So, it was like all these cool people were in my life, and my – I suddenly was meeting all these gay artists, and ACT UP wasn't invented yet, but there was a scene that was bubbling.

And Ray became a really good friend. We actually became really good friends when he came here. And we got him his apartment on Eighth Street – Anthony and Ray were in our apartment.

So, there was a year in which — I think it was '87, '86, '87 — where I was becoming really like, okay, Hunter, you're doing this really dangerous stuff. You need to fucking start getting a grip on your sexuality, because you don't know if you're positive. You could be positive already. You don't know what Tom is. I was still with Tom. He moved out, but we had a more open relationship then. We didn't live together.

I think '86 was the year – '86, '87 — that I started really changing my whole thought process and patterns of sex and trying to figure out how to use condoms spontaneously, and stuff like that.

And then – I was working at Paula Cooper Gallery. Just there, in all those different scenes; when ACT UP started, I was aware of it. But I don't think I started going to meetings for about six months. I think six months into ACT UP was when I started going. Ray and whatever, and my friends who were members, and people from the beginning were there, and I would hear about what was going on. I can't remember the date exactly, but it was like within the first six months that I started going to meetings.

**SS: Okay, let's take a little break.**

HR: Yeah.

**SS: Okay, great, thank you.**

HR: Am I going on and on?

**SS: No no, it's good. Let's just take a little bathroom break.**

**SS: You first went to ACT UP –**

**JAMES WENTZY: Hold up.**

**SS: Where were you and Ray in your own health at that point?**

HR: I was fine. So, ACT UP – when I first started going to meetings, I was just like, my friends were already there. Aldo, I think, was already going; I knew Gregg [Bordowitz]. I knew Zoe Leonard; I knew a lot of the art people already. And that kind of was my first awareness of ACT UP. I think Ray was already there, from the beginning. So, I just started going to meetings.

And I was just like a soldier, you know, really. Until 1989, I was just a soldier. I just would be kind of astounded at the meetings, just at the diversity of issues, people. Maxine Wolfe, and Ann [Northrop] – these amazing people, who'd get up and just fucking talk, and speak, and be forceful. It just was like this shit would happen, and getting off into the committee meetings, and going off into the rooms, and coming back for votes. And I was just like, whoa, this is amazing.

So, I would just do what interested me. If an action was taking place, I would go to a meeting, and just do what I was told, basically. I wouldn't contribute my ideas or anything. I was just like kind of – body. I'll help with this or that. So, I kind of went to different things, and thought, okay, this is too much like – Treatment Data, I was like, oh, god.

So, I stayed around the creative things, and did posters and –

**SS: Which posters did you work on?**

HR: I worked on a lot of different demonstrations. I was working with Richard [Deagle] sometimes, on paintings, hand-painted stuff, and signage, and whatever. I wasn't really hanging out with the Gran Fury people at all.

**SS: What was the inner dynamic between all the artists? Some people were like, ACT UP, artists! And some people were –**

HR: Right. Well –

**SS: What was all that?**

HR: – that was, I mean, for me, what it was doing for me personally, in my art, was it was making me very aware of my art, and what I wanted to communicate at the time in my art. I started making installations about – I was particularly influenced by the committee meeting rooms off the main room at the Center, and that whole concept of an idea being thrown out on the floor, from left field, and a group of people going off into a private room, and coming back with a concise presentation to the floor. And this dialog is what really – because my communication, my verbal skills, all these things, were – I would never get up and speak in front of anybody. The whole idea of what was happening there was so intimidating to me that I could never consider being one of those people. Except, when I went into the committee rooms, there, I was really able to sort of get my ideas together, to be able to speak, or to say, oh, this is what I think, or something like that.

So those rooms were like – and I started making my art. My first table installations were about that concept and taking the idea of what I ended up calling dialog tables.

I can't remember when ACT UP – I was the person who kind of got Paula to start doing meetings at Paula Cooper Gallery.

**SS: Who was meeting there?**

HR: At first – I forget what groups would come to meet there. We would have general – we would have sometimes meetings for actions. So whatever affinity group – I'm trying to jog my memory on some of this. I got Paula to offer the gallery as a space to meet, for whatever reasons, a variety of things, whenever we needed it, after work. So, if we needed to have an Action Committee meeting during the week that couldn't happen at the Center, or whatever, we could do it there. And then she did a benefit – she started doing stuff.

Then — it must have been '88 — I just started going to demonstrations and yelling and screaming. It was very exciting for me, and I would get up at five o'clock in the morning, get on the busses to Washington. Because of my police issues, I would be one of the people who would do – lay down in the street, but as soon as the police came, if that person was getting picked up, I would jump and run. I was a runner, as they called it.

So '88 was the year where I was like, okay, this is what I'm doing. I started making my art about it, and just doing whatever I could, with whatever means. All the time, I'm becoming more – so I'm getting connected to Catherine Saalfield, through Ray, and DIVA TV is starting, and all these parties at Catherine's loft in Tribeca.



And I'm working at Paula Cooper Gallery, and for many years, had no idea that Catherine was – she was Saalfield back then. And I'm going through Paula's Rolodex one day, and I'm like – see Catherine Saalfield Gund. I was like, whew. I asked Paula. I said, why is she a Gund? She said, because she's Aggie Gund's daughter. I was like, you're, what? Because she was giving off, like, oh, activist lesbian. And I didn't really question how she had that big loft. But it was like, oh, you have a whole other identity, and I know about it.

So, my friendship with Ray really got deep. And of course, Aldo and I lived together. And Aldo was a kind of mover-and-shaker person, so I just got that by living with him. And Ray – it was just all happening, and it was exciting. And I myself didn't know I was positive. And the whole issue of getting tested became a big issue, for a lot of people within ACT UP, Ray included, who didn't know.

People were dying, and people were sick, and no one really close to me. But it was everywhere. Suddenly someone's gone, and they're – you would become really aware suddenly at ACT UP meetings that somebody was going over that edge. And I was in the process of breaking up with my lover. I was becoming a safe-sex Nazi. Really, condoms – I spent like a year trying to figure out how to use them, and the right one, and how to slip it on at a club to fuck somebody. The whole safe-sex thing, really, for me, happened in 1988. And I became kind of a condom Nazi. Like even – I wouldn't come in someone's mouth.

**SS: Because you thought you were positive.**

HR: I thought I could be, because – I had two things happen, extreme things happen, in the previous couple of years, where blood had – fist-fucking, which is a

kink that I realized I was getting into. And one of my first experiences with that was with a big blood exchange, a rupture, and felching, and I thought that would be a major place.

And then I was more of a top back then, and I wasn't getting fucked that much. But I occasionally did. And there was a time when a guy fucked me without a condom. And also, I noticed blood.

So, there were a couple times where I was like, uh, you know. And I was pretty much becoming aware – like, cocksucking was not a way you were going to get it. But no one really knew.

But I did become kind of a condom Nazi. There was one –

When I made the decision — Ray, a couple other people that I knew well — we were having discussions about getting tested. And Ray was absolutely bone-dead afraid of knowing. We would have talks about it. And I was like, how could you – okay, how – you are one of the main people in ACT UP. How are you wrapping your head around this? We gotta all get tested.

And he said, no no, I can't, I can't.

So that whole thing was happening in myself at the same time. And I forget what it was. There was some monumental moment for me that I realized, okay, I want to know. So, I knew that not only did the L.A. Men's Study already have almost nine years – or no – from '79 to '85, when I moved to New York, they had my blood work, every six months. And it had become an HIV-and-AIDS study by then. And they were going back and looking at all that blood into the '70s, because I think that study started in the middle '70s. So, I knew that there, I had my results. Not only did I have my results, I had a history of them.

**SS: Right.**

HR: So, I made the decision, I think, at the end of 1988, '89, that I needed to go back to L.A. And that is where I wanted to find out what my results were.

In that first six months of 1989 — which was the pivotal year for me, on every level, with awareness, with a kind of place, a confidence in myself that I was starting to get more involved with certain things within the group; and my work, my installations, started really focusing on creating these activist environments in galleries, and working with Simon Watson, and Hallwalls, in these first installations I did that year all were dealing with activism, the Drag Pose series, you know, drag pose alter ego was born as a political action. So, my art started really getting more focused with this at that time.

I was aware that kind of every decision I was making was a political one. And people were really, in that time, getting sick, and dying, and I decided, okay, I need to know, I need to deal with this, and I'm going to do it.

And I remember, Ray and I had this — I was like, I'm going to go back to L.A. And he'd talk about his mother. He hated — everything about his mother was not good. And we got along on that, because my mother, we'd like, you know, bash our mothers.

I remember, there was a talk we were having. I'm trying to weave together some things here during this year. So, we were approaching — I'd already started Art Positive. The Kostabi Helms Amendment had already happened. All that, that moment was my moment in ACT UP.

However, it was after all that, in the fall, that I was going to go get tested – go back to L.A. to find out the results. And that somehow was important to me, to go back there, as opposed to just getting tested here. It was kind of a thing. And we were approaching, I booked the ticket, and we were approaching Stop the Church. And it was Stop the Church that I – was my moment for I’m going to get arrested for the first time; I’m going to totally commit my body to this; I’m going to go the full nine yards.

So, I went to L.A. Found out that I was positive –

**SS: Did you find out what year you had –**

HR: Yes. I found out that I had converted between the last half of 1984, ’85. And I also had all my numbers before and after, which was unusual for somebody to have. So, I kind of learned – and ACT UP gave me the information that I – when I was there, in L.A., I already had enough information in my head that I could assess the numbers. And I knew that I had a low-average T-cell level before I was positive, and that I should look at the percentage points. And that thought, that knowledge, that awareness, came solely from being exposed to these brilliant people in ACT UP, and the information that was just flowing out of our group. And that was something that I was really kind of – oh yeah, okay.

And I came back. And I wasn’t able to be in any of the Action Committee meetings, or any of the preparation for being arrested. I was basically flying in from L.A. and going to the demonstration. But I knew what the deal was, I knew what to do, and I knew what I wanted to do, which was be with – I think it was the women – what affinity group. One of the girl affinity groups was — I can’t remember which one — was having a die-in, just – I arrived at Stop the Church, into the 6,000 people, in the middle of that

crowd. Felt like a sardine. Was suddenly just screaming with everyone, but feeling really frustrated, because the die-in was about to happen. I knew it was about to happen, I knew what I wanted to do, and I wanted to be in it. And I was just trapped.

There's this famous picture of me doing what I did at that moment, which ACT UP gave me – I just picked up the barricade; and threw it into the middle of the street; thinking that a bunch of people would join me and run. And I ran, and all these cops came, and people were screaming, and – and there was that picture that Tracy Morgan took of me, just being picked up by the police. Four policemen just picked me up. And I said to them: I said, I want to be there! Where they're dying, on the ground! And they took me there. They didn't take me to the paddy wagon. They took me and let me lay down with the die-in, and then get arrested.

So that moment was kind of at the end of the '89 year, which was the culminating year for me in ACT UP. And I had already started Art Positive – cofounded Art Positive, with Aldo and Bill Dobbs.

**SS: Do you want to explain what Art Positive was?**

HR: Yeah. The Center show was happening that spring. And I was in the Center show – that show, which turned out to be really an amazing show. And the history of that show is kind of a great thing. And Mark Kostabi wasn't – the show had straight artists in it; Fred Tomaselli was in it, some other straight people. It wasn't an exclusively gay show. So, Mark Kostabi, who I kind of knew from L.A. I knew his shtick, and I knew that he kind of would play with adopting a bisexual persona, as art, to manipulate whatever he wanted. I knew that was part of his gig.

So about three weeks before the show, a *Vanity Fair* article came out; interview with Anthony Haden-Guest with Mark Kostabi. And it was like a major interview, in *Vanity Fair*. And in it, he said: The art world right now is controlled by gay dealers and curators. And most of them are sick and dying of AIDS right now. And although I think that's sad — I used to have this to — although I think that's sad, I think it's for the better, because homosexual men don't actively participate in perpetuation of human life.

I lost it. I absolutely lost it.

And I said, this motherfucker cannot be — he can say this, and be in a show at the Gay and Lesbian Community Center? No way.

So, the first thing I did was I called every artist in the show. I called the curators and the Center before anything. I just did that all on my own. And I sent them or told them the quote. And I said, we have to have this person out of the show, or there's going to be a riot at the opening. I will start a riot at the opening. I'll throw him and his work out at the opening.

And it worked. He was taken out of the show.

So, at the opening, I decided I wanted to destroy his career, that it wasn't enough to be out of the show, those words had no context for art. They only incited violence and homophobia against gay people, period. It wasn't enough just to get him out of the show, for me.

So, I talked to Bill about it. And he said, yeah, let's make a little flyer, and we'll hand it out at the opening, and see what happens.

Well, 60 people showed up the next week, at the Center. And I was like, whoa. And then Art Positive started. It took a couple weeks to get that name. Our single purpose, as an affinity group of ACT UP, heh heh heh, which was a great thing. It was like, you could come up with any idea at ACT UP, present it, and if it got approved, you can go off and do your own little thing. So, this is what Art

Positive was. It didn't start out to be an art group; it didn't start out to be anything other than, let's attack this – this is homophobia in the arts; this is, we're fighting – the Helms Amendment hadn't happened yet, but stuff was brewing. There were attacks happening in the arts, in the NEA and things were just starting to brew with all that.

So, the whole purpose of this group was to attack Mark Kostabi, and get the Abrams book that was being published, a Rizzoli book – and attack Tina Brown for not editing this out. Attack *Vanity Fair*, attack Anthony Haden-Guest, attack Ronald Feldman for representing him. And we made this street wheat-pasting signs that were: Know the Virus, with the quote, with the red circle and the line through it, and we just wheat-pasted that all over the city. Studio. And he, in the press – so suddenly, I'm doing it. And I'm meeting with, sitting down with Ronald Feldman and Tina Brown and all these people, and talking, saying, you have to do this, and we're doing this, and – so I got this, like – because it was, you could channel –

ACT UP provided not only a way to express your anger or whatever; it could channel and focus your ideas and your interests and your, what really meant something to you. So, there's everything there.

**SS: So, what happened to Mark Kostabi?**

HR: Well, we were successful in getting the Rizzoli book canceled. One of the amazing meetings was with Ronald Feldman, where Ronald Feldman started defending him, in the category of boys of Komar & Melamid, all these political – Ida Applebroog, all these – I was like, “are you kidding me? You have to be kidding me. There is no defense. You’re a fucking Jew. This is a Nazi that you’re representing. There’s no defense.”

And he started crying. Really teared up. And he said, “I know, I know, I don’t, I don’t know what to do.” He said, “but I can’t throw him out of the gallery. He said, there’s no excuse, no excuse.”

I said, “no, there’s no excuse. None at all. This is not art, you cannot defend it as art, period.”

So, the last thing – that lasted all about three months. And then the Helms thing, the Robert Mapplethorpe thing; the show – all this sort of happened at the same time. Visual AIDS started; all the arts groups were coming together. The Estate Project, and all those kind of art groups and organizations had started.

So, the last thing we did with that was I called all the maître d’s of all the restaurants that he – because he was a little scene guy, and liked to go to Odeon, and Chanterelle, and all those places. I made sure every maître d’ at every restaurant knew about this quote. And when he started getting refused service, that’s when he called me. And he apologized. He said, I know I was stupid, I’m sorry. I said, Mark: whatever. What kills me is that you had that thought.

And then Art Positive moved on to the Helms Amendment. And that was pretty quick, and our first big action was the Metropolitan Museum, on the steps of the



Metropolitan Museum. And it was another classic – go to the meeting, Aldo and Bill and Richard Deagle, and Jim Fouratt, and all the – Julie Tolentino, Ray, and all the people who were really interested in art. ACT UP members already, but interested in art issues, were all early members of ACT UP, and it was an amazing group of people. And we would have meetings in our house on Eighth Street, and the police would come, I mean their agents would come and sit there. Aldo, one of the most vocal people around – we were pretty sure our phones were tapped, and we'd get followed home from demos — the Wall Street demo — they'd follow us.

**SS: How do you know?**

HR: One, because I'm really aware of police, and I've had a whole myriad of stories with police in my life. And actually, what they can do, and how entitled they feel with their power to control. So, I already knew these levels of police activity.

**SS: But why would they come after you?**

HR: I think it might have been because we had three – we had a very vocal person, Aldo, who was angry, could be very angry; vocal; who was actually doing a lot of stuff, on all these different levels. And we had Ray, right next door, above us – or below us. And they knew who we were. There was one moment where, after the — it was Wall Street — there was a line of agents. They weren't police, they were obviously undercover FBI or CIA. But there was a whole line of them, with the other ones. And we watched as they broke off and followed people. And this guy got on the subway with us, and we tried to lose him, and he just followed us. And finally, we did lose him. He didn't get to the house. But we knew that meetings were – you know how you say, is

there anyone here from law enforcement at a meeting. And twice, there was. And we all looked at him, and said –

**SS: Because, well, the only other person in ACT UP who says that they were personally followed by the police is Tracy Morgan. Nobody else has said that. And also, this is the first time I've ever heard –**

HR: Oh.

**SS: Go ahead.**

HR: Yeah. Me. I forgot.

**SS: Okay.**

HR: Me. So, I did ACT UP 101 mistake. Right? So, when you go to these planning meetings, you learn how to demonstrate, and the amazing thing about ACT UP is you really learn the Robert's Rule Orders. You learn what your job is, what your role is, and how that works, and all the variables of possibilities of what could and might happen. Yet if you want to take a big, fucking barricade, throw it in the street; do it!

So, I had put out my name and telephone number on all the contact information of the Art Positive demonstration at the Met. And this was, and then Bill [Dobbs] had done all these fake press releases, telling the media that Joseph Papp, all these famous people, and the *Daily News* and the *Post* actually put them in that day. And so, I'm at work, before. And you know, we thought maybe a couple hundred people would come to this demo.

So, I'm at work on the day of the demo, at Paula's. And the receptionist buzzed me, and said, Hunter, you have a phone call. And I said, oh, take a message, blah blah blah. And she goes, no no no, you have to take this call.

And I got, Hello, this is Agent Blah Blah Blah from the FBI. Are you Hunter Reynolds? And I was like, uh, yeah. He said, you're doing the demonstration at the Metropolitan Museum? I was like – yeah? He said, well, can you explain to me exactly what this demonstration is about?

And I said, well, it's about art, and we're not protesting the museum; we're using the museum as a backdrop to the Helms Amendment. We're protesting the legislation that's going on, and the NEA, and all the attacks that are happening in the arts on gay people. And that's what the demonstration's about. And it's going to be a peaceful demonstration, but we want to use the museum as a metaphor for, there's a lot of art in this museum that could be censored if this amendment gets passed.

Okay, meet me at, outside the museum at five o'clock. The demonstration was starting at six.

So, I get there at five. Everyone's coming with those posters and stuff. And I'm the organizer of it. And I've been flagged by the FBI.

So, there is the sergeant, FBI; the head of the NYPD precinct, captain; like five guys, talking to me. Bill's – so – this was a moment. So, they had set the barricades way, way to the left of the museum, by then. And I said, he said, "well, this is where your demonstration's going to take place." And I was looking over them, and I was thinking no, it's not. And in that five minutes, I said, "oh, okay. People are starting to come, and I needed to coordinate them." And suddenly, there were satellite vans, and

media, and suddenly, within 10 minutes, hordes of people, in outfits, and people put things together. Leave it to ACT UP. Everyone just did it. Hundreds of people were coming. And within minutes. And I was getting freaked out, because I knew I had to start the demonstration, and I knew that I had to go against these guys, and I knew that I had to just do it, get the courage to do it, for whatever happened, because – it was just all on me, in that moment.

So, I ran over – I looked at him, I said, “excuse me.” And I ran over. I said, “is there anymore? I need to do this demonstration, and I need to get this started.”

So, I ran over, and I got the poster, the first poster, a pile of them. Ran into the front of the museum and started handing them to people. And said, “march, march! Go this way, get a circle going!”

And they did.

And those guys came up to me – the FBI guy was red-faced; just bulging blood. Wha, screaming, yelling. I looked at him very calmly. Bill was in the distance. I said: “what are you going to do? Arrest me now, or – I have a demonstration to run. Arrest me now; or let me run my demonstration. There’s our lawyer; talk to him.” And I sent him over to Bill.

And that moment was just like, wow! And it became an amazing demonstration. I think like almost 2,000 people came. And then it was like, how do I end this thing? It was going on. And they moved the barricades – so we’re doing our circle on the sidewalk. It’s like, wow, Jesus, all these famous people came!

So, they moved the barricades from over on the left of the museum to the steps, so that we couldn’t go on the steps. This is how I got the idea of the barricade, for

Stop the Church. This one ACT UPper – it was kind of like, okay, now what? How do we end this? It's got to end somehow.

And at the right moment, he just picked up the barricade, threw it onto the steps, and all those people flew onto the steps, screaming, Ah! Ah! Ah!, and I was like, oh, perfect. So, I had a bullhorn, and I had already talked to, like, Leon Golub and some of the famous artists; Hans Haacke, and like – would you say something after this? And so that's how it ended. And they passed around the bullhorn, and Nancy Spero spoke, and I was sitting there going, ah! Wow! And I think that is why I was followed, because –

**SS: Okay. And what happened to the Helms Amendment?**

HR: Well, it passed. And the NEA – for artists was abolished. It worked. But Art Positive became a kind of grassroots activist organization. And Aldo kind of took it over, and really kept it going for as long as it did, which was five years. We made a kind of – we really didn't want to be a Gran Fury project. We wanted to really stay grassroots. We could have anywhere from five people at meetings to 40 – for big actions, or things that were – 200.

**SS: What was your critique of Gran Fury?**

HR: Well, it's changed over the years. Gran Fury – at that time, I was kind of like, okay, the art world was controlled, and Mark Kostabi was right, in that there was an '80s art-world mafia that was gay, that did control a lot of the art world. And I saw Gran Fury move into this kind of, for me. Okay, I'm in the high-end art world, too. I'm making activist art, and dealing with art galleries, situations. So, I was there, in that.

But what I was learning was that what I was doing in ACT UP, on the streets, not only was art for me, it was art that changed something. That it was going to – what I was experiencing in ACT UP – I was starting to get labeled as a political artist, and I was starting to question all that. Because I was like, well, actually – what’s my art going to change, or do, if it’s in some museum, to some educated person who already knows all the issues? I mean, it’s only going to reflect the issues to them. It’s not going to have any major effect on them.

And what I was doing in the streets with ACT UP, I saw it was having an effect. And so, I started to shift that whole thing in my mind. And I thought, Gran Fury was branding us, visually. And I thought that was really cool; but I didn’t want to be doing that. And I knew some of the Gran Fury people, and I thought – I felt like, okay, what – so you go to the fucking Venice Biennale; who cares? But that was cool. But on the other hand, I felt – like, what I’m doing is more effective than that. That was how I felt back then.

**SS: Okay.**

HR: How I feel now is like I just like, blown away. The whole history, and the images, and that show at NYU. The branding of ACT UP that they did, and the propaganda of ACT UP, and the visuals of ACT UP. We did propaganda like nobody else. But it worked. And one of my favorite demonstrations was Storm the NIH. That was like, whoa. From beginning to end. It was like, Jesus Christ, we are causing – this is a revolution. We’re going to visually create it with rainbow-colored smoke bombs. Attack this building, get into it, send Mark Harrington in, from the East Village, a genius, to negotiate. It was like a war.

But it was really the art and propaganda that pushed all that forward; the street art, the protest art, the construction of the visuals of these protests, in conjunction with the functional –

**SS: What were some of the visuals for the NIH action? The smoke.**

HR: The smoke bombs was the big one. People had lots of dress code stuff, like military as the gay. It was like the whole thing about how to visually make us an army, and this was going to be a war, and this was going to be an attack, and so how do we do that, and make it look good, and work.

The whole propaganda visually thing; I became more interested in – working for the demonstrations where people were actually painting signs and messages, as opposed to doing big printed-out stuff. But the printed-out stuff was really great, too. That we did these really clean – we got the money together to do both. And so, in the last few years, with all the anniversary histories coming up; it's just – like this demonstration was like a reunion, and it was – kind of – wow. This was really an amazing thing we did.

**SS: When did you leave ACT UP?**

HR: 1990. So, in that same – '89, end of '89, after Stop the Church – Stop the Church was a significant thing for me, on every level. I had just quit my job. I had processed the positive thing to the point already, within a couple weeks, that I may be dead soon. My numbers were low; my percentage point – I had below 500 T-cells back then. Ray – I was with Ray, I was with Ray at the moment the pain hit. And I think we were talking about – I was talking with him about this, because he wasn't feeling good. And really, it was like a moment. We were walking in the Village, we were talking about these issues. I had already found out. And he went Ohhh! Just like, aahhh! Jesus! And

that was it. He was in the hospital a week later, and he never got out. Cryptococcal meningitis.

It was his process that profoundly changed my life, on every level. His process of dying – it was like a flower opening. And so, Patricia, his mother, who came, who was nothing like the woman I expected to be there. And I was like, what the fuck was he talking about?

Her ability to deal with every aspect of his illness – politically, with the structure of ACT UP as a support system – Ray Navarro was the first, I think, one of the first – when he fell out of the bed, at St. Vincent’s, and broke his – I think he broke his wrist, or something, or sprained it, or something, because he fell out of the bed; he was in immediate pain. He was in immediate, that coctomeningitis [Cryptococcal Meningitis] thing, it just is relentless. He was just in it. And so, I think, I remember that it was that moment that we, his friends and everyone around him — I’m not even sure if his mother was there yet — said, to St. Vincent’s, “we’re having a 24-hour watch here with him. And you need to put a bed in here for us.” And they did. And I think we were, he was the first precedent for that there, as I recall. Maybe not, but it was like – bed in –

People started doing shifts, and everyone took turns, and Aldo was one of the key people of – what Ray did was he opened up like a flower, and he knew that he wanted to finish work, and the project was the photographs with Zoe, and the Army of Lovers essay, and the book, and all this stuff. He was a brilliant human being.

And I could not deal with his death at all. I couldn’t go to the hospital. It was one of the most difficult things for me to do. I didn’t feel – I knew that he had teams



of people around him, and so I didn't feel like I needed to be there. But it got to the point where I felt like, why can't I go see him in the hospital?

So, I started forcing myself. And living with Aldo, it was like a daily thing.

And I was also wrapping around my – like – this amazing guy has all these – look what he's accomplished in his life.

And when I did get a private moment with him, he was blind already. And some of the nights that I would stay with him, and he would be screaming, just fucking screaming! It was just horrifying. And then it would go away. And he had this lucid moment. You know Ray, right?

**SS: Yeah.**

HR: He would just come out with something. It was like – all this pain and shit, and he still had this amazing – even he got more amazing, when he couldn't see. And suddenly, he'd just like be clear, and say shit, and, and he'd go, write this down! And I was like, oh, god, I can't write. So, Aldo started being his person he dictated to. And so, he'd get these calls from the hospital, and Pat would go he wants to write.

This was a long process for him. And it was in that process, for me, that I started – as he was getting close to death, and we were working on the exhibition, Art Positive, and he's writing an essay, and Zoe was working with photographs, and he's saying, I want to get this done, and we were helping him get it done.

I was like, oh, Jesus. Every time I went, there were so many people in his room, I couldn't talk to him, really. And people who didn't know me, or who I was, even, would just say, "oh, he can't talk."

So, I remember very specifically; there was a scare, where we thought he was going to die. And he didn't. And I thought, okay, this is it. You gotta get over your issues and start going to the hospital to see him. Because we were working on this show. So, I went one day, after this scare. Patricia had gone through hell with the insurance companies. Just everything about that taught us all something.

I ordered everyone out of the room. And I said, "I need to talk to Ray alone." And someone didn't want to leave. I said, "please, leave. He's one of my oldest friends; I've known him much longer than any of you; and I want to talk to him alone. Get out of this room."

And in that conversation, we had our moment. I remember he looked like an eggshell. And I was like, I wanted to touch him, and I was – hard of hearing, he was almost deaf, and you had to scream into his ear. We just had this amazing talk, where he said, Hunter, you know – he got all Catholic. God, Jesus, who knew Ray was going to get all Catholic? But it made sense. He knew that I was with him. He knew that that pain was the moment. He said, "Hunter, we've known each other, you know, you knew me before any of these people." I said, "I know, I just kicked them all out of the room."

I said, Ray, you know– he would just prophesize, and he said to me, "Hunter, you know; I know it's bad to see me like this, and I know I'm dying, and I know – but you see what I have done? Because he knew everything was happening. And he said, I'm here, right now, because I refuse to deal with my fear of this disease. And you have the opportunity to not do that. Don't be afraid of it, don't let it control your body; and use it in your life" — he said those words to me, right there — "in your art."

And I said, "yeah, I will."

And that was the last conversation I had with him. A couple weeks later, when everything was finishing, Aldo and I – he had not talked to anybody for three or four weeks, or a long time, except his mother. And everything was done – for that Army of Lovers show. Aldo and I went. Zoe’s photographs were framed, and we went to tell him that it was done.

And he was out. She [Patricia Navarro] said, and he hasn’t talked in a couple days, or said anything. And I leaned into his ear; gently touched the top of his head; and said, Ray! We’re here! And I did it three times. And he woke up, just like this.

Aldo, Hunter, Ray! And he just – yeah, we, yeah, it’s done! Is the color right? I mean, he – the text, the book, the – it’s all done. The show’s up, or about to be up.

And he was just – a lucid conversation, which was his last conversation. And he died the night of the opening of that show – the day of.

So, he accomplished everything.

It was like, it was watching a flower.

So, I took what he said, from that moment on. I decided to quit my job and move to Germany and to go for, I had a couple friends in Germany who died there, never came back. And I just sat down with Paula, and said, I’m going to go. This was before Ray died, right in this three-month period, where I had made that decision, Ray died, and then Stop the Church; all this stuff going on. Can’t remember the exact timeline. My show opened in Hallwalls. And I came back from Stop the Church, and realized that I couldn’t quit my job, and I asked for my job back, and she gave it to me,

because Dr. Howard Grossman, I went to the doctor here, I got – I sat down with Howard. And he said, “well, these are your numbers, I wrote all my numbers back.” He said, “well you’ve got 250 T-cells.” He said, “you’re a person with AIDS already.” I was like, “yeah, yeah, whatever. I feel okay, but I know the numbers are low. But look at my percentage point, it’s really high.”

I said that to him.

He said, “yeah, yeah, it’s 28 percent.” He said, “that’s kind of weird.”

He said, “but I want to put you on 600 milligrams of AZT a day.”

I just looked at him, and said, “I respect you as a doctor. You’re the best AIDS doctor in New York. Everyone I know on this drug is in the hospital dying. And I don’t want to take it. What else can I do?”

That moment ACT UP gave me that ability, awareness, to say those words to the biggest AIDS doctor in New York and understand, eight years later, when I did go on the cocktail, that I had made a very good decision. That I trusted myself, with the empowerment of this group. And I didn’t.

**SS: You saved your own life.**

HR: Yeah.

**SS: Yeah.**

HR: In that moment. Yeah.

**SS: I only have one question left. Is there something, anything important, that you think we’ve missed?**

HR: Nope. What’s your question?

**SS: My question is, so looking back at ACT UP, what do you feel was its greatest accomplishment, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?**

HR: Should we shut that window? Or wait –

**SS: No, we're okay.**

**JW: It's too late now.**

HR: Well – when I went to Berlin, in 1992, there was an ACT UP starting there, and I just immediately got involved with it. And I started to see something very – okay, we fought the Department of AIDS Services; we fought the – I wasn't sick, I didn't need, nothing was really happening to me, health-wise. But ACT UP had already put into place all these social services, which I am now benefitting from. And I went to Germany, tried to get involved there, and ACT UP didn't take off there, because the Germans provide a lot of social healthcare to the gay community and AIDS community in Germany, at the time, in 1992. So, it wasn't the – and I didn't know what they were. It wasn't like, it didn't quite work there, because they didn't have, they weren't fighting for the right things yet. They didn't know – because they were given a lot. So, it didn't really take off there, because they didn't have – in their makeup, to change the – what are they going to fight against their government for, because we're having – we get the best social democracy – everything, they get it. What's there to fight about? Well, there were issues to fight about, but it took them –

So it was that year, that first year in Berlin, when I started processing — I know this sounds hokey sometimes when I actually say it, but I became proud to be an American, from living in Berlin, and seeing that my experience with ACT UP; and that

we, as a people — as stupid as it sometimes sounds — we have the power to change our government. And we did it.

Not only did we do it, we did it in one of the smartest ways. I just — in going through the ACT UP Oral History, and looking at the people I know, and what they actually did — you know somebody, you know they're on that committee, but you don't know the real nitty-gritty of what they're doing. But seeing their contributions to this history, and how it's all weaving together, with what you guys are doing. Yeah, we did it. And I think we did it in a way that's never been done before, in America. And taking, like — the propaganda, the rule of order, target, we have that target. We're going to get to it. And not only get to it; we're going to convince them to do, or to even be, on our — advocate for us.

So, this whole reality, in my life, became apparent, in my experience of living as an American in Germany — a very socialized-democracy country, influenced by America, but very different. They couldn't do this there. What we did, they really can't, don't have it in them, don't have it in the psyche, and really wouldn't have operated in the same way.

So, I became — as ACT UP went on, and I became aware that the group— so I stepped out in 1992, basically, from Art Positive, ACT UP, as an activist, and just did what Ray said; do it in your art. So that's when I made the memorial dress. Because I realized, I wanted — my political art was not going to change anyone's mind about anything. It reflected my ideas to them; maybe influence how they thought a little bit. But it's not going to change them. And that's what I wanted my art to do. And I thought,

okay, books can do that, film can do that, art's the last thing, next to poetry, that's going to change masses of people.

So, I really thought, okay, make my art. I want to express, reflect my life, how AIDS has affected me, but on a more emotional level. And that's kind of, everything I did had that connection in it. And so – as time went on, and you get older, and you're still alive, and I had PCP. If I'd been in America when I had PCP, I think I would have died. Because it was in 1996. I was part of a consortium with gay doctors in Berlin. They had this network. And I had the best healthcare of my life was there. *Künstlersozialkasse*, the insurance for artists – they even provided for resident aliens. It's not free, you pay your premium, and you get healthcare.

So, when I started coughing up the blood, I was on the bus, and I called my doctor from a pay phone. And he sent an ambulance to where I was and took me to the only hospital in Berlin that had the cutting-edge treatment at the moment, or – I don't remember what it was. But I immediately got on, and within three weeks, I was like, it never happened.

**SS: Wow.**

HR: So, when I came back to America, after having PCP, after living on my art, after surviving into the late '90s, approaching 40, which I never thought I would live to, I was like, oh, gee, I'm still fucking alive. And I moved back to New York, where suddenly, in 1999, I didn't have the support system that I had had in a new way, in Germany. And I was navigating healthcare issues. Suddenly, I didn't have insurance, and I had to have a job to get insurance, and it didn't quite occur to me yet that – because

I wasn't disabled. I could still work, and I hadn't done that whole disability thing way on, even though I had a hundred T-cells.

So, I started looking into services here, and realizing, oh, ACT UP did all this. All my friends are on all this stuff that we did in ACT UP. And I think I need them now.

So I applied to the Department of AIDS Services, and I didn't even know, until just recently — this is major — the Department of AIDS Services, okay, which is the only thing in the United States that really exists the way it does here, in New York City — Medicaid, through the Department of AIDS Services — which I did not know until a few years ago — I am now getting income stuff now. I have to remain indigent to stay on the Medicaid, blah blah blah. Medicaid – the Department of AIDS Services, created by, ACT UP helped create this agency – it is the only – the government can take away my Medicaid for income loss, or whatever. I got flagged for my Pollock-Krasner grant. And after having the HIV strokes I had six years ago, I really needed all this stuff. But I was getting some income, and I got this grant, and I was trying to figure out how to deal with it.

So in that process, of them flagging the grant, and me meeting with Social Security, and them threatening to take – then saying I owe them \$20,000, they're taking away all my benefits, I found out that they can't take away my Medicaid, because it's rolled into the Department of AIDS Services. Thank you, ACT UP. Like, who knew?

So now that I'm in this space where I'm really grateful for the amazing work and achievements of ACT UP, because I am benefitting from them, in such a



different way now; so I'm just proud to be here to say, I was there and part of it, and it was an amazing thing. That's how I feel about it now.

**SS: Okay.**

HR: I'd also had to ha-, wrap around my concept of me as an activist. Like I didn't – I did come to that label then, as a description for myself. But after not being involved with an activist group, or anything, for a long time, that I thought – I did my time, I'm getting old, I've had strokes, I've had PCP, I just need to chill; and let the young'uns go out and die in the street. But they don't.

I'm now part of this new wave of – oh, you know – of these young people who want to get informed, who are feeling they want to know the history, they want to see – that it needs to be reinvented for themselves, and the Occupy movement, and all this stuff. So, I'm part of this new kind of survivor-daddy-wisdom thing. Which is cool.

What was the last part?

**SS: What was ACT UP's greatest disappointment?**

HR: I think that maybe – well, I think my perception would be that ACT UP's biggest disappointment would be – well – I have two frame, periods I'm thinking of. In the time, I wish we had really done more to attack the whole deconstruction of the sex life of gay New York – not only gay New York, but primarily gay New York, and understanding – we did some of that. But I felt in the end, these initiatives, that were placed against us; and used – only one bathhouse was really closed down in New York City. Why was that? Only one.

**SS: St. Marks.**

HR: Yeah. Because that's where all the ACT UP people went. Just – the only reason that was – the politics of the city, and all that kind of – and because Aldo had that Meat and Safe – one of the first sort of safe backrooms, and – it was really like, when I, because when I came back to New York in the '90s, after leaving New York right at the beginning of the suppression of sexuality in New York, I would go to Germany, the most openly sexual place in the fucking world, where every kink I could explore, I did, and you can do anything you want, and where there are no rules, no regulations about any of it, personal sexual choice. They're not regulated at all.

So, I come back to New York in the late '90s, and it's completely dead here. So much so that I got thrown out of The Lure for kissing someone and grabbing their cock and pissing on somebody – all these things I had become accustomed to doing all the time, in Berlin. Suddenly, not only could you not do them, you were –

So, I was very kind of in that time frame; like, fuck, it worked, what they did. And so, my personal disappointment in ACT UP, even that I wasn't aware of it then, would have been, I wish we had taken on that sex thing even more –

**SS: Okay.**

HR: – with the city. Like really protesting. But you know, they're blaming us for the disease, and it is complicated issues, and outing, outing within ACT UP, and the whole thing, it was very complicated. But I think in the end, we could have maybe done more with that.

**SS: Hunter, I just want to say, I know that we talked about some really difficult things. And I really appreciate that you talked to us about Ray.**

**Because you told us stuff that we really didn't know. And it's very important to have that on record.**

HR: Cool.

**SS: Thank you so much. And also, the Art Positive, we didn't have any of that, and the Kostabi thing.**

HR: I'm surprised Aldo didn't talk about it very much.

**SS: Yeah. So, I really appreciate that contribution.**

HR: Cool.

**SS: So, we're done.**

HR: Thank you, thank you.

**SS: Thank you so much.**