

**A C T U P
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P R O J E C T**

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Interviewee: **Christine Vachon**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Christine Vachon
February 26, 2015**

SARAH SCHULMAN: Have you looked at the website?

CHRISTINE VACHON: Have I looked at the website? Not in a long time.

SS: But you get the basic idea. We ask you about your entire life.

CV: You ask me about my entire life? Okay. Alright as long as we're done by 4.

SS: We'll be done. It's about who people were before they came to ACT UP and all that kind of thing.

CV: Okay

SS: So, look at me.

CV: Okey doke.

SS: So, we start. You tell us your name, today's date, your age, and where we are.

CV: My name is Christine Vachon. Today is February 26th, 2015. I am in my office at Union Square.

SS: And how old are you?

CV: Oh, I forgot that part. I'm fifty-three years old.

SS: Okay. Now, you're a native New Yorker, right?

CV: I am. I grew up in Manhattan.

SS: And what did your parents do?

CV: My father was a photographer, most notably an FSA photographer, but by the time I came around, he was a *Look* photographer for *Look* magazine, and my

mother was a French teacher at the Columbia School of Continuing Education and then at Juilliard and Purchase, and then eventually worked for the United Nations.

SS: Okay. Are you bilingual?

CV: Not really, but I am bi-passportal.

SS: Okay.

CV: I'm a dual citizen.

SS: Oh, you are?

CV: Yeah.

SS: So, would you think that you were brought up with particular values about community, intervention, social justice?

CV: Well, I mean, I think if you grew up in the sixties, in the seventies, it was certainly more part of the fabric than it is now. I mean, Manhattan was a very different kind of place, and my parents were very, very liberal, so I think it had a fairly strong effect on how I viewed our place in our world.

SS: Were they politically active?

CV: Yes. I mean, my father, you know, he was a photographer, so he was at Selma. He was at many of the defining moments. He took pictures of people like Kennedy and — I don't know if he ever took pictures of Martin Luther King, but he very well could have. That was his — he was a photojournalist. So, I don't know if that is politically active or not.

SS: Did they ever take you to demonstrations?

CV: I remember — I had an older sister also, who's twelve years older than me, so she was right in the middle of that. I don't remember going to

demonstrations necessarily, but I remember knowing about them and seeing them. I went to demonstrations, myself, by the time I was a teenager.

SS: In high school.

CV: Yes.

SS: Do you remember what they were for?

CV: What was our issue then? Wasn't it anti-nuke?

SS: It could have been.

CV: Yeah, I think that was it.

SS: So, what do you think came first for you, being queer or having a political sensibility?

CV: I mean, having a political sensibility for sure, because I didn't really decide what I was until, like, my mid-twenties. But I had a pretty strong sense of what my politics were way before then.

SS: Before high school or in high school?

CV: I mean, I don't remember much before high school, to be honest. I went to LaGuardia, to the *Fame* high school, and, in fact, I was there when they were shooting *Fame*, and I guess one thing at LaGuardia that was pretty — and I didn't realize how unusual this was, to be honest. I don't think I've ever been in a place, before or since, that was as truly mixed in every sense of word, race, class, economic level, and everybody was united by a common passion for art or music or — so it just broke down barriers in a way that I've never really experienced since. It's had a profound effect on my life. I went there — you know, that was the battle days of New York City when, you

know, there were forty kids to a classroom, and often not enough books to go around, but everyone was just *dying* to be in a place that celebrated.

SS: What was your art form at LaGuardia?

CV: I was an artist.

SS: You were like a painter?

CV: You got in on a portfolio and then you had to go through a fairly strenuous series of courses in ceramics, graphic design, etc. I think by your last year, you got to declare that you were a painter or whatever or a sculptor, but —

SS: So, do you think that art and politics were linked for you from the beginning?

CV: Maybe they were. My older sister was an experimental filmmaker, so I did — I got to go and see her work at the Collective for Living Cinema and kind of understand this idea that how radical it was for a film not to be narrative. Of course, I was also like, “That is so not for me.” But I understood this whole notion, and I think that was a fairly — the idea that there wasn’t some set way a movie had to be was a pretty profound one.

SS: So, when did you start getting involved in any kind of organized politics? Did you do anything before ACT UP?

CV: Well, does it count that my brother and I campaigned for McGovern when we were ten and eleven?

SS: Yeah, that counts.

CV: And, you know, our universe was so small. It was the Upper West Side of Manhattan, that it didn't occur to us that he would lose, because I think that's the only place where he didn't.

SS: Right. He got all his votes from the Upper West Side. Then you famously went to Brown.

CV: I did.

SS: Now, where did that take you in terms of this sort of sexuality, art, politics relationship?

CV: Well, I got to Brown. I don't remember much about my first year, to be honest. I mean, I probably did what most freshmen did, which is drink and do a lot of drugs. But my second year, I started to get involved in semiotics, or maybe by the second half of my freshman year. And again, at that time semiotics was such a radical notion, which now seems ridiculous because it's so integrated into our vocabulary, especially as artists, but at the time it was considered so radical that if deconstructionism sort of even crept its way into your papers for other classes, it was like an automatic fail. There was a lot of, like, defensiveness around, like, the new ways and the old ways.

SS: What was inherent — what was radical about semiotics?

CV: I guess it was really this notion that you could break something down along political lines and not just — you know, that a poem wasn't just about emotion or that a book couldn't just stand on its own as just a piece of literature that was part of a whole like cultural tableau, that was political, that did bear — where race and sex and feminism, everything, you know, all of that, the whole potpourri could be brought to bear, and that you could see a text in so many different ways. And then it was much

more like you saw the text in terms of what the author meant, and this notion that it doesn't matter what the author meant was a very radical idea.

SS: But do you still feel that way?

CV: Do I still feel what way?

SS: It doesn't matter what the author meant.

CV: I mean, I do and I don't. I mean, the fact is when we make a movie, I'm well aware that once you make it, it doesn't really matter what you meant to say. What matters is what people hear, and that works on a million different levels. I mean, *Still Alice*, obviously, you know, for a lot of people it's about seeing their same relationship that they had with a loved one that they lost to Alzheimer's. For other people, it's a text about, you know, upper-middle-class people and their problems, and they're not interested in it. That's like that's how it exists in the world, and I'm totally fine with that.

SS: Okay. So, there was no irony in Brown, this very exceptional Ivy League school, being the place that semiotics entered into our generation?

CV: I don't know. I mean, probably there was, but, you know, it probably just went right over my head, you know.

00:10:00

SS: All right. So, when did you first become aware of HIV?

CV: I remember — this I remember very clearly. I somewhat pretentiously subscribed to the *Village Voice* while I was at Brown.

SS: Why was that pretentious?

CV: Because, you know, I think I just liked the idea that I was still connected to New York, and it was very important me that it could barely fit in the little

mailbox. But I did read it, and I remember reading that article that I think was — I think it's credited as being one of the first articles about GRID. It may not have been, but I think I saw in some documentary that it was, and it gave it a name and it said basically like what's going on. So, I remember that. I was very close at Brown with a man named Brian Greenbaum, who ended up executive-producing my first two features, and he was recently out and he was kind of — he was like, “Wow. What — .” He was kind of like, sort of like, “Do I need to be careful, like, when I go to — ?” It was sort of on his mind. And, yes, he did end up dying of AIDS.

SS: So, when he got diagnosed, were you guys still close?

CV: We were still very close, yes.

SS: And so how did that compel you? I mean, what did you do?

CV: Well, he got diagnosed later. I guess the first person I knew who was diagnosed was Jim Lyons, and then probably around the time that I found out that he was HIV-positive, it was probably right around the time ACT UP was forming. So, I can't pretend I went to, like, the first meeting or the — I think Todd [Haynes] started to go, and then we let Gran Fury use our office for their first few meetings, the old Apparatus office on Lafayette Street, which is now, I think, luxury condos. So, I was aware of it.

And then sometime around that time, a close female friend of mine was diagnosed, really just like bad luck, you know, just like — not that any of it isn't, but it was just one of those like one-time things, and never in a million years did it occur to her that that would be the outcome, and it was. But that was sort of a really interesting thing, because it was like everyone was talking about it as just a gay-man disease, and I was very close friends with a straight woman.

SS: Okay. So, you have this woman who has nowhere to go —

CV: Right.

SS: — and then you have these men you're close to who don't have any medications to take.

CV: Right.

SS: So, where were you emotionally in all of that? How implicated did you feel and how responsible did you feel?

CV: How what did I feel?

SS: Implicated.

CV: I don't know if I felt implicated. I think I just — I mean, at the time it was just such an intense time of so many people getting sick. Literally the hairdresser next door to us at Apparatus, because it was that kind of building — I don't know if there's any buildings like that anymore, but the hairdresser next door literally told us that he was diagnosed, and like a month later, he was gone. People were there cleaning out his office, and it was just like, "How could that have happened so fast?" So, it would always be this like, "Where's so-and-so? What happened to them? Uh-oh." And then these families would sweep in and take their — mostly their sons back to somewhere in the Midwest, and you'd never see them again.

SS: Did that happen to someone you know?

CV: Absolutely. Well, it happened to Bill Sherwood.

SS: Did you work on that film?

CV: I did and I'm in it. If you look closely, party scene.

SS: Are you in the party scene?

CV: Yes.

SS: What happened to him? His family took him because he couldn't take care of himself?

CV: You know what? I can't remember exactly. I think — and I might be wrong — he was here in New York at Beth Israel for months, in and out, in and out, and I can't remember if he died here or if he died there.

SS: What was the situation like in the hospital?

00:15:00

CV: You know, I would go visit him a lot, and it was just past the time — you could look on the Internet when he died. I can't remember. But it was just past the time when nurses were, like, in nuclear gear. So that wasn't happening. It wasn't like — people understood at that point that you weren't going to get AIDS by touching somebody.

So, I remember visiting him around Christmas and, like, some chorus coming in and singing show tunes, and Bill was like, you know, "Let me put a pillow over my head."

But I did visit — I think it was Brian that I visited in the hospital. He got very sick, then had a sort of recovery for a couple of years, and then got very sick again and died. I don't even think it was a couple of years. It was like a year. But right when he got sick the first time, it was still very much like, you know, nobody wanted to be around people with AIDS.

SS: So how did you feel? I mean, were you afraid?

CV: I don't think I was. I mean, I think I kind of understood pretty early on that there wasn't anything to be afraid of.

SS: And also, just because I think that that time is very far from people's minds now —

CV: yes.

SS: — and the kind of relationships that queer people had with each other at that time, and how honest the relationships were with people who were really sick, I mean, do you remember those kinds of conversations with your friends about the reality of what they were going through?

CV: I mean, you know, the crazy thing was is that a lot of us were in our early twenties, when you sort of romanticize death anyway because you don't feel like it can ever happen to you. You don't believe in your own mortality. And I don't think Brian believed in it till the end, you know. So, our relationships became very deep, absolutely, because there was a sense of urgency and a sense that — I mean, it was probably very similar to what people feel like during wartime, like you just don't know what's around the corner.

SS: Okay. So, then you come to ACT UP.

CV: Right.

SS: Do you remember when that was?

CV: No. I remember — I can remember some of the things I participated in. I participated in the NIH demonstration.

SS: Okay. Let's talk about that.

CV: Yeah. I don't — they all kind of mix together, but I'll try.

SS: Well, tell me what you remember from that experience.

CV: I just remember driving to Washington. Jim Lyons and I both got arrested.

SS: Were you planning on getting arrested?

CV: I was. I'm not sure Jim was, but I can't remember. But I feel like it took him longer to get out than me, because he was always a little belligerent.

SS: What did it mean to you to get arrested?

CV: I mean, I guess I thought, like, what could I really — you're so helpless in the face of something like that, you know, of like people dying and — and my close friend, my close girlfriend, who's still a very close friend of mine, actually, she was not American and she found out because she had to — it was when you had to take a blood test in order to get a green card. So, she told a story of, like, she walked in to get her results, but she did it at Immigration, right? She said she walked in and the whole office looked down, and she was like, "Oh, fuck." And it was just — so, given my relationship with her, my relationship with Brian, and just feeling so helpless, it felt like, "Well, if there's something effective that I can do, I'll do it," and that seemed to be, for me, the thing I could do.

SS: Now, there was a trust relationship with ACT UP, because you didn't really know the specifics of what the demonstration was actually asking for and how you getting arrested would actually advance AIDS, but you believed in the structure of ACT UP.

CV: Exactly. Exactly. And I think I got arrested four times, which came back to haunt me a little bit when I adopted my daughter, but it all worked out.

SS: What were your other arrests?

CV: The Waldorf Astoria.

SS: Oh, what was that?

00:20:00

CV: That was when George Bush — or I guess it was the other Bush had come to speak at a dinner, and we rented a hotel room, and it was me and Ron Parisi, and I can't remember the other guys, but I remember Ron because he's a Facebook friend. But we rented a room and then stormed the dinner with blood on our hands.

SS: Oh, great. Were you an affinity group or was this you both?

CV: No, I — oh, we must have had an affinity group to do that. We weren't rogue. Right. No, no, no. We were very much part of a — you know, there were a lot of us. It was a big, planned action.

SS: So, when you walked into that room with blood on your hands, how did the Republicans respond?

CV: I mean, it was all of two seconds before we were tackled and dragged out of there.

SS: Okay. And what were the other two?

CV: An immigration thing, which was down by City Hall. And maybe it was only three times. I thought there were four, because I thought that's what came up when I did the adoption, but —

SS: Oh, wow. That came up.

CV: Yeah.

SS: That's amazing. Those are supposed to be erased.

CV: Well, they are. It was actually just one that still showed up, but it was pretty — it was easy to get rid of. But somehow in the whole — this is fuzzy, too,

because this was fifteen years ago. I somehow remember somehow it showing up somewhere that it had been four times, but I can't remember four times, so maybe it was only three.

SS: So how did you come to trust ACT UP so much that you would do something like that?

CV: I don't know. I mean, I probably just was naïve, you know. It probably just didn't occur to me not to. And I think I really — I think the people like Mary Dorman and like the older people who spoke with such authority about what your rights were and what — I think I felt a real sense of like, you know, like they knew what they were talking about. And I didn't feel any sense of — it never occurred to me that anything I was doing at that moment would have any repercussions to anything I wanted to do later on in life, same way it didn't occur to me that, like, defaulting on your student loans could fuck up your credit. You know what I mean? It was just like, "Who cares? This is now."

SS: Right. And also, the stakes were so high.

CV: That's right.

SS: So, in your relationship to ACT UP, you mostly just went on events, or were you ever involved in, like, planning or a committee or —

CV: I went to the meetings. I could tell that the committees were just like — like the process part. I still can't handle process, and everything has — running a company has it. I could tell that was just not for me. I just was not going to be able to sit in a room with a bunch of people for hours and figure it — just couldn't do it. I was just

like, “Put me where I can be the most effective and I’ll do it. I’ll get arrested. I’ll march. I’ll be a number. I’ll be whatever those — I’ll do all of that, but I cannot discuss.”

SS: Okay. So now I want to get to really the reason that we’re here, which is the cinematic movement, of which you are a key figure, that really intersects with that time of AIDS and with that world. So, as you’re progressing, so you said you came out of Brown. You were a filmmaker by the time you came out, right?

CV: Yeah. Well, I’d made a movie, you know. I don’t know if that makes you a filmmaker.

SS: Well, okay. So, you had started.

CV: Right.

SS: And then you started Apparatus.

CV: Well, first I came to New York, and New York at that time is — I came to New York in ’83, and a lot of filmmakers were making their first movies, people like Bette Gordon and Spike Lee and Jim Jarmusch, and there was a sense, back to what I was saying before, that you could make movies that were not Hollywood movies but that used narrative, you know, but to tell your *own* story and to tell a very personal story. And this was a fairly radical idea at the time, although, again, each generation assumes it discovers everything, and, of course, people had been making movies like that. We just weren’t just exposed to them.

So, it was a very exciting time, and I somehow got connected with Bill Sherwood, who was just about to start shooting *Parting Glances*, and I sunk his dailies, which is a job that no longer exists, but I was very good at. So, it was kind of great

because — and he cast Steve Buscemi and a whole cast of characters, mostly nonunion, I think. It was Steve's first movie. But I would go to Bill's house. He had a Steenbeck in his house, and I would go to his Upper West Side apartment at midnight when I was off my day job, sink up the dailies. He'd come home from the set and we'd often watch them together, and it was great. And the thing about that movie was I'd never really seen anything that was about gay people that wasn't about coming out, that everybody was already out.

SS: I mean, it wasn't the first AIDS feature.

CV: No, and I'd say he would say it isn't an AIDS feature, you know, because that was just one part of it, and it was really about a relationship between two men, you know, and it was really a love story.

SS: So how was the AIDS content received at the time?

CV: Well, it came out at the same time as *My Beautiful Laundrette*, and everybody was like, "Oh, well, that's the cooler, hipper gay movie." But I'm kind of amazed at how well *Parting Glances* stands up, you know. It really does. You can see, you know, where some of the — you know, not every performance hits it out of the park, but it feels very authentic, I think, when you see it. You know, at the time I was like, "Oh, this movie is so bourgeois," and now I see it and I'm just like it's amazing how much he packs in there, you know.

SS: So, then you started Apparatus. Was it right after that?

CV: Started Apparatus pretty soon after that, I guess.

SS: With Barry — I forget his last name.

CV: With Barry Ellsworth and Todd Haynes, and Todd was just finishing *Super Star: The Karen Carpenter Story*. So, we spent a couple of years making short films together, the three of us. *Super Star* kind of blew up in a way that nobody anticipated, and then Todd said, “Now I’m ready to do my next movie, a feature,” and that was *Poison*. And I came on very quickly to produce it with my friend Brian Greenbaum. You know, *Poison* was Todd’s kind of direct response to what was going on around him.

SS: But what about you? Okay. You’re behind so many movies, but you said these movies are also expressing something that’s important to you. I mean, the aesthetic decisions around *Poison* and how they relate to AIDS, I mean, it’s the opposite strategy of *Parting Glances*.

CV: Right.

SS: And was that something that you think was a product of your education and this kind of —

CV: Oh, but I don’t want to give myself too much agency in *Poison*. I mean, that’s Todd’s movie. I mean, I feel like it was very — I feel very much a part of it, but, you know, I also feel — look, I think I’m like the best enabler in the world. That’s what I’m good at, you know, and I helped figure out how to take this story and get it on the screen for some ridiculously small amount of money and make it more or less what Todd wanted, and then helped guide him through that process. But, of course, I mean, I was very — it really appealed to me, the anger of it and all the — I mean, some people would say that *Safe* is actually really his AIDS movie, but people were really angry when *Safe* — the queer community was very angry when *Safe* came out —

SS: Why is that?

CV: Because it felt it should have been about AIDS. And Todd was like, “Well — .” But the whole point was to crack that all open and explore this whole notion of, you know, what makes you sick, and really do it in a way that makes you uncomfortable.

SS: Well, also *Poison* speaks viscerally —

CV: Yes, it does.

SS: — to an emotional experience of deterioration, of terror —

CV: Yes.

SS: — inexplicable threat. That was very authentic to how people experienced AIDS.

CV: That’s right.

SS: There’s a way that this kind of AIDS kitsch has evolved in parallel to the kind of work that you were doing that was very, very on the nose —

CV: Mm-hmm.

SS: — and that work is forgotten now.

CV: What was some of that work?

SS: There’s so much. I’m just thinking — oh, do I have to say it on — *Longtime* —

CV: You don’t have to say.

SS: *Longtime Companion*, for example.

CV: Yeah, but see, I kind of love *Longtime Companion*, you know. I

00:30:00 watched it, like, I don’t know, about three or four years ago again in the middle of the

night, and I was kind of like, you know, I mean, it really — I thought it was really emotional. And I get what you mean, but I also — because it kind of was taking some very familiar, I don't know, like scenarios or — but I also felt like it had a lot of heart.

SS: Okay. But have you made a film about AIDS that had a deathbed scene, for example?

CV: No, but that's not my — you know what I mean? Like I also — that's just — but that doesn't mean I don't appreciate them.

SS: Right. That's not your aesthetic. You're in this other realm of —

CV: Right, right.

SS: Okay. So, in ACT UP there were a lot of queer filmmakers: Maria Maggenti, Jenny Livingston, Todd, Tom Kalin, you. I mean, there's probably more that I'm not thinking of right now.

CV: Right.

SS: What do you think was going on there? Do you think that filmmakers were attracted to ACT UP, or do you think that ACT UP fostered a kind of experimental arts?

CV: You know, I just think there was a lot of — I don't know. I mean, I think a lot of artists were attracted to ACT UP, because it was running rampant through our communities. AIDS was running rampant through our communities. I mean, it just was you couldn't be an artist and not be directly affected by it in some way, shape, or form. So that was really, I think, people's response.

SS: Yeah, but that's a very particular group of people that I just named. I mean, it's not —

CV: But, I mean, those are people who managed for whatever — look, on the one hand, there's this notion that, like, all right, queer cinema had its explosion because there was a sense of urgency and because people thought, "If I don't tell my story now, I'm not going to get to tell my story." So that's arguably, you know, *Poison*, *Swoon*, *Living End*, *Looking for Langston*, movies like that, right? But the other argument is we were figuring out how to identify audiences and figuring out, like, you could make a queer movie, and if you made it for the right price and only gay people went to see it, it would still — it would make its money back.

SS: It could live, yeah.

CV: Yeah. That was really — that was like a whole other idea of, like, the whole economics of this. So, I mean, I think that's kind of those — the people that you mentioned, they were people who had something to say and they were part of a movement that sort of like instigated that.

SS: I know that in AIDS literature, for example, there's always been this disappointment that Americans never read AIDS literature, only queer people read AIDS literature.

CV: Right.

SS: So, I've always experienced that as a kind of failure.

CV: I don't know. I mean, I guess I just — I figure like, well, look, I'm like twenty-five years later, and we've made close to eighty movies —

SS: Congratulations.

CV: — and sometimes people want to see it and sometimes they don't, and sometimes — it's always — like with every movie, it's always like — if it's a

failure, it's like, "The poster was wrong. The campaign was wrong. Nobody knew it was in the theater," you know, all of that. Sometimes it's just like they just didn't want to see it, like they just didn't want to see it. And, you know, at least now it feels like, at least with movies, with Netflix and etc., like a movie can live on and find its audience. Like we made a movie called *Dirty Girl*, which I thought was a really great movie. People just didn't want to see it, but people are discovering it now, and at least that can happen now.

SS: Okay. So just back to the ACT UP experience, where were you when the drugs started to be approved, I mean when your friends started to take meds that actually worked?

CV: Well, some — it was just such a — when I think about that, it was such a crazy crapshoot, because it was like some people had felt like they were at the exact same place in their trajectory with the disease, and for one, those drugs just gave them years more of life, and for others it was just like just too late, and that was always just like — how does — you know, that was just such a crazy —

SS: And also, Jim — we interviewed him — he had this incredible will to live —

CV: Yes.

SS: — and was able to live at a very diminished state for a really long time.

00:35:00

CV: But we all have an incredible will to live. I don't mean to diminish what —

SS: No, tell me what you think.

CV: But I just feel like, you know, we all — you know, nobody wants to die, especially when you're not even forty years old.

SS: Right. So, you think that — because he lived at a very diminished state for a very long time.

CV: I guess he did, but I guess I'm thinking more about all the years that he wasn't diminished at all, which were the years I really was close to him, where he seemed unmarked by this when so many people were *really* sick and really struggling. So, when *Poison* was coming out, and then when we did — we did *Safe*, and he came to Los Angeles and cut *Safe*, and there he wasn't always — oh, that was when he got — he took — it looked like — he got very ill, and then pretty soon after that, he had a rebound. Then I guess by the time we finished *Far From Heaven*, he really wasn't in great shape.

SS: So, you're very unique, and you have a very unique profile, and you're in this cutthroat industry, and you are this out queer person who's made these AIDS films. Did you ever get private conversations from other people about AIDS, people who were looking to you for certain kinds of information or because you had the guts to make a certain kind of statement?

CV: Like in what sense?

SS: Like people saying, "I could never make a film like that, but I'm so glad you made that" or, "How can you make that?"

CV: I guess people still say that, but, I mean, I'm trying to think back at the time — I mean, first of all, every movie we made was attacked by the queer community pretty much. When we made *Poison*, it was attacked for not having enough sex in it. Swear to God. Then we —

SS: What does “attacked” mean? That somebody criticized it?

CV: It felt like the community at large was criticizing it. Then when we made *Swoon*, we got caught up in the whole positive image thing, like —

SS: Oh, because it wasn’t a positive image.

CV: Because it wasn’t a positive image. Like, “How could you, when this is going on, make a movie that, like, glorifies,” which it doesn’t at all, “these two men who killed a little boy?” Then *Safe* was criticized for not being explicitly about AIDS.

SS: What do you think is behind that, all of that criticism?

CV: I don’t know. I haven’t gotten through it all yet, though.

SS: Oh, I’m sorry. Go ahead. Keep going.

CV: Then I started being personally attacked for only working with gay men, and I was like, “Give me a fucking minute.” I’m just like — then I made — I co-produced *Go Fish*, which was criticized for being too much about young lesbians and not enough about older lesbians. Then we made *Stonewall*, which was criticized for being historically inaccurate, even though 100 people would tell you 100 different versions of what happened that night. So, I don’t know who held the accurate version. So anyway — oh, and then *I Shot Andy Warhol*, which was again a not positive representation of a lesbian.

SS: So, what is your takeaway from all of that?

CV: Just you can’t win.

SS: But is there anything that isn’t criticized? Everything gets – in a way it’s nice to have discourse about things.

CV: Well, but you're thinking of now, where there's like a debate that's like online, where you produce a piece of work and there's like — you can just go to one, like — to Rotten Tomatoes and read all your reviews in one fell swoop, and people — “We champion it.” “We hate it.” So, you can access all that. Back then, you really couldn't, and really there were just a few — so *OUT* or *OutWeek* or *Q* or whatever those magazines were, they would say, “This is what we think.” There was more of that sense. So, when I say we were attacked for this or attacked for that, it felt more like a common voice because you didn't get to hear all the voices. Does that make sense?

SS: I understand that, yeah. Just one more question on this and then I want to move on, but what was the link at the time, in your mind, between the films and the AIDS Activist Movement?

00:40:00

CV: I don't know. I guess I felt that we were — I did feel that sense of urgency, that sense that we had to tell our stories quickly, and that there was also this imperative that — well, it kind of goes back to what you said, I wouldn't have a deathbed scene, or I wouldn't produce that movie. But people were, so it was important to me that I produce the other kind, which was, you know, something that wasn't so comfortable or easy or, I don't know, or as easy for straight people to understand, and that was really important to me.

SS: Okay. So now I just want to talk about being in ACT UP or being a rank-and-file person.

CV: Okay, let me do a quick e-mail check.

SS: Okay.

CV: Alright, sorry. Alright, good.

SS: So just talk about the regular experience. There you were, you were in your twenties, you were coming out, you were starting your film career. Did you socialize in ACT UP? Did you party?

CV: Yeah. I mean, I wasn't like — you know, Marlene [McCarty] and I weren't together yet, and I didn't even really know her, so really I often went to meetings with Todd or with Brian, with my girlfriend, and, you know, they were sort of what you did that night, but I wasn't in the inner circle at all.

SS: Can I just tell you that 80 percent of the people we've interviewed have —

CV: Say that.

SS: — said they were not in the inner circle.

CV: Yeah, but I really wasn't.

SS: Okay. But did you socialize? Did you go to parties?

CV: I think so. I mean, I think I went to — I don't think I went to parties so much as like sometimes to a bar afterwards or —

SS: We've interviewed so many people. We've interviewed 175 people in fifteen years, right? Everybody felt that somebody else was looking down on them, that they weren't in the cool group.

CV: Oh, no. I didn't — see, I didn't get that involved. I think that Todd had more of that experience. Or I don't know if he had that experience, but he would tell me like, “Oh, the boys, this — ,” and there was a whole group of — the swim team and those guys and how they —

SS: Yeah, but Christine, the person you've built your whole life with you met in ACT UP, Marlene.

CV: I didn't meet her in ACT UP. I met her because — Tom met her in ACT UP, and I met her because Tom asked her to do the titles for *Swoon*.

SS: Okay. But it's an ACT UP relationship.

CV: Absolutely, but *I* didn't actually meet her in ACT UP.

SS: Okay. So that makes you, I think, one of the few remaining, still-standing couples that were produced by ACT UP.

CV: Well, that's probably true, though, of anybody who got together twenty-three years ago.

SS: So, were you aware of, like, political debates in ACT UP?

CV: Oh, yeah. No, I knew that there was a lot of — I mean, I can't remember exactly what, but I knew that there was a lot of, like, debate all the time and arguing over language and the correct language and that kind of thing, which I just can't deal with at all. So, I just was very good at like, "I'm just not gonna — ." Like, I can separate myself very easily from what I can't deal with about this organization, and I appreciate it. I wasn't contemptuous at all of, like, everyone's arguing over what pronoun to use. I understood the importance of that argument. I just needed to be away from it.

SS: Okay. I don't think that that — all right. Whatever.

CV: Right.

SS: All right. So, I just have a couple more things, and then we're done. So, everyone says or I say and many people say AIDS changed everything in

terms of the queer world, and HIV is in its own strange purgatorial state right now, but something really depoliticized after the AIDS crisis came down. What do you think went wrong or right in the move forward after that?

CV: I don't know. I think people got really weary. I do think that happened. I think it was really — it was really hard. It was like everyone had — a whole generation had — or a whole specific part of a generation had Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. When you're taking care of people in your twenties who are in their twenties, and they can't move or they can't — it's just like, "This is crazy."

00:45:00

But I also know that sense of empowerment that came from, you know, like we are making a change, like this is effective, this is causing progress, you know, and also that sense of feeling like if we don't — we're so outside of the mainstream that if we don't join together and try and help ourselves, no one cares about us.

SS: But it's a really difficult story to tell, because sometimes I feel like we've been really good at conveying the heroism, but the actual experience of oppression at that time, is something that's very, very hard for people today to understand.

CV: I think that's true, but I also think there's — I totally agree with you, and I think there's this assumption of like, "Oh, that's — check. Gay rights. Check that off. Movin' on," and then all you have to do is open the paper and see, like, which judges are trying to roll back gay marriage or whatever, equal rights. It's obviously not really where we are.

I almost — living in Manhattan with a fifteen-year-old who has out friends, and she goes to a public high school, she doesn't go to a rarefied private school

where those are the opinions you are forced to have. She used to go to one, but she doesn't anymore. It's kind of like — because even when I was at [the High School of] Music and Art, people, I mean, as you can imagine, there was a fairly large number of pretty flamboyant people, and they were closeted. There was one guy in my senior class who was out, and I was like, “Whoa,” you know, and of course he was gay. I mean, he was as gay as could be, but the fact that he actually owned it was just, like, unbelievable.

SS: Yeah, there's a lot of that story that still hasn't been told, even though it's in the past.

CV: Right.

SS: I only have one more question. Do you guys have anything you want to add?

JH: Yeah. Have you ever seen the footage of the arrest at NIH?

CV: No. Only what was in *How to Survive a Plague*, which I saw Jim in, but I didn't see myself.

JH: Right, yeah, because actually it's really well documented from before you guys sit down till when they were putting you in the van and everything. It's the whole —

CV: Wow.

SS: So, you can relive it whenever you wish.

JW: David Buckingham's footage?

JH: No, it's actually Catherine Gund.

JW: I have a quick question. I wanted to know if your friend who went to get her green card, did she get it?

CV: She didn't get it because she was HIV-positive, and then — you know, this is really her story, so I don't know if I want it on the record, but she actually figured out someone — she had her blood tested again but with someone else's blood, because it was a period where things just weren't so buttoned up, you know, and somehow it was like her friend was able to go get tested, and —

SS: Smart girl.

CV: — so she got her green card, and she's still here.

SS: Great. Last question. So, looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

CV: Oh, god. That's a hard question. I mean, you know, look, its greatest achievement, I think, was the fact that it actually — I do believe it brought attention and change to a devastating situation, and I think that that made a lot of people, including myself, feel like we can change something if we want to, you know. My daughter helped when Obama was first elected, knocked on doors, and she really feels like she had something to do with him getting elected, and she asked me at around that time who I had voted for when I could first vote when I was eighteen, and I had to say I didn't vote.

SS: Oh, wow.

CV: I was like, "Who gives — Reagan or —," or whoever the fuck was running against him. I can't even remember.

SS: Mondale.

CV: And I was like, "They're both the fucking same." Like, "Who cares," and I didn't vote. She was like, "You didn't?" Like, "How could you not?" And that's

great that she feels that way, I think. I feel like that that idea that you can effect change in that way, and also I think it brought the community together, and I guess what you're saying in some ways was that, but then that community is so depoliticized now or in so many ways — look, I now work with people who are younger than my company, so I work with a lot of queer twenty-two- and twenty-three-year-olds, and they really have no idea.

SS: What was ACT UP's greatest disappointment?

CV: Oh, I thought I said it.

SS: Oh, you think that —

CV: Well, I think that — I don't know. I mean, I guess the disappointment is that urgency wasn't able to just, like, build a momentum through our community. It's —

SS: Forever.

CV: — forever. It does feel like — in some ways, it was like, "Okay. That's done." Like, "Everyone can go back to real life," except not so many of us are here anymore.

SS: Right. Thank you for your time.

CV: Oh, you're welcome. I hope that's what you wanted.

SS: That's what we wanted. Thank you.