

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

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Interviewee: **Douglas Crimp**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Douglas Crimp  
May 16, 2007

**SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so the way we start is you could just say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

DOUGLAS CRIMP: Okay. My name is Douglas Crimp. And I am 62 years old. And today's date is May 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007. And we are in my apartment in New York City.

**SS: Right, on Fulton.**

DC: On Fulton Street –

**SS: Yes.**

DC: – yes.

**SS: So Douglas, you're from Idaho, right? Is that where you grew up?**

DC: I am, yes.

**SS: And did you grow up in the country, or was it a small town?**

DC: I grew up in a small town, what was then a small town; a notorious town called Coeur d'Alene, which is a center of white supremacy. And, yeah; it was a mill town, actually.

**SS: And were your parents, had they been born there as well, or had they –**

DC: No, but they born nearby, both of them in Washington State, actually. And my maternal grandparents moved to my hometown.

**SS: So you're multigenerational Northwestern –**

DC: Yes, yes, I am, yeah.

**SS: And did your ancestors work in the mines, or –**

DC: No.

**SS: No.**

DC: No. My father worked for my maternal grandfather, and he had a hardware store that had been his father's blacksmith's shop. And then it became a kind of general store.

**SS: So you grew up with your father running a general store.**

DC: Yeah. A sort of, a hardware store with sporting goods and appliances and things like that. A small-town business, basically, yeah.

**SS: Okay. And what did your mother do?**

DC: She was a housewife.

**SS: And how many children were there?**

DC: Three.

**SS: Three.**

DC: I have an older sister and a younger brother.

**SS: So when did you start to separate from the culture that you grew up in?**

DC: Ah, I can't say that I was ever really a part of the culture that I grew up in. I was, you know, it was very difficult, growing up in the '50s, in Idaho, being gay, being a sissy, I guess. It was jock culture; it was incredibly conformist culture; very homogeneous culture. Irish Catholics were considered strange. It was that homogeneous.

I separated by going away to college.

**SS: So you endured all your high school years there.**

DC: I did. Yes. I didn't know that I had any choice, basically.

**SS: So did you have a little clique of other weird kids who you bonded with, or –**

DC: I did, in a way. I mean, I had friends. My best friend turned out also to be gay. I didn't know he was, when I was in high school. My girlfriend, or my friend who was a woman who I went to the junior prom with, is Marilynne Robinson, the novelist.

**SS: {Laughs}.**

DC: {Laughs}.

**SS: Oh, okay, so you found other intellectuals.**

DC: Well, yes, some people who turned out to be that, yes, absolutely.

**SS: And would you find out about books that you would read, or –**

DC: You know, I didn't actually read very much when I was, I mean, it was such a kind of anti-intellectual culture, such a deeply anti-intellectual culture. There was no bookstore in my hometown, for example. It was sufficiently – I mean, it wasn't rural, it was a small town. But I grew up on a lake, so I was, you know, I water-skied and swam and canoed and played outdoors, and I didn't really, I didn't read very much.

**SS: So how did you get an image of another kind of life being possible for you, at the time?**

DC: You know, I don't know; I don't know that I did. I luckily got away. I decided to go away to college, mostly because Marilyn's older brother — who's also an art historian, actually – David Summers — went to Brown. And so Marilyn and I decided that we would also go away to college. And I had some vague idea that I wanted

to be an architect. I don't even know where I got that idea. I didn't really know what architecture was, I suppose. But, so I applied to schools that had good architecture schools. And I got a scholarship to Tulane, and that's where I went. And it was, luckily, very, very far away from Idaho, in every way. New Orleans was a very, very different culture, of course.

**SS: So did you come out when you were in college?**

DC: I did, yeah. I mean, I found a gay circle of friends. I went to gay bars. Initially, I went to Greek sailor bars, with other friends and faculty members and assorted drag queens and prostitutes and sailors. And that was the milieu in which I sort of first knew about being gay, I guess. So I, yeah, so I actually had gay friends, and was able to be out to the group of people that I knew in college, that I was friends with.

**SS: That's interesting, because that's a paradigm you've maintained all your life. On one hand, having a foot in an institution and an official identity, and then really being integrated into some kind of marginal underground community.**

DC: Yeah, I think that's actually true –

**SS: And what do you –**

DC: – although I don't know what the institution was, except –

**SS: Tulane.**

DC: – Tulane, yeah, of course. But, yeah.

**SS: What is it about that of relationship that works for you?**

DC: This is a really interesting question, Sarah, because I'm writing a memoir of the '70s right now. And it's about, for me, it's about trying to think about the

relationship between being in the art world, working in the art world; and the immediate post-Stonewall queer world in New York. And I inhabited both of those worlds. Even before Stonewall, actually, when I was first in New York — I came here in '67 — and I fairly quickly began going to Max's Kansas City, which was where the Warhol crowd hung out.

So I, that was, in one way, you would think that would be a kind of integrated art world, queer world. But it wasn't. Because Max's was divided between the front room, which was the sort of straight art world, and the back room, which was the Warhol scene. And so I had to walk through the straight world in order to get to the queer world, essentially.

I don't know — to answer your question, I don't know if I could say that, I mean, it worked insofar as I survived. But I think it was complicated to negotiate.

**SS: In what way?**

DC: Well, certainly, my experience of the art world, in general, when I first became a part of it — and I became a part of it quite quickly. I should say that when I was at Tulane, I transferred quite quickly from architecture to art history. And I became, at my university, the art school and the art history department were one and the same. So I had friends who were artists — graduate students who were studying art seriously. And they were, some of them were part of my queer milieu. And it was through them, I think, that I became interested in contemporary art, because you couldn't study that when I was a student. And I knew that I wanted to come to New York and get involved in the art world. And shortly after I came to New York, I just luckily got a job at the Guggenheim Museum.

Tape I  
00:10:00

**SS: At –**

DC: The Guggenheim Museum.

**SS: How did you get it, honestly? Was it because you were cute?**

DC: {LAUGHS} No. It's a better story than that.

**SS: Oh, okay. {LAUGHING}**

DC: I came to New York in '67. I went back to Tulane to finish, because I had left school. I was somewhat traumatized by having to officially declare that I was gay to the Army in order to get out of the Vietnam War. So I then went back to Tulane and finished, realizing that it wasn't a wise idea to not get my college degree. And then I came back in fall of '68, and I was looking for a job. And I was living in Spanish Harlem at the time. And I thought I would go to the Metropolitan Museum and apply for, you know, to be a guard or something like that.

And I was walking down Fifth Avenue from where I lived. And I came upon first the Guggenheim. And I thought, well, I'll try; this is a museum, too; I'll try this place. And I walked in, and I said I was looking for a job. And the guy who was there, in the lobby — who turned out to be the PR person — said, do you know anything about Pre-Columbian art? And I said, yes, because I had actually studied quite a lot of it. My advisor at Tulane was a Pre-Columbian specialist, and Tulane was one of the important schools, even for doing archeological digs in Latin America.

And it just happened that the Guggenheim, at the time, was doing a show of Pre-Columbian Peruvian art. And there was a guest curator who fought with the director of the museum, and was sort of banished from the place; whereupon all these art objects arrived from Peru. And so they thought that perhaps since I knew something

about Peruvian art, that I could help them install the show, which I did. And then they basically made a little job for me to run the information desk and you know, sort of hand out the Acoustiguides and things like that. And then I was able to persuade them that my interest, really, was modern and contemporary. And so I stayed on, initially as a research assistant.

But that was incredibly lucky, and it was my entree into the art world.

**SS: So you weren't involved in a graduate program at all when you came in '67.**

DC: No, I didn't go back to graduate school until 1976, when I moved here, actually.

**SS: Oh, okay. So you're living in Spanish Harlem; you're working at the Guggenheim. And what was the Guggenheim like in the late '60s?**

DC: What was the Guggenheim like?

**SS: Yeah.**

DC: Well, it's, it seemed very glamorous to me. It was still that period when young people who worked in museums mostly were very upper class, and they paid nothing, so unless you had support from your family, it wasn't easy. I didn't feel that I could even really afford the clothes that were necessary to wear to an opening, for example. But it was the Guggenheim. The Guggenheim was built in 1959; it opened in '59. So it was already a world-famous building. And I loved it; I loved the building. And I was plunged into the heart of the contemporary art world at its most exciting.

I remember, for example, going to the opening of the show that was called Henry's Show — Henry Geldzahler's show — at the Met. That was a big, you know,

painting and sculpture from 1945 to the present. It was one of the most glamorous things, still, probably, that I've ever done. And I was a kid. So it was extremely exciting. It was also, you know, we were very overworked. I worked, like, seven-days weeks. And I was paid, my starting salary at the Guggenheim was \$4200 a year. So it was really poverty wages, essentially.

**SS: How was your ethnic-geographic-class background; how did that operate? Did you have to start passing for middle class, or compete with East Coast**

–

DC: Well, I am middle class.

**SS: Oh, okay.**

DC: I mean, my family is, my father was a businessman. So I grew up middle class, yeah. I mean, I was a hick, though. That's –

**SS: Okay.**

DC: That was the problem, I suppose, for trying to kind of pass in that world, was that I didn't have the requisite sophistication, even for when I went to Tulane. I mean, I wasn't well educated; and I'd never been outside of the Northwest.

**SS: So how did you change that?**

DC: Oh, I don't know. {LAUGHS}

**SS: I mean, were you conscious of that? Did you try to learn –**

DC: No, I don't think I was conscious of it. I think that I simply – I think that from the moment – from the moment I went away to college, I was in a situation of having to radically adapt to a different world. For example: New Orleans was a majority black city. I grew up in a place where there was not a single African American person

living. New Orleans was a city with a very distinct, not particularly American, in the sense that I knew it, culture; a different cuisine; a different way of life altogether. It had history; it had decadence, or what we would call decadence, I suppose. So yeah. And I was miserable.

It was also hot. I had never experienced humidity in my life. And suddenly there I was, in a city with 100% humidity. I arrived there in late August. I remember just lying down in my dorm room and crying from the kind of agony of this atmosphere. Which I then, I mean, my adaptation was very complete. I came to love New Orleans, to love the heat. I feel more comfortable in the tropics than anywhere. Not now, so much, but eventually I did. And of course everything else about New Orleans. It was a truly queer city, I would say, pre-Stonewall. There was the Mardi Gras; there were drag queens; there was a pretty big developed gay culture.

**SS: A lot has been made about the art world in the late '60s; that it was equally homosocial as homophobic. That it was homosexuality that built careers and created cliques and marketplaces. But it was the closet that kept the power in certain hands. We've heard that from many different corners. And since you were a participant witness, what is your assessment of that?**

DC: I experienced it differently. I think that the mainstream art world, for the most part, was extremely heterosexual and covertly homophobic, because it was liberal, so – the homophobia was a kind of taken-for-granted homophobia that could be easily expressed with just a kind of flip phrase, or something like that. It could be more overt in some cases.

Warhol, for example, had a lot of trouble with his swishiness in the early '60s, and there are famous stories about that. Warhol's queerness and the queerness of that world and the centrality of that world was something of an exception.

I had a very particular experience of the gay versus straight aspects of the art world in the period because — and this is now really beginning in 1970 — when I started publishing, when I started writing reviews; it was for *ARTnews*. And *ARTnews*, under the editorship of Tom Hess was — he had a particular interest in poets as critics.

And the second-generation New York School poets were very much represented among the reviewers there. And the senior editor at the time was John Ashbery. So it wasn't

that all of those poets were gay; in fact, they weren't. But some among them were, like Garrett Henry, for example. But there were straight ones, as well — Peter Schjeldahl,

Carter Ratcliff. But the center of this world, really, was John Ashbery. And I remember

Tape I  
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going to parties at John's house all the time, in the early '70s. And it was a very gay world, of course. I met the guy who would become my first boyfriend, indirectly through one of those parties. I met a woman who had been in *The Conformist*, the Bertolucci film *The Conformist*. And my first boyfriend was also in that film.

**SS: Did he play the chauffeur?**

DC: No, no. I wish. No, no, no, it wasn't Pierre Clémenti. No, he played the naked hustler at the very end. It was a small part, but it had a certain glamour.

So I knew a gay world in the art world; an openly gay world, a gay friendly world, and a group of people who, those of whom were not gay, were nevertheless part of a gay-centered world, because of John.

This would be an extension of the belovedness of Frank O'Hara in the '60s, in the mainstream art world. But at the time — around 1970 — that was also, in some ways, a very conservative and not mainstream art world. So that what I was interested in, myself, as a young critic, was minimalism, the beginnings of conceptualism. And that was not a gay world; that was a very straight world. And the people in that world who are reputed to have been gay were indeed deeply closeted. The one that I knew who was — I mean, this is a slightly older person, but who I knew quite well at the moment was Ellsworth Kelly. But Ellsworth, I don't think, would be representative of that. He's the one who was truly in the closet at that time.

**SS: Why would that aesthetic movement not attract openly gay artists?**

DC: Conceptualism, minimalism and so on?

**SS: Yeah.**

DC: You know, I don't know. Someone like Ellsworth Kelly, who's not classically a minimalist, but is involved with an earlier version of that aesthetic — I guess we could call it that — was certainly gay. And it did, it did attract certain gay people. But it wasn't as acceptable in that world. There are very famous figures from that world who are known to, or rumored to have been gay, or to have had gay relationships. I mean, you know, we know that sexuality is complicated, so —

**SS: Yeah, um hm.**

DC: — it isn't really as simple as gay and straight, I think. The person whose work I was most attracted to in that world initially, and whose work I did an exhibition of in 1971, was Agnes Martin. And of course, Agnes Martin was a lesbian, I

guess we could say, although basically, I suppose, Agnes Martin, I don't know of any women she was involved with. She was a solitary figure.

**SS: What attracted you to her work?**

DC: This is a really complicated; this is a question you're asking to a critic who has been involved with her work for many, many years. I think, now — I wouldn't have said so at the time, because I wrote differently about it at the time — I think now it is actually the complex relation between its apparent rational rigor and its extremely emotional, moving, even spiritual quality, let's say. At the time, I saw Martin more in conjunction with the figures of a later generation; like, say, Sol LeWitt. And I don't think that that's wrong; I think that there are things that I've just said about Martin that are also true of LeWitt. But in fact, Martin herself insisted on her being part of the generation that included Ad Reinhardt and Barnett Newman — her actual chronological generation.

Tape I  
00:25:00

**SS: Do you feel that the issue of rigor became less important to you over the years, as you started to look at community-based art or movement-connected art?**

DC: No, I don't, actually. I think rigor has always — it would be differently defined. I'm talking about almost a stylistic rigor with Agnes Martin. But in terms of rigorous thought or complexity of thought, then I would still value that.

**SS: So at that time, you were curating and you were writing significantly.**

DC: Well, I only stayed at the Guggenheim for three years. But I had begun writing for *Art News*, and then eventually also *Art International*. I left the

Guggenheim in '71. I was fired, actually, after the Buren debacle in the Guggenheim International – it was the time when a very important piece by Daniel Buren was removed from the International Exhibition in '71; it was big art-world scandal. And then the Hans Haacke exhibition was canceled. For a different reason, obviously. But because of the inclusion of the real estate pieces. And I think I was basically too close to the curators, who were not exactly coming clean with what happened. And so I was fired.

But in any case, I, yes, I had started writing, and I was also then teaching at the School of Visual Arts. I taught there until I went to graduate school in '76.

**SS: Okay, so –**

DC: So that's how I supported myself actually, yes.

**SS: So even though you beat the draft, you weren't really involved in anti-war organizing per se, right?**

DC: Not organizing, no, although I certainly, as was true of most people, I suppose, of my generation and my milieu, I was very much involved in going to demonstrations and opposing the war. But I didn't do actual organizing, no.

**SS: So in this very important early '70s period, in terms of the development of gay liberation, what was the relationship between the gay art world and this new street movement that was evolving?**

DC: I can't tell you the answer to that generally, because I don't think there was a general relation. I think that it was lived individually. So I can tell you –

**SS: For you.**

DC: – for me –

**SS: Yeah.**

DC: – what it was. I mean, probably the relevant, in my own experience, is that I wasn't that professionalized as an art-world person yet. By teaching at the School of Visual Arts, which paid the bills, because New York was inexpensive in those days, and I had moved to Greenwich Village by this time. First, I moved to Chelsea, and then the loft where I was in Chelsea burned, and then I moved to Greenwich Village in '72 – '71, I guess. So I was as involved in being gay, let's say; in sort of gay experimentation, in gay life, as I was in being an art critic. I taught to pay the bills, but I was living in the Village and playing, doing a lot of playing, basically. So the way that I experienced the movement was, you know, obviously through things like the Christopher Street Liberation Day marches. But I used to go to the Firehouse dances. And I did things like, I read all of the first books that came out; Arthur Bell's *Dancing the Gay Lib Blues*, or Dennis Altman's – I don't remember the title, actually – *Homosexual: [Oppression and] Liberation* – something like that. Mario Mieli's book; eventually, Guy Hocquenghem's book; Guy became a friend in the early '70s. And I went to the GAA Firehouse dances every Saturday night. That was my disco, pre-disco, basically. And that was my real connection. I didn't go, I went to a couple of GAA meetings. I wasn't that politically involved. I was experientially involved, I'd say.

**SS: But I mean, one world was cross, mixed class, and to some extent, interracial. And then the other world was quite elite, right, and segregated, in some sense.**

DC: Yes, yes.

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**SS: And what was it like for you to go back and forth between those two?**

DC: Again, I can only say that I experienced it as I did with – I suppose what it was like was that I had certain friends in the art world — some of whom I still have; some of whom I don't — who knew that I was gay; who were not themselves gay, a lot of them; but who certainly had many gay people in their lives. I think that I experienced the gay world — in bars; eventually, discos; the street — as, yeah, a much more mixed-up world, and I loved it for exactly that reason. I loved the fact that I could meet people from different worlds.

The art world is a very narrow world, in many ways. It's a professional world. And therefore, although – and it was a small world at that time. But it was also a world of extraordinary experimentation, at that moment. It was the beginnings of performance art, of artists making films, the beginnings of feminism within the art world. So it also had its ferment, let's say. It also had a kind of period of the birth of new forms. And also of new institutions. So, for example, just as the Firehouse was on Wooster Street, in SoHo; right at the moment — this is 1971 — right at the moment when the first alternative spaces, like 112 Greene Street and the Kitchen, were opening in SoHo. Food, the Gordon Matta-Clark restaurant, opened right up the street, on Wooster Street, from the Firehouse. This is before the commercial galleries moved there, with the exception of Paula Cooper. So you know, it was actually literally the same world — that is, the same physical world — where these things were taking place.

So I did know some gay people who lived in SoHo; and then eventually, Tribeca, where I moved to. But I certainly inhabited a physical space that was both an

alternative art-world space – and truly alternative, at that moment. That is to say, it was a space of real experimentation in, it's hard for us to think of it now. But the birth of performance art, in the work of someone like Joan Jonas, for example; that was so unpredictable, unexpected, unlike any, I mean, it was not painting or sculpture, which is what, all we knew up until that time.

**SS: The reason I bring this up is because I know that I first became aware of you in the famous *October* split. And in some sense, you chose sides. It's like you had lived in all these different worlds, and then the moment came, and you decided that you belonged with the community, on some level. Or that you were willing to stand up to academia's neglect. And very few people made that choice.**

**So I'm trying to understand, from your point of view, looking back, what led to that moment for you, since you had been able to make it all work, in some sense, up till then.**

DC: First of all, I'm not so sure how well I made it work, Sarah. I think my life was ridden with conflict. I think life is ridden with conflict. And also, the split with my *October* colleagues was extremely complicated. What happened in the meantime was AIDS and ACT UP. I mean, the split with my colleagues at *October* happened in 1990, over the "How Do I Look?" issue; that is, what became the *How Do I Look?* book, the queer film and video book which my colleagues refused to publish, after having accepted it, theoretically.

**SS: And after you having been there for how long?**

DC: Thirteen years.

**SS: Thirteen years.**

DC: You know, it's a whole development. And the only way that I can really characterize this breakup was that it was similar to a divorce. I mean, it's an extremely complicated story that has a long history, that isn't just — or maybe even necessarily primarily — about the question of the community or my being gay. Having said that, I think that what really, really shifted for me was that when, in 1987, I decided to do a special issue of *October* devoted to AIDS; and once I had decided to do that, through meeting Gregg Bordowitz, I started going to ACT UP meetings —

**SS: Oh, I see.**

DC: — so that was in the summer. I had seen the *Testing the Limits* pilot tape, in a gallery exhibition. And sought out Gregg Bordowitz for advice, really. I had begun to think about, not even doing a special issue, but doing a couple of pieces on AIDS, or on, not even on AIDS, so much as on representation and AIDS. Specifically what I had intended initially was a review of Simon Watney's book *Policing Desire*; and an article, which I commissioned from Martha Gever, on Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes*, which I had seen in, or at least eventually saw in Bill Olander's show at the New Museum in the Homovideo show. That was in 1986 —

**SS: Oh, okay.**

DC: — I believe. And that show was very important to the genesis of this issue, actually. So as I was thinking about doing these essays, I got, I started reading and getting more and more involved in the questions around AIDS; in an intellectual way, rather than just a personal way that had included a lot of denial, I think, up to that point.

And so I met Gregg. And Gregg said, if you want to really find out about AIDS, come to the meetings at ACT UP. And I did. And once I went, I was hooked.

And that utterly transformed the nature of this special issue that I did: both what I commissioned for it; the size that it grew to; and the kind of balance between, or the juxtaposition of more academic essays and more directly activist work. And in doing that, first of all, it was probably the most ambitious thing I'd ever done in my life. I mean, it grew to very large proportions. I got really cathected onto it. I did a, it was a high learning curve; I did a lot of learning. And my fellow editors completely left me alone. They just didn't, they weren't interested, and they didn't know what was going on, and they didn't really want to read the manuscripts, and I, I just did it.

And it occupied a good six months of my life, or more; really, all day, every day. Because I was also writing about AIDS myself. I wrote both the introduction to the issue and the essay "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," which was a really ambitious essay. It took on both Randy Shilts and Larry Kramer, and it wasn't the very first thing I had written about anything to do with gay issues. But it was probably the first thing that I wrote that was a big rush of all of the things that I had thought, or that I had come to think, in all of the reading and thinking and experiencing that had taken place in my life up to that point, in my gay life up to that point, particularly in the period from, say, 1970. So that's a long period.

**SS: Right. But also I –**

**JAMES WENTZY:** We gotta stop.

**SS: Oh, we have to change tapes? Okay.**

**JW: Hold that –**

**SS: But also, you know, I'm not an expert on you, so tell me if I'  
wrong –**

Tape I  
00:40:00

Tape II  
00:00:00

DC: You're doing pretty well.

**SS: – but I have the impression that it's the first time that you actively were in dialog with gay community, quote, thinkers or leaders or figures, like Larry and those kinds of people. Those were not the kinds of people you'd been responding to in your work up to that time.**

DC: No, that's true. With a very few exceptions. I mean, there was one, I did a special issue on Fassbinder in 1981 – '82, right when Fassbinder died, actually. It was coincidental, but he died right when the issue was being finally prepared. And I did sort of take on a certain, I discussed with other people who were doing work on Fassbinder's gay politics. I took on some of that material. So that probably is professionally the first time that I did that.

I told you that I knew Guy Hocquenghem. So I was in a kind of dialog with Guy for a long period of time. So I knew people that were in the gay intellectual community, let's say. But you're right; I had not, it had not become part of my work. I had thought about, I had wanted it to be, more. And didn't know, given the kind of art that I was involved with and the kinds of issues that I was involved with in the art world, I didn't see an entry into gay politics. I can answer that by saying that eventually my way into it was to understand the importance of subjectivity and representation.

And so I think I came into it through the AIDS activist movement. But I also had a certain intellectual preparation for it. Because I was really interested in post-structuralism and postmodern thought; I had been reading Roland Barthes, including the late works of Barthes; I'd been reading Foucault. *The History of Sexuality* was an incredibly important work for me.

So I certainly was thinking about it. But indeed, you're right; it wasn't really until later that I –

**SS: But that shift; I mean, you stopped looking at gay “high,” and you started looking at “low.” And was that part of the refusal or the abandonment of your colleagues of this subject matter? That it wasn't, it didn't have enough currency?**

DC: No. You know what it was? Yes and no, let's say.

When I did the AIDS issue of *October*, I came to realize that my interest in how the art world was responding to AIDS, which is how I initially came to it, was not sufficient; was not what I wanted to talk about. I wanted to talk about all of the issues of culture and representation that were raised by AIDS. So that meant, for example, the culture of science as well. It was very important for me that I found Paula Treichler, for example, and published her piece on AIDS and signification. And of course, when I wrote my own piece on promiscuity, it was primarily motivated by a close reading of *And the Band Played On*. And so, I hadn't, I'm not a literary critic; I hadn't written about writing before, particularly; except perhaps writing in the Fassbinder text, actually. And so, yeah, I, at that point, I began to think about representation, not so much, it wasn't so much even high and low, but just the breadth of forms of representation. So what I found, at that moment, from an academic position, is that I had shifted to a kind of cultural studies position. And indeed, in 1990, I was invited to the big cultural studies conference in Champaign-Urbana that was organized by Paula Treichler and a couple of other people — Larry Grossberg and Cary Nelson — and I found a kind of intellectual world among these cultural studies scholars from all over the world, mostly from Britain

Tape II  
00:05:00

and Australia, the United States, that I felt at home with, let's say; and intellectually at home with.

You know, there was a preparation for this in that in 1986, I gave a talk in the first of the Dia conversations. And it was about art and its publics. And there was a kind of exchange, Q&A, afterwards, that was – I talked about the Homovideo show. And there was an exchange about questions of sexuality that was difficult for me. And I decided afterwards to form a reading group on gay issues. And I did that. And that's actually what, it was that reading group that organized the *How Do I Look?* conference on gay film and video.

**SS: Who was in that group?**

DC: It was shifting. Martha Gever; Amber Hollibaugh was in it for awhile; Lee Quinby — she's an upstate academic who had lived in New York for awhile; somebody who had been one of Lee's students was in it for a while – a guy named Tim Landers; Tom Kalin was in it briefly — he didn't stay in it all that long; I think I'm forgetting people. It's the collective that made the *How Do I Look?* book. So it was just a weekly reading group, and we were reading work on sexuality.

And at a certain point, Ruby Rich was at the New York State Council on the Arts, and she alerted us to a New York State Humanities grant, or something, that we applied for and got — a very large amount of money, actually, to do this conference.

**SS: How much?**

DC: I don't remember. But it was enough to actually bring people from places like Canada and even England to be in the audience; to just be among the people who responded to the six papers. So we brought Isaac Julien and John Grayson and a lot

of people for it. So it turned out to be the exchanges after the papers were as interesting, probably, as the papers themselves.

One of the people who gave a paper was Richard Fung. And he was talking about the representations of Asians in gay male pornography. Cindy Patton did a paper on the use of pornography in safe sex education videos.

So already there, there was a kind of, or let's say, simultaneously with the AIDS issue of *October*, we were working on this conference that involved a kind of mixture of readings of popular culture and high culture, let us say.

**SS: Now it's interesting, because you're describing all of this intellectual curiosity and emotionally propelled intellectual curiosity, and seeking out Gregg, and your relationship with him, and bringing you into ACT UP, but you are the AIDS generation. So weren't you having personal AIDS experiences that preceded all of this?**

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DC: Yeah, sure. Although certainly not as extensive as many people of my generation. I mean, I was lucky in that way. Partly, I suppose, because — how can I put it? — I didn't have a very large group of friends my own age who were gay. I had, I mean, I certainly knew lots of people from the bars and from the culture. For the first several years, I was extremely skeptical of the admonition not to have sex. Skeptical may be not the right word. I mean, I just, I couldn't imagine that. That just seemed to me, first of all, it seemed like a kind of conspiracy to make gay men stop having sex. And secondly, it just, I just felt like life isn't worth living. You know, I was much younger then.

And then, in 1985, I went to Berlin for a year; I lived in Berlin for a year. I was working, also, at this point, on my dissertation. I was very kind of single-mindedly involved in art issues and my intellectual, the demands of *October*, the demands of graduate school. Eventually, it was when I came back from Berlin that my first really, really close friend was diagnosed with AIDS, and that another close friend died. So, '85. So it's late. I mean, I certainly knew people who had gotten sick and died before that, but not, they were not within a kind of close circle of friends.

**SS: What about the places that you went to have sex, like the bars that you went to, or those places; how were those places affected by the epidemic, specifically? Your haunts?**

DC: It's a little bit hard for me to reconstruct it chronologically — that's the problem — because I experience it now, of course, as a kind of decimation of that world. But it didn't happen overnight. There was a pall, I think, already, beginning as early as '81 and '82, I think. There was a sort of, there was fear, there was a sense that things were changing.

**SS: But like, where did you used to go, and how could you measure that?**

DC: I used to go to the Eagle and the Ramrod and I used to go to all of the Village bars. I used to hang out on Christopher Street, even after I moved downtown, and when I was living here already. I used to go up to the Village all the time, or to Chelsea. I was someone who loved being on the street. And I, until, I continued going to discos beyond going back to graduate school, which was difficult, but, so into the late '70s, certainly. Not so much in the '80s. I used to go to the Cock Ring all the time. I

loved to dance, and I went dancing all the time. So I went to the Cock Ring. And I went to the Ramrod, which was across the street from the Cock Ring. So I hung out, let's say, at the end of Christopher Street for, I don't know, it seems like half of my life.

And that was a place where I do have distinct memories of people that I knew from that world — from the people that I knew only from the bar world and only from the street world; guys that I had slept with; guys that I had talked to in the bars — who were getting sick, visibly sick; or that you would hear that someone was ill; or that people just, suddenly, you didn't see them anymore, and you began to wonder.

So I think that happened early, by the way.

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**SS: And were you fearful for yourself?**

DC: {SIGH} I was; of course, I was. But I wasn't intelligently fearful for myself. I wasn't allowing it fully into my consciousness, I would say. I was not practicing safe sex. I didn't start practicing safe sex really regularly until '85. I didn't always practice safe sex in Berlin that year that I was there, in '85. And I knew people in Berlin who were experiencing AIDS, of course, as well. Or I met people who were. And by then, of course, it was also, I also knew — you know, I knew somebody who was Paul Popham's lover. So I went to the first AIDS, GMHC fund-raisers, for example.

**SS: The rodeo —**

DC: I didn't go to the rodeo, but I went to the circus. And I do remember all of that kind of stuff very distinctly, because I knew people who were involved in it.

**SS: So when you were taking on Larry and those guys, and the argument was about promiscuity versus this using AIDS to bring out people's sexual shame or to control people's sexuality, do you think that this was also playing**

**out a kind of historic conflict or relationship between the leather guys and the street guys and the West Village guys, versus the Fire Island-y kind of more bourgeois element?**

DC: No, I don't know. I think – I think those worlds are so mixed up, Sarah. I went to Fire Island – I spent the summer at Fire Island in '73; not in the Pines, actually, in Water Island. And then again, I guess later in the '70s. There was a group of people that I shared a house with. But particularly that one summer. And yeah, I certainly experienced the kind of mainstream Pines guys as not me. I wasn't one of them, I didn't feel – I suppose those guys always seemed to me the same way, very much the gay equivalent of the people who I felt not a part of when I was in high school. I mean The Jocks, the kind of A-List gays. Even though I, I went to Flamingo. That was, eventually 12 West was the club that I went to most, and then the [Paradise] Garage. But the first disco I went to, first mainstream gay disco I went to, I think, was Flamingo, and I went there quite a lot. But I did always feel a little bit that, it wasn't exactly a clubhouse to which I could really be, I mean, I wasn't a member. I always went with people who were. So I didn't feel like a member of the club.

**SS: Let me ask it a little differently, because I think you're right, but that's a false distinction. Looking back on the promiscuity debate and that article that you wrote, do you have more insight or more hindsight into what that was really about – that whole conflict about sex and how people were going to sexually respond to the crisis?**

DC: Well, I think I have more insight about it to the extent that I eventually wrote a whole book about it. I mean, by writing *Melancholia and Moralism*, I

think that I have, I mean I think you're asking me a different question. You're not asking me intellectually what it's about –

**SS: Right.**

DC: – you're asking me more in terms of groups of people and –

**SS: Now that you're wiser and –**

DC: Heh heh. No, but I mean, I –

**SS: Because people grandstand, and we all do it.**

DC: Right, right.

**SS: But when you look back, you see the human elements, and you understand the human issues that are more at stake.**

DC: The analogy that I could make is what I feel now in relation to the marriage debate, or the, not even the marriage debate, because that's too simple; but the question of coupling, and the way in which gay life has come, in so many ways, it seems to me, to mimic more normative ways of life. I don't know why temperamentally I am so much a kind of gay liberation type, because I wasn't a gay militant. But I am. And I think that something resonated for me in the kind of ethos of my gay liberation moment — the early '70s — that said, it was a little bit an extension also of the '60s hippie culture and drug culture and so on — that experience for the sake of experience, pleasure for the sake of pleasure, is a good thing. And that any ways in which you limit that, whether institutionally or even temperamentally, is something that you should overcome, that you should get over, somehow.

So even the discourse of top and bottom has never made any sense to me. Because I come from the generation that says, you know, if you don't like getting fucked,

get over it. Right? Because there's pleasure there that you're not experiencing, that you're not allowing yourself to experience.

Now, I know now that sexuality is much more complicated than that, and that limitations of desire are the way desires are formed. Nevertheless, I also know that because of sexual experimentation, I opened myself to all kinds of things that I didn't know I was open to until I ended up going home with somebody who sort of, because I'm maybe ultimately a bottom or something like that; because ultimately I'm willing to take somebody else, I like to follow somebody else's lead. If somebody says, let's go down this route, I'll think, well, why not, at least tonight, try it. And so it would, and then suddenly, and sometimes I found that I like it.

And I guess that whole sense that, I mean, for me, the pleasures of my life have had to do with, on the one hand, sexual experimentation; and on the other hand, formal experimentation, I mean artistic experimentation; opening myself to things that I didn't know I could like, affectively, physically. And so the kind of closing down of that; the sense in which there is a right way, there is a normative way, there is a good way, there is a moral way, there is a proper way; I've always been allergic to.

Now this may also come from the fact that I grew up with strict Calvinist grandparents who were moralistic and tyrannical. I mean, they were very kind to me, but their attitudes, for example, toward my father were moralistic. And I reacted very severely against it. And for me, it's just so connected to being gay. It was wrong to be gay, and therefore I know that what's wrong can be right.

And so the discourse of righteousness, which arose in relation to AIDS in certain rhetorics, I just had a very gut opposition to. And still do, actually. I mean, I still

feel this way with regard to the demand to form couples, even. I feel that all of the great gains that we made in the period of gay liberation, where we thought about relationality in a much more complicated way; that you could have all kinds of pleasures with all kinds of different people, and that you didn't have to say, I am in *a* relationship, or this is *my* partner, or this is my significant other. I mean, all of that, for me, is about devaluing not only all of the other relationships in one's life, but also it's about restricting the kinds of relationships that we can even think about; the kinds of pleasures that we can have with other people.

Tape II  
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So now I think about it much more in terms, then I thought about it much more in terms of sex, because it was about sex in relation to AIDS. Now I think about it more in terms of relationality in a more general sense — affective relations across the boards — because I don't have as rich and varied a sex life as I once did. It's not as available to me for all kinds of reasons, not the least of which is that I'm 62 years old. Which is not exactly a highly prized thing to be in the gay world, as you know.

**SS: Okay. So let's go to ACT UP.**

DC: Okay.

**SS: So Gregg Bordowitz brings you — I never knew that! It's very moving, actually, that someone so much younger and so new to being gay —**

DC: He's exactly 20 years younger. We share almost the same birthday.

**SS: He brought you in, and did you first come to a general meeting?**

**Is that how —**

DC: I did. I did. And I never stopped, until it got to be too demoralizing to go. I was one of the last, I think, to — not really the last, but one of the last of my cohort to stop going to meetings.

Yeah, I mean, Gregg said, come to ACT UP; it's where you learn about AIDS. And he was right. And we didn't actually become really close friends right away. I don't even remember who, if anyone, I went with, initially. You know, I was about 20 years older than most people at ACT UP. And I felt it. I didn't feel, ever, terribly comfortable at the meetings. I mean, but that's not just because of age; that's also just because of me; of who I am and how being in a group feels to me. Although I also loved it. I have to say, I loved going to meetings, I was hooked on meetings, I never missed a meeting unless I was out of town. I endured them. I sat to the bitter end of every single one. Partly because I also, there was a group of people I would go out to dinner with afterwards. You remember, they started at seven, right? So it was before dinner, and so by the time they were over, you were incredibly hungry, exhausted.

But yeah, so I, what happened was that I talked to Gregg about the issue of *October*. And he said, go to ACT UP; I did; we did see each other; and I commissioned the article about *Testing the Limits* from him, which was one of the articles. It was called "Picture a Coalition." He talks about it, actually, in his interview. It's about representing coalition politics in the *Testing the Limits* video.

**SS: Well, how did you get involved in the organization? Did you join a committee, or —**

DC: I didn't. I was actually very sort of, not exactly an outsider, because I went all the time and I went to the demonstrations and so on. But fairly early on, I, well, first of all, I was working on this issue of *October*.

**SS: Right.**

DC: And that was, as I said, very full time. I was in over my head; I was working very long days, every day of the week. It was a labor of love. But I was, it was as much as I could handle. I would go to meetings; I would go to demonstrations. But more than that, I couldn't take on.

Then, when I finished the issue of *October*, I think quite early on, I began giving lectures – I began, when I was invited to give lectures in the art circuit, basically, or the academic circuit, which I was, often, invited. By then, by 1987, I was already fairly well known as an art critic and fairly often invited to participate in this and that. And I began talking about AIDS. And pretty exclusively, actually. I mean, I didn't, after the AIDS issue, I think I wrote only one more essay on art for a very long period of time. And I began then also writing more about AIDS. And I began being invited to conferences about AIDS. Almost immediately after the AIDS issue came out, there was a kind of explosion of interest in the questions of AIDS in academia. And I participated in that. And so I was, I began writing and continued writing, until about 1995, pretty constantly, for lectures and panels, and I also began teaching about AIDS, courses on AIDS and representation.

So by the time I had finished the AIDS issue, I had pretty much decided that this was my activist work, essentially. I mean, apart from the fact that I needed the grounding and the basis in movement politics; I needed to be a part of it, and I wanted to

be a part of it; I felt very committed to it. But I did not ever become an organizer. I was a writer. And so I wrote. It was not too long – I guess, when was it that I published *AIDS Demo Graphics*, 1990, maybe?

**SS: Ninety or '91, I think, yeah.**

DC: That was a project that I began thinking about fairly early on. And so of course that was in addition to being a kind of argument about the use of graphic production within the movement, it was also, in a way, a history of the major actions of ACT UP. So I was simultaneously participating and chronicling and, to my mind, anyway, a bit; and thinking about issues that came up within representation, which was my field. So after the *October* issue, the first thing that I wrote — and which I gave as a lecture many, many times — was the piece called “Portraits of People with AIDS,” which was about the Nicholas Nixon photographs.

**SS: Now were you involved in the protest against that show?**

DC: No, I was not. I talked about it in my, but no, I didn't, I think I didn't actually know about it.

**SS: Oh, okay.**

DC: I think it was done – my memory of this is very vague, Sarah. But I don't think it was full on – I think it was a group of people from ACT UP who decided to do that. It was a very – let me see if I can remember this. I think maybe it was raised in a meeting. And it was decided that a kind of real full-on protest was not called for. So it was done as a silent protest, if you remember. I don't know if you were part of it.

**SS: Oh, no, no.**

DC: As I recall, what it was was people went and sat in the exhibition and they had with them photographs that said things like, this is a picture of my father; he has AIDS.

**SS: Right. It was Alexis Danzig, yeah.**

DC: Yeah.

**SS: That's right.**

DC: And then if people wanted to talk to them about it, they would talk to them. But it was not a disruptive demonstration at all.

**SS: Now had you ever personally experienced an art exhibit as propaganda at the level that you engaged that exhibit? I guess what I'm asking is, your position in relationship to gallery art had really shifted, I think, at that point. Because previously, I'm not aware of you ever having done that kind of social critique of an exhibit.**

DC: Well, you know, all of my work in the '80s — the work that is published in my book *On the Museum's Ruins* — is about critical art practices and about questions of the art institution taken on by critical art practices. I had written a lot about photography prior to writing about the Nicholas Nixon photographs. And in fact, I think my first work at *October* had to do with questions of photography, and particularly the kind of photography that Nicholas Nixon makes. So I was well prepared to write that essay.

My own work on photography had been about postmodern photography practices that I saw as critical of mainstream — you can't even really call Nixon documentary. That work is really a kind of, it's much more about the photographer than

the subject. And in fact, that was the critique of documentary that had been made by artists like Allan Sekula and Martha Rosler. And I was very much part of those critical questions that were raised about photography.

So I'm not sure how to answer that, because I think that in some ways there is, I don't want to say that there's pure continuity between what I did with regard to art world practices and what I did with AIDS practices. But I think my ability to recognize the problems of how the mainstream art world was approaching questions of AIDS had to do with the work that I was already doing in the art world.

**SS: Okay. That makes sense. Because I always think of that, and in relation to "Harlem on My Mind" that big show at the Met.**

DC: Yeah, yeah.

**SS: Where the black community was like, no.**

DC: Yes, yes, right.

**SS: And to have gay people go to the museum and say –**

DC: No, right.

**SS: Now did you ever talk to Mr. Nixon directly?**

DC: No. But you know, I, heh heh heh. This is a funny story. But when I came to – it's very, very difficult to reproduce photographs; I mean to get the rights to them. I had to go to Nicholas Nixon to get the rights to reproduce them when I published *Melancholia and Moralism*. And he asked me in what context I would be using them.

**SS: So he wasn't aware.**

DC: No. He was not aware. Even though it had been published way before that, and yeah; no, he wasn't aware. So I sent him a letter, which sort of finessed

it. And I said, well, this is an article which is about representations of people with AIDS, and it contrasts negative, or it compares, I said, negative media images of people with AIDS with art-world representations of people with AIDS. Of course what I didn't say is that what's going on in your photographs is exactly what's going on in the negative media representations of people with AIDS. And he wrote me back, and said, oh, that sounds very interesting, you have my permission, so.

**SS: Oh, my goodness. But also, you were a member of Gran Fury.**

**So, I mean, another –**

DC: No, I wasn't. No no no.

**SS: Oh, you weren't?**

DC: No no no, no no. No no.

**SS: Oh, I didn't realize that.**

DC: Uh-uh. Uh-uh.

**SS: So you never were involved in actually making art, in ACT UP.**

DC: No, no. I was not.

**SS: Oh, okay.**

DC: No. I simply wrote about it. I have a fairly, no, I, my, my critical practice is my, my writing practice is my practice, I would say.

**SS: So were there any particular graphics used in ACT UP that you were felt were really on the wrong track, or highly problematic, or –**

DC: I can't think of any that I particularly, I mean, I wrote critically of one that was done, actually, by somebody who's become a quite good friend of mine after the days of ACT UP that I remember. I don't know if you know Alessandro Codagnone.

He's part of an artist team, [John] Lovett and Codagnone. But he did a piece after Clinton became president – he was in ACT UP at the time. And it was a group of posters, one of which said — they were all along these lines — “You can't wear a red ribbon if you're dead.” Do you remember those posters?

**SS: Right. The David Feinberg thing, yeah.**

DC: And “You can't join the military if you're dead.” The whole point was that, it was sort of, why doesn't anybody talk about AIDS anymore. And I felt that that sort of, I basically criticized them as being moralistic, in a certain way. That it was like saying that to suggest that other kinds of issues, other kinds of gay issues, should not trump AIDS issues was a kind of comparison that wasn't really a useful one. But it was a mild critique. And I actually, it was a very funny thing, because I gave the talk — it was a talk called, eventually I published it as “Don't Tell.” It was about the gays-in-the-military issue. And what I read as in fact a displacement of the sick body with the healthy body of a soldier. And I gave the talk at the Whitney program, and Alessandro was a student at the Whitney program at the time. And he argued with me, very intensely. And the result was that we became very good friends. I think his work is actually extremely interesting.

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In any case, I don't actually remember. I do remember some discussions on the floor about some posters that were rejected. I don't frankly remember what they were.

**SS: Okay.**

**JW: Can you hold that thought?**

**SS: We have to change tapes. Do you want to go to the bathroom?**

Tape III  
00:00:00

**SS: So when we interviewed Marlene McCarty, she had so many interesting things to say, and it was really an exciting interview. But one of her observations was that using graphics that referred to advertising was far more effective at the beginning of ACT UP, because the message was simpler. But as the message became more complex, she learned that advertising cannot convey a complex message.**

**And I'm wondering if you have an idea, sort of a narrative arc, about the evolution of graphics in ACT UP in relation to the evolution of the crisis, beyond the period of *AIDS Demo Graphics*.**

DC: Beyond the period of –

**SS: Yeah. Because that was still at the height of the movement, when you published that book.**

DC: Yeah, but it's hard for me to think of, actually. Because that ended with Stop the Church. So I actually can't, apart from – what was it? Where did we demonstrate that was not the FDA that was in Bethesda?

**SS: The NIH?**

DC: The NIH.

**SS: The CDC; the NIH.**

DC: Apart from that demonstration, I can't really even recall graphics.

**SS: Oh, okay. So you ceased to follow them, in a sense, after that – as closely, would you say?**

DC: Yes, I certainly did. I guess – this is just a question of memory, sorry. But it's just a question of where I sort of locate the end of, I mean, that's crazy. Because

obviously, Stop the Church, we were still at the Center. So it doesn't even include the entire time that we were at Cooper, where I certainly continued to go to meetings. But I don't, it's funny. I guess this is a question of just my own self-involvement. But I don't remember graphics beyond that.

**SS: Well, as we started to get into issues of women with AIDS; and there was like, you know, "Women don't get AIDS, they just die from it"; those kinds of slogans –**

DC: Right.

**SS: – and housing issues, and needle exchange –**

DC: Right.

**SS: – it started to be more difficult –**

DC: Yeah.

**SS: – to convey –**

DC: Everything became more difficult. I don't think it's a question of just graphics. I mean, for me, it was a question — once the organization began to, let's say, to take on the structural questions that AIDS only magnified, then everything became way more complex; and, I think, intractable, in some ways. Or let's say it was more despairing, because you couldn't — you could change — I heard recently a broadcast, on NPR, about the drug approval process now. And suddenly, I heard Gregg Bordowitz's voice, archival footage from the FDA demonstration. He was in an ACT UP, saying, 10 more days before we take over the FDA. And so there were places where we could really see change. Particularly in relation to how AIDS was talked about in mainstream press, for example. I think we really did have an effect on that. But changing poverty is like a

Tape III  
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whole other ballgame. And it seemed to me that that was, it was not only a question of the greater nuance that you needed to talk about certain kinds of issues. But just the more we came to understand the depth of the problems in this society with regard to healthcare; with regard to class; with regard to race; as they intersected with AIDS, the harder it became for us, I think, to take them on; and the more despairing it became.

**SS: So you're saying, then, that, like, the class divide is stronger than HIV?**

DC: No, I'm saying that, what I think I'm saying is that there was perhaps a period of time, between the founding of ACT UP and, say, 1990, '91, that we could just suspend thinking about the huge complexity of the problems of this society, and think more myopically about the urgencies of what we were confronting with regard to things like the drug approval process, or the fact that the president hadn't said the word "AIDS."

One of the things that I've always disagreed with Larry Kramer about is that he tends to demonize particular people — or did — with regard to AIDS issues; particularly government officials, who he considered our enemy. And the focus that that gave us; the fact that we could say, so-and-so is a bad guy. Stephen Joseph, health commissioner of New York City, is a bad guy; Ed Koch, Mayor of New York City, is a bad guy, because they're doing the wrong thing with regard to AIDS. That was a lot easier to do than to take on structural inequality, the larger, more complex analysis of politics. Wanting to kind of give a face to evil is something that governs a lot of political thought in this country in ways that are an effacement of structural questions.

So I think we allowed ourselves to do that for a period of time; to simplify things in order to attack them; and that it worked. But I think that that has a limited life span.

So that was part of it. I think that –

**SS: But also, poverty wasn't the dominant issue in the lives of many of the people in leadership in ACT UP.**

DC: Of course.

**SS: So it didn't seem integrated. But if you look at it from the point of view of people for whom that's integrated, it's a different kind of task, don't you think?**

DC: Indeed. Sure. Of course it is, yeah.

**SS: It's a perspective problem –**

DC: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**SS: Because I mean, postmodernism addresses the problem of explaining things or addressing things that cannot be summed up.**

DC: That's right, that's right. Of course.

**SS: So if you can only agitate around things that can be summed up, you can't create change.**

DC: That's right. Well – yeah. I think that that's, I think that eventually you have to be able to figure out, I mean, maybe that question actually makes me want to revise what I said to you –

**SS: Okay.**

Tape III  
00:10:00

DC: – a little bit. Because I think that maybe one of the great things that ACT UP was able to do was to figure out ways of putting a certain complexity into sloganeering. Silence Equals Death is an extremely vague, and at the same time, extremely resonant image text, that, I mean, the way I wrote about it in *AIDS Demo Graphics* was that it was partly because one doesn't necessarily immediately know what it means; what that pink triangle is, for example; why it's upside down, in relation to the way it was historically used; how it was historically used. That's not all right there. And yet, it became incredibly resonant for that very reason. So I think that there are ways, graphically and textually, to constitute a certain complexity. And I think that that was one of the achievements of the graphic and other representational work that ACT UP did. The invention of slogans; certainly the Fact Sheets, the way the Fact Sheets were broken down, and so on. But I guess maybe I still think that there is a certain limit to how far that can go. But that kind of activist work — that on-the-street, chanting, sloganeering demonstration — is, as we know, only one of the many, many, many things that ACT UP did.

**SS: Yes.**

DC: So we weren't limited just to that; I mean, to the kind of reduction of things into a chant or a slogan or a sound bite.

**SS: But that was our marketing.**

DC: Yeah.

**SS: That was our marketing.**

DC: That we were able to do that. You mean that we were able to –

**SS: That's how we recruited and that's how we –**

DC: Yeah, yes.

**SS: – branded ourselves.**

DC: Yes, I think that's true. And I think that the innovation there, there were several innovations. One of them was the professionalism of the graphic work; I mean the fact that it actually looked truly mass produced; that it looked like we were, I mean, I think when ACT UP first went to the gay rights march in Washington, which was in '87, I believe — '88, '87 –

**SS: I don't know.**

DC: – and everyone had the same T-shirts; that the group looked incredibly well organized; incredibly together. And it was just a question of T-shirts, which are pretty easy to get made. So it was partly savvy.

The question that you're asking me about the issues that both were and became obvious to us as more complex also has to do with a different set of questions that I tried to take on a bit with regard to questions of ambivalence and of mourning; questions that Gregg Bordowitz took on really, really beautifully in *Fast Trip, Long Drop*. Which, in some ways, was a critical work, a critical video, about the rhetorics, the early rhetorics used in ACT UP. It was a self-critical look at, or a self-reflexive look, at earlier moments of activism.

I said before that I felt a certain – distance from the organization from the time that I went. I didn't feel fully a participant, although I was very, I always went. And it was partly a question, I think, of my age. But I think it was also a question of a certain shyness and a sense of awkwardness in a group situation that I've always felt. The idea of, I don't know, having a microphone thrust in my face during a demonstration

always terrified me. This was captured, this feeling — it's one of the reasons I love this video called *Marta*, by Matt Ebert and Ryan Landry. I don't know if you know that, but

—

**SS: Jim knows it.**

DC: Ryan plays, in drag, a kind of young girl who comes to ACT UP. And it's all about the sort of awkwardness of not being able to choose which poster you're going to carry at the demonstration, and everything she does is a little awkward and a little weird. And for me, it exactly captures the way I felt in being an activist. It doesn't feel in any way natural to me.

Tape III  
00:15:00

And I came to realize that that was one of the things that I loved about ACT UP; was that it so often undercut or punctured or criticized the kind of heroics of activism, even as it also enacted it; the kind of, the macho character of activism. And I think that you need that, you need a self-assurance, you need to believe that you're right when you're shouting something on the street. But you also need to be self-reflexive about that, and to recognize ambivalences and complexities and sadnesses and — you have to recognize, at the same time as you are saying "AIDS is not a death sentence," that at that time, AIDS was a death sentence.

**SS: Although many of those people didn't die.**

DC: They didn't die, no.

**SS: No.**

DC: But they, they knew that it was likely that they would.

**SS: Right.**

DC: And we knew it was likely that they would. And many of them did.

**SS: Right.**

DC: And that was the reality that we were both grappling with and dealing with on a daily basis, and disavowing on a daily basis. So I think that that ambivalence, that sort of recognition/disavowal thing that was necessary to us – if it tilted in one direction or the other, it didn't work. It very rarely tilted in the direction of being just about sadness, let's say; except for those people who just stopped coming, couldn't handle it anymore. But the way in which the heroics got punctured by Rollerina in drag, on the floor; or various jokes that were made, that sort of punctured the kind of inflated rhetoric and so on; that's what made those meetings pleasurable to me. I think that I'm temperamentally just so put off by certainty, by political certainty. For me, the kind of moral certainty of George Bush is the most terrifying thing about him. And when I see it reproduced from the left, I'm, maybe not equally, but I am also put off by it.

**SS: Right. Although one has a state apparatus, and the other has no apparatus.**

DC: Right, right.

**SS: I just have a few kind of weird questions that I'm asking you because of your role as an art historian. Given all the artists that came out of ACT UP, and how many careers were created, in a sense, by ACT UP; I'm noticing now that East Village Studies is emerging, and that there's a canon being created around that period, and I'm observing how it's being created. And I'm seeing David Wojnarowicz being picked as the emblematic artist of that era. And I really wonder if you can explain – if you think that's happening, and why. And also, he really wasn't in ACT UP, actually. But –**

DC: Well, he came –

**SS: His legacy –**

DC: Right.

**SS: – in a way, represents ACT UP, on some level, even though he wasn't in it.**

DC: It's funny, because I – for me, if there's an artist associated with AIDS who is now being chosen as the most representative and important artist of a period, it would be Felix Gonzalez-Torres. I mean, he is, after all, our representative at the Venice Biennale this year; that is, the U.S. representative. And I think that that work, Felix's work, is very, very different from David Wojnarowicz's work. So I think it probably depends. Yes, in the East Village show, David Wojnarowicz would be, in some ways, the emblematic artist. Although still, another artist who really stands out from that period, and who has really come into his own since his death is Peter Hujar.

But I guess, I am assuming partly what you're asking me is what about the activist work from the period.

**SS: The canon, the creation of careers, and who ends up representing and why?**

DC: Right.

**SS: Yeah.**

DC: I think one of the things is that – the work that I was championing in *AIDS Demo Graphics*, for example; which really was the work produced from with the movement, and in relation to specific demonstrations and so on; it does have a short life span, because it so truly is tied to its moment and its issue. If it's a poster that has Ed

Koch's face on it, or Stephen Joseph's face on it; or even the pope; it's somebody who's not any longer the focus of our attention. It has a specificity and a contingency that make it possible for it to be only, let's say, an example or a representative of a moment. It doesn't have any; it can't become universal.

Now, I don't believe in universality, actually. Or I should say, I am critical of the notion of universality. I don't think that David Wojnarowicz's work is any more universal. But I think that it can transcend, because it is less specific, that it can transcend its moment more easily. And certainly this would be true of Felix's work, which is highly abstract, and can be read in many, many, many ways. And it can actually, AIDS can be completely read out of it, in most cases. Although it was motivated, much of it, by his experience of living with AIDS, by the experience of his lover dying from AIDS, and so on.

**SS: But isn't his rebirth really because of Andrea Rosen and the whole machinery behind the artist's catalogue, and people keeping work alive because it's in certain collections, or certain kinds of people have investments in it?**

DC: No, obvious-

**SS: Or do you think it just emerges –**

DC: No no no.

**SS: No.**

DC: Obviously, the market has a lot to do with – I mean, the market has very, very much to do, the various forms of investment in art have very much to do with what we see and how much attention is given to it. I don't think it can be reduced to that, however.

I think that there is much more going on discursively. I mean, for example, since I teach in a graduate program that deals with questions of contemporary art, partly, I see who my students are interested in, and what kinds of interests they bring to certain kinds of work. And Felix Gonzalez-Torres would be somebody that, over the years, a number of my students have expressed a lot of interest in. Now, that isn't completely separable from Andrea Rosen's pushing of that career. I chose Felix Gonzalez-Torres for the cover of my book [*Melancholia and Moralism*] because I felt that it was a kind of, because I didn't want anything too specific, because my book covered a whole era of my writing about AIDS. I also did it, frankly, as a kind of gesture of kind of reconciliation, I think, with regard to questions of the elegiac and so on, which I had sort of polemicized against in my early AIDS writing, and which I have come to value a lot more as time has gone on. I never did not like Felix Gonzalez-Torres's work. I always did like it. I'm more ambivalent about Wojnarowicz's work. There's work that I like and work that I find less interesting. And for me, it's always complicated by the fact that the East Village art scene meant something very specific in the debate about artistic practice in the 1980s. It was about the return of neo-expressionism and things that I actually very much opposed. It was also about the gentrification of a neighborhood.

**SS: Right.**

DC: So it was complicated.

**SS: I just have one of those kind of questions. I don't want to wear you out. I'm sorry.**

DC: No, [LAUGHS].

**SS: Like, you're the man, and here I am. You talk about the professionalism of the graphics. And I think part of the appeal was everyone always suspected that homosexuals controlled graphics anyway.**

DC: {LAUGHS}

Tape III  
00:25:00

**SS: That they seized the means of production for themselves, and made everything look so beautiful. But AIDS video had a really opposite aesthetic. It didn't look professional; it wasn't comforting, in the same way that the graphics were. Can you talk about the juxtaposition of those two art movements inside ACT UP?**

DC: Yeah. I mean, actually, there are videos about AIDS that were extremely aesthetically professional — Tom Kalin's work, for example; *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether* is an extremely gorgeous work. There's quite a canon, actually, of — I think Stashu Kybartas's *Danny* is an extremely lush and beautiful work. But yes, a lot of it is gritty street activist work. And I think that partly it's because that's, well, partly because *Testing the Limits* was a model, I think. I think that tape, being a kind of first, became a kind of activist model.

I think they served very different purposes, probably. That is, in some ways — although I made the argument about the graphic work that its primary audience was internal. That is, that it was about articulating our politics to us, for us. But it was also obviously external. It also articulated our politics to the world. And although video also did that, video did it in a very, very different context. That is, it was not a GP, a general-public context. That video was not going to, except in very rare cases, get

broadcast out to a general audience. It was going to be shown internally; it was going to be shown on a kind of festival circuit.

But I actually, until you asked the question, I hadn't really thought that much about it. But it's very, I think in general, what you're saying is true. Certainly DIVA TV and a lot of the – I don't know, it's hard to think. Because if you think of Jean Carlomusto's work — the Cosmo tape, for example — it's really professional, in a way. I mean, it has that street activist grit about it. But it's really smart; formally smart. It's very savvy about a history of documentary, I think.

**SS: But your insight really helps me in seeing that in a way, the video is us talking to each other, in the way that the graphics are the public face.**

DC: Yeah.

**SS: And that's a distinction I didn't have before, so that's really helpful.**

So I'm at the end. I have one last question.

DC: Okay, good.

**SS: Which we ask everybody. Which is, just looking back, particularly from the areas of ACT UP that were most important to you, what do you see as ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think was its most significant disappointment?**

DC: Its greatest achievement and its greatest –

**SS: Disappointment.**

DC: Disappointment. You know, there's, when I think about achievement, there's both what it publicly achieved and what it achieved for me, which are two different things.

What it publicly achieved, I think, was to — and maybe this is also, in some ways, about me, because what I worked on was questions of representation; what I understand best, what I think about professionally is questions of representation — I think that ACT UP was able to pretty much change the nature of how AIDS was represented in U.S. culture; how it was talked about, how it was thought about, how it was reported. In a period of about five years, I think there was an enormous shift in the sort of hideous misrepresentation, or vile representation of people with AIDS and people struggling with illness; people dying of the illness; to a more generous, a more true, a more thoughtful kind of representation. Things have regressed; it's not that battles won are won forever. But we saw something really shift in our culture.

Tape III  
00:30:00

There are other kinds of achievements that are extraordinary. I think, in some ways, the fact that healthcare has been so much at the forefront of political discussion — although we certainly have not made gains with regard to it — but the fact that we have to talk about healthcare in this country now; I think that's a shift that is partly attributed to ACT UP.

For me, personally, ACT UP was the place where I felt a part of what is called a community, in a way that I never did before and I never have subsequently. Even though I feel senses of community in various places in my life, and have, there was something, there was an excitement to this community, there was a sense of belonging. And I have permanent friendships that I made in ACT UP that are central to my life. And

it happened that when I – it was during the time that I became a part of ACT UP that I, in some ways, lost a big part of my other community, my art, I mean – that a certain group of friends essentially abandoned me, or rejected me. And so it was incredibly important to me personally that I made those friendships and that I have those friendships. But beyond that, it was just, there was a sense of belonging, doing something together, caring about each other, that, you know, I'm skeptical of the use of the word "community." But I do feel that it made sense to call it a community at the time, and it was enormously important to me to experience that, to experience what belonging to a group that is trying to effect change can mean in one's life.

It's something like not feeling alienated, or something, which is really, really hard to do. The other thing that I think was an amazing achievement of ACT UP was to have politics become queer. I mean, to have politics queered was, because politics has always been so unqueer; I mean, left politics has always been, in some ways, so, it's had its, its truly moralistic and sexually regressive side, although it's also at times had sexually progressive sides. The kind of pleasures that can be associated with political activism, even in the face of truly gruesome problems and truly terrible things happening in our midst; it was really important to be able to experience that pleasure at that time. I mean, I think it was lifesaving in more ways than one. Even for people who weren't dying, it was lifesaving to be able to stand up against the kind of vilification that we were experiencing.

Mm, disappointments, or failures? They seem to me to be the disappointments and failures of the whole history of left activism to me. The kind of moralism that eventually gets the better of us; in which antagonisms of various kinds of

identities get more and more intractable and fixed and the way we all, we'd tear each other apart in our sense of being morally superior to each other. That's an area where I think we've made maybe more progress in theory than in practice; how to think beyond those fixed identities, and the kinds of antagonisms that issue from them.

**SS: Thank you so much, Douglas.**

DC: Yeah.

**SS: Thank you. Hope that was okay.**

DC: Yeah. I, I thought you were, you're very –