

# **A C T U P O R A L H I S T O R Y P R O J E C T**

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Interviewee: **Avram Finkelstein**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Avram Finkelstein  
January 23, 2010

**SARAH SCHULMAN: – we start is you just tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.**

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Oh, god, why do you start with the hard questions? Avram Finkelstein. I'm fifty-eight. It's the twenty-third of January, 2010, and this is my house—it was actually my dad's house; I inherited it—in Long Island Sound Beach.

**SS: Near historic Port Jefferson, as we discovered.**

AF: Near historic Port Jefferson and the ferry to Bridgeport, if you have to make a quick getaway.

**SS: So where were you born, Avram?**

AF: I was born in Brooklyn.

**SS: Aha.**

AF: Yeah.

**SS: Which neighborhood?**

AF: Well, my mother doesn't remember. It's very funny. If you're Jewish and you have relatives from the old country in Russia, in particular, there's a lot you don't know about your ancestry, but it's very strange to think that my own parents might not know where I was born. The hospital apparently burned down, so we never went back to it. It wasn't something that people pointed out. My mother doesn't remember.

**SS: Were your parents born here?**

AF: Yeah.

**SS: Now, why did they choose to name you Avram?**

AF: Well, I was named after my mother's father, who died just before I was born.

**SS: But they didn't want to Americanize it?**

AF: No.

**SS: Do you know why?**

AF: My parents are Jewish and very proud of it, and, yeah, there was never an attempt to Americanize my dad's family's name either, Finkelstein. It's a burden, Avram Finkelstein, and even in New York where there's so many Jews, I still to this day, if you have any doubts about whether there's anti-Semitism in America, still to this day when people ask me my name and I tell them, they say, "No, come on, really, what is it?" *{LAUGHTER}*

**SS: So where did you grow up?**

AF: Well, we moved to Long Island, to Jericho.

**SS: When you were like a little –**

AF: I was a little kid, yeah. I was still in my crib. Then we moved to Westbury, which is the middle of the island, kind of the middle lengthwise and widthwise. That's where I went to high school.

**SS: What did your parents do?**

AF: Well, my dad has a checkered work history. Actually, he booked show-business acts for the IWO.

**SS: Do you want to explain what that is?**

AF: He represented, I swear to god – What was his name? Not Professor. Brother Theodore. Do you remember Brother Theodore?

**SS: Oh, god, like a standup comic on TV.**

AF: He called himself a standup tragedian. He was rumored to have escaped Austria with the help of Albert Einstein. He was just like a show business oddity.

My dad also represented Russian puppet troupes. He booked that kind of thing. But he lost his shirt when they booked a Russian puppet troupe that cancelled and they'd sold out, so they had to return all that money. So that was the end of that.

**SS: What was the IWO?**

AF: Well, it's either the International Workers Order or some people say it's the International Workers Organization. So, it depends.

So after that gig, he sold art for a while. Then he sold clothing in the men's department of Abraham and Strauss. Then he was business manager for a school for developmentally disabled children. He kind of had a lot of jobs and never exactly succeeded at any of them.

Tape I  
00:05:00

**SS: What about your mother?**

AF: My mom, on the other hand, was a research scientist. She started out as a lab technician for—I think it was International Starch Products and found that she had an aptitude towards it and eventually went for her doctorate in biochemistry, microbiology. She did cancer research for a while and she did pediatrics research.

In fact, in this house she inadvertently diagnosed my boyfriend with AIDS because the night that I brought him here, the weekend that I brought him here to meet my folks, he spiked a fever. We were sleeping on the living room floor right here, right where we're sitting now. This had happened several times before, but it had never

happened in public. He would have that thing where he would spike a very high fever in the middle of the night and be gone in the morning. My mom was not a doctor, but she was a very gifted diagnostician, and she was the one who, whenever something was wrong with somebody in the family, she would immediately know what it was. There would be this long dance of her not wanting to say it and sort of like telling us, the nuclear part of the family, what she felt was wrong, and then it would turn out to be true. Epstein's Barr, like whatever it was, you wouldn't have even heard of it and she would know what it was. So we would suffer in silence as the disease unfolded.

So the next morning, I asked my mom, I said, "I don't know what's wrong with Don. This is not the first time it's happened. He has some sort of undiagnosed sinusitis and then he has dermatological manifestations, but nobody's able to diagnose it."

She said, "I think there's something wrong with his immune system."

**SS: Had you heard of AIDS by that point?**

AF: Well, it wasn't called AIDS at that point. It was still called GRID. And, yeah, we were very aware of it.

That area where our kitchen is, was a walled-in kitchen, and we were doing the dishes, and there was that standoff, that it's very hard to explain that a mother/son conversation that is also a scientific conversation or a diagnostic consultation. So it was very layered. My ears pricked up when she said it, and I also had to evaluate on the spot whether she knew what she was saying also. So all of those layers happened right over there.

**SS: Right here.**

AF: Yeah.

**SS: When you were at Westbury High, which came first in your life, artist, homosexual, or politico?**

AF: That's a really good question, Sarah. I think that it's very weird, because I was attracted to men my entire childhood, but I wasn't out. I didn't come out until I went to college, which I guess isn't that common. But I was one of the freaks in town. I had hair like down to here and did a lot of drugs and was the artist. I was identified as the hippie fag artist, but I didn't own up to the fag part. All the other parts, yes. And to add another level of irony to it, all of my friends were gay, all of them. I was the town queens' best friend.

**SS: What kind of artwork were you making?**

AF: It's funny, because, as you know, I'm writing, and I also found, when my dad died and we were going through things, he kept a lot of things that I did that I didn't know he kept. My first political poster I actually did in high school. We were learning offset lithography, and I did a poster. I wish I had it to show you. It's a Whitehead quote, and it says "Sheep who died silently are no useless victims," and it's sort of an abstract. It's an antiviolence poster, and I did that in high school. So it was political art.

**SS: But also so you've been on this "Silence = Death" theme since you were very young.**

Tape I  
00:10:00

AF: Oh, yeah, a bazillion years, yeah.

**SS: Do you know where you first really took in that broad concept?**

AF: Of that poster or the idea of the political poster?

**SS: Yeah, that idea that sheep and silence.**

AF: Well, I know it's very funny, the word "silence," isn't it? The quote came out of Marshall McLuhan, who I was influenced by and also you could say there's a direct line between Marshall McLuhan and the "Silence = Death" poster. There definitely is.

I'm a red diaper baby, so politics was practically the family business. My dad worked with Ethel Rosenberg, and they were at the Robson riots. We used to go to folkdance retreats. My mom and dad met at an IWO camp, summer camp, that his mother was the cook at. And we had a lot of friends in the family who were WPA artists, so the idea that art should be political or have a purpose, it was woven into my swaddling clothes.

**SS: Were they really in the Party or were they fellow travelers?**

AF: There's controversy about that. My sister thinks yes, and my mom thinks no, but she – This is a very funny story. But the Rosenbergs spent – We were members of the utopic community upstate, Golden's Bridge. It was one of those Lefty utopian communities. It was like a collective environment, and a lot of artists and a lot of people from the old country and a lot of Party members lived there, and the Rosenbergs summered there one summer. After that, people were pulled in for questioning.

So my mother was very scrupulous about not involving us in any of this, because if they came for them, she didn't want us to be in jeopardy. My brother, who was a TV geek – I am, too, but I wasn't anywhere near like my brother was. There was a show called *The FBI* with Efrem Zimbalist Jr., back in, I guess it was the early sixties. He was the kind of kid who would just repeat ad nauseam things that he'd heard on TV,

and to this day he can quote TV shows from 1958. He's like an idiot savant of television. So he was obsessed with *The FBI*, and she started buying him books so that if they came for her and my dad, they could at least say, "Oh, no, we didn't indoctrinate them."

**SS: But does your mother say that she was not a Party member?**

AF: She says, whenever I ask her about my dad, she's like, "I don't think so. No, I don't think so." But this is the woman who, the day that Kent State happened, told me to pack a bag, keep it under my bed, and the next step, when they start gunning down students, is a Fascist takeover, military takeover, and they would get me out of the country in the underground railway. I swear to God that's what she said. So I don't even know what she meant by that. I don't know how a parent gets the idea of an underground and isn't more involved than she's saying. My dad was also very coy about it.

**SS: So were you sent to Socialist youth groups?**

AF: No. We went to science and art camp and did that whole leg of it. Like when everyone else went away to go boating and canoeing and do handcrafts, I was learning Russian and studying Wagner and the humanities and like that.

**SS: What was the name of your camp?**

AF: It was just called the science and art camp, and they rotated it to different high schools on Long Island. So while everyone else went away from school, we went not only *to* school during the summer, we went to high school. We went from being elementary students during the year to being in a high school environment in our downtime. So, no, we never were involved in any Socialist schools, but all the other activities were in that direction.

**SS: So how did being gay fit into this political world view?**

Tape I  
00:15:00

AF: Well, as I say, I've been thinking a lot about this and writing about it recently, and the truth is that the politics of my family is something that I'm incredibly proud of, but like a lot of Lefties, their myopia about homophobia was something that they just didn't see, that was there but they didn't see. I think anyone who has been involved in political organizing in Left Wing causes and groups find that there's this dividing line about being gay, and it exists in my family. We had friends of the family who were gay, but when they found out I was gay, my dad cried. He cried.

**SS: How old were you?**

AF: I was in college when I came out to them. I got so sick of playing the pronoun game, and I had fallen deeply in love with somebody I'd met at art school. He was a drunk, and we had built a ceramic studio in the country in a barn, and I went back to Boston after the summer, and he stayed there to continue working. He fell asleep. We had a sleeping loft that was the barn loft, and it just had a wooden stair, and he fell asleep with a cigarette, wrapped in a blanket, and the cigarette caught the blanket, and the blanket was smoldering. He woke up and was so startled, he fell off the loft and was knocked unconscious. So he was very, very badly burned.

So I was going through this, this first love who had third-degree burns, and not being able to tell my family about it. And I just thought, "Enough. I can't pretend that I'm seeing somebody. They're really great. I really like them." You know, that thing. So that's when I came out.

**SS: So from the beginning you've had all of these endangered partners, from the beginning.**

AF: Yeah, yeah.

**SS: So you had to get your family involved right away.**

AF: Well, yeah. I guess that is a writer's view of it. {LAUGHTER}

**SS: Always looking for the trope.**

AF: Yeah, yeah, I am too. And you're correct.

**SS: Where did you go to school?**

AF: College?

**SS: College and art school.**

AF: Well, here's another part of this trope. I went to the Museum School. I was on the waiting list for Cooper Union, which was, since I was a little kid, I can't tell you why, where I wanted to go to school. It was free, is of course why. My folks encouraged me to it, but we didn't have money. My mom was a research scientist, but my dad, as I said, didn't work all the time. There were times when we grocery shopped once a week, and when the food was up, the food was up. So there'd be towards the end of the week an empty fridge. We didn't have a well-cushioned life. So I think that's where the Cooper Union thing came. But I was on the waiting list and there were sixty spots, and I was number ninety-three, and decided to look at other options.

The Museum School at the time was \$3,000 a year, which I worked during the summers to pay for. My mom paid for the rest of it. It wasn't expensive, and I don't know how people go to school now. I don't know how people go to school. Sixty thousand dollars for a year? I don't know who goes to school anymore. But it wasn't that easy, anyway.

So we went up. The Museum School had a good film department, and I actually entered school as a filmmaker. Sorry, guys. But the Museum School was an old

sort of nineteenth-century academy at the time, and they had just transferred, morphed into an experimental program. I think it was two years old, and it was review boards instead of tests, free-form academic environment. And as a result of the student strikes, they had decided to keep the school open for twenty-four hours a day and it was essentially a poster factory for the rest of the schools in the Boston area.

Tape I  
00:20:00

I went up with my mom to look at the school, and it was configured very different from how it is now. It was basically an old industrial warehouse. I think it was a machine shop or something, a factory or something. You walked into the lobby, it was kind of an impoverished-looking Beat-style gallery with beaverboard walls and a long hallway. And lining both sides of the hallway, two or three deep, were posters, silk-screened posters, drying. All of the studios off of that main hallway were filled with people twenty-four hours a day, silk-screening posters, and then they would come from the other schools in the area to pick them up, and they would use them to wheatpaste around town or for demonstration posters. I walked in the door, and I smelled that ink and I saw those posters, and I looked up at my mom and I said, "This is where I'm going."

**SS: And because your mother was your mother, she said, "Yes!"**

AF: Totally, totally. But the thing that I've also left out of this story is in high school the town of Westbury was originally a Quaker settlement, and we went to a lot of Quaker events, Quaker fairs and things like that. It was very close to where we lived, in fact, between my high school and my home, so when I walked, I walked through the Quaker graveyard, through the Quaker meetinghouse and became very involved with people who went to the Quaker school, Friends World College, which, oddly enough,

was in a military barrack. It was an abandoned military barrack that they were using as a school. So all of my friends were involved with the Quakers and I spent a lot of my time in high school, my spare time, at the campus of the Quaker school.

During the student strikes in France, people came back with posters, and we started reproducing them there. So I learned how to silk screen, and I was silk screening strike posters while I was still in high school. So when I saw that at the Museum School, I was like, “Yes, this is where I’m going.”

**SS: So after you graduated, did you come back to New York?**

AF: I stayed in Boston for about three years and then I moved back to New York.

**SS: Now, when you moved back to New York, what was your relationship to the gay community? What year are we in now?**

AF: Well, we’re talking – I went to school, it was a four-year program, but I was accelerated. I graduated in three, and then I stayed there for three years, so it must have been ’76 or ’77.

I think that here’s the thing. I like to say that I flunked fag. By that I mean — I’m on a slippery slope here. There is a legitimate critique of Larry [Kramer]’s book *Faggots*, but, truthfully, the god’s honest truth, I had a very similar experience of the seventies. I didn’t fit in at all. I wasn’t good at it. I didn’t know when people were cruising me. I didn’t know how to cruise. I didn’t have that experience of it. So when I moved back to New York – And plus, it was Boston. So Boston was kind of like a mini New York. They suffered from that complex of being a satellite city. I was very active in the gay community there.

**SS: Did you work with organizations?**

AF: No political organizations, but I was raised by drag queens, and in particular the ones who – Well, actually, that’s where I met Nan Goldin and David Armstrong, and we were members of the same circle of friends. One of the key figures who, out of respect for the fact she’s married and is leading a life as a woman, I’m not going to mention her name, but she was a Radical Fairy. She had lived in a Radical Fairy commune. So I would say that my gay life there was a political one, although it didn’t involve political organizations.

**SS: Mark Morrisroe, did you know him?**

AF: No.

**SS: So then you came back to New York. So you’re saying you were alienated from the scene.**

AF: From the scene, and I was very invested in the rock scene. I’m a rock dog. I’m not a disco person.

**SS: So what kind of music were you in?**

AF: Boston is a music town, so we used to see the Cars. We saw Blondie, I remember, when all of the Museum School students were like, “There’s this band coming up from RISD [Rhode Island School of Design].” We thought RISD was like the scum of the earth. The Museum School was very snobby about that sort of thing, and we didn’t take RISD seriously. But there was this band, Talking Heads, and everyone was like, “Oh, you should hear them. They’re opening for Blondie.” So, that was my life.

**SS: I mean, being in New York and being a Blondie fan is still being part of a gay scene.**

AF: It is. We were art fags. We were art fags, and it was heavily involved in the music scene.

**SS: What was your job when you came to New York?**

AF: Well, I was an art director for Vidal Sassoon for twenty years.

**SS: Okay, so that's a gay world too.**

AF: Yeah. In fact, I remember when I came out to my dad and told him. The way I fell into hair was I was picked up by some guy and I was still in college. I was very naïve to this sort of thing, to the world of hair. So after we fucked, I said, "So what do you do?"

And he said, "Well, I'm a hairdresser."

And I said, "Really? What's that like?"

And he said, "Oh, you know." He sort of described it.

Then I said, "Can you make money doing that?" And he told me how much money you could make, and I kind of flipped out.

After college, the College Placement Office got me a job at the Women's Educational and Industrial Union, the first women's union in the United States in Boston, and I was, p.s., the first male employee they had ever hired, and I designed needlepoints in their needlepoint shop, but there was no money in it, and I didn't really see it as a career.

And when this guy told me that you could make money as a hairdresser, I went home and I spoke to my mom, and I said, "I understand that you could make a decent living at this. Would you be willing to send me to hairdressing school?"

And she said, "Yeah," so I did it.

When my dad heard I wanted to do it, I wouldn't say he was in tears, but he was flabbergasted. And I was raised as the artist in the family. I had that converse experience of people's family discouraging their art careers. It was never a question that I was going to be the artist. And he was horrified and he said, "I don't know why you want to do this." He said, "You know, just because you're gay doesn't mean you have to become a hairdresser."

And I said, "That's not it, Dad." I said, "It's a good living, plus I like being in an environment where I can be gay and feel safe about it."

**SS: So can you give us a little insight into the world of Vidal Sassoon in the seventies?**

AF: It's possible to be good at something that you hate, and that is actually the only way I could describe it. I was completely ambivalent to it. They're very dogmatic about it. They think they're artists, but I know what art is. Hair is not art. There's hair. Art. There are elements of it in hair. But I went to school during the height of situationism, and because of my politic, was deeply ambivalent about the art world anyway. So it was an okay segue for me. I felt like it was an honest way to make a living. It was working-class. Truthfully, it was a little freaky for me. When I went to hairdressing school, half of the people there were there from rehab programs. I'd go down to the locker to get a comb, and there'd be some guy, like, burning his arm with a cigarette. I mean, it was rough. It was really rough.

**SS: Were you working at that on Madison Avenue? Didn't they use to have that –**

AF: They moved from there by the time I was there. But, anyway, I quickly became an art director there, so I traveled a lot for them and I worked with Vidal. I did a lot of television work with him.

**SS: So, for someone like him, what was his view of his homosexuality?**

AF: Vidal?

**SS: Yeah.**

AF: He wasn't gay.

**SS: He wasn't? He was straight?**

AF: No, Vidal's not gay. Yeah. Vidal is one of those — the myth about the hair world is that it's a gay world. It really isn't. It's very straight, and there are a lot of gay people in it, but it's very straight. I wouldn't say it's homophobic. It isn't homophobic. But there are a lot of straight hairdressers and they're very macho.

Tape I  
00:30:00

**SS: So did it give you access to a lot of wealthy women?**

AF: I wouldn't say so, because, truthfully, as I was starting to say, I never believed in it. It wasn't something that I wanted to do or really believed in, and there were a lot of people who are in that world who do believe in it. Like florists and chefs and hairdressers and interior designers, there's this gravitational pull of wealth, but I never for a second was deluded into thinking that if I had a client who had money, it was my money. It was their money. But, moreover, I wasn't very good in that kind of context. I didn't care enough about it. So all of my clients were working women. They were all career women. I didn't work for the carriage trade.

**SS: So you're there for a number of years, and then you said that you and Don were aware of GRID before you realized that he was infected.**

AF: Yeah.

**SS: Do you remember how you became aware of it?**

AF: I think it was probably the *New York Native*, but you couldn't be gay and live in New York during that period and not have heard of it, and everyone was talking about it, and Don and I were talking about it.

**SS: Did you know anyone who had gotten sick at that point?**

AF: No.

**SS: So he was the first person you knew who had it.**

AF: He was the first person I knew, and he started showing signs of it in 1980, and he died in 1984.

**SS: Can you take us through a little bit what it was like to be dealing with being infected in that era when there were no treatments and it didn't even have a name?**

AF: It was terrible. Don was a musician and didn't have insurance, and the first time he was too sick for us to cope with, he was taken to Bellevue. We called the ambulance and they took him to Bellevue, which has a well-deserved reputation as a snake pit. It did then; I don't know if that's still true. And it was horrible. They wouldn't bring him food in the room. They left it in the hallway. They wouldn't even pick up his trays when we put them back in the hallway. It was masks. It was gloves. There was blood underneath his bed from a previous patient. They didn't clean it. We brought in cleaning supplies and cleaned the room. He was terrified, and it was terrible.

**SS: Did you have a doctor?**

AF: No, he didn't have a doctor, and there was no test for it. I think by the time of his first hospitalization it had been named AIDS, but nobody knew anything about it. Well, that's not true. Obviously, there were people who knew a great deal about it, but we didn't know anyone who did, and none of the doctors we became involved with had a special — it wasn't their area.

**SS: So what did you do? Did you chase treatments?**

AF: Well, truthfully, I think there was a tremendous amount of denial involved, spearheaded by Don in particular, and it was a secret. He wouldn't let me tell anyone. He was a musician, and you could say that he was in some ascendancy. He had co-written a song that Aretha Franklin had covered. He was co-writing with Luther Vandross, who died many years after him. He co-wrote with Desmond Child, who had written a lot of KISS songs, like number-one songs. So he was like a musician's musician, and he sang backup. He was afraid nobody would insure a tour that he was on, which probably was true, if they knew that he had AIDS or thought that he might have it, and so it was a secret. And truthfully, I wasn't even allowed to tell our friends, our closest friends, until I realized he wasn't coming out of that hospital the last time, and then I just did, started telling people.

**SS: So you guys didn't know anybody else who was sick?**

AF: No.

**SS: None of your other friends. So what happened when you told your friends?**

Tape I  
00:35:00

AF: Well, the terror of it is, actually — I happened to stay with Don the last night before they put him into the ICU, and it was the death rattle. It was the whole

thing. He didn't know I was there. It was terrible. It was a long night. But he rallied in the morning and I think we all thought maybe it was okay. His fever broke; he rallied. His grandmother came, his aunt came. Everyone knew there was a chance that this was it, but it also seemed like he might be okay.

I had convinced myself, as many people did in those days, to believe what doctors were saying and that it wasn't necessarily a death sentence, which in those early days actually was somewhat of a lie. So later that day, they admitted him to the ICU, and I realized that if anyone wanted to see him, this might be the last chance, so I started telling people. I told two of his closest friends, one of whom – Well, Chris Lione was Peter Lione's brother. Peter Lione was one of Don's closest friends. So I told them, and Peter was furious, but we took the bus out to New Jersey, which is where Don was, and by then he was in the ICU and they wouldn't let us in to see him. Peter snuck in anyway and realized that he was really bad. So we waited there, but they wouldn't let us in, and they just said, "Really, there's nothing you two can do. You should go home." And we did go home, thinking we were just going to come back in the morning, and he died that night. So they didn't really have a whack at dealing with it. It was over by the time his friends knew.

**SS: So then what? What did you do after that, that they're telling you he's dead? Did you start telling everybody?**

AF: Yeah, yeah, but it all happened so quickly. Truthfully, if it weren't for Chris, I don't know what would have become of me. He insisted that I come home with him, and I slept on their sofa for a month and basically let my friends tell me what to do, because I was shell-shocked, to put it mildly.

**SS: Were you concerned about your own health at that point?**

AF: Of course, yeah. I think the presumption was that that was my fate, but there's another lesson to be learned here, which is the lesson that everyone later in the AIDS crisis understood and the world outside of the gay community began to understand, which is you're not allowed in the hospital. You are an ancillary appendage to the doings of the family world. All of those terrible lessons I learned before Rock Hudson was sick, before people knew what the word meant, before people said it out loud. It's hard to realize that there was a time when it was a word you couldn't say out loud.

**SS: Do we need to change tapes? Okay.**

**SS: So I said I didn't know that you knew Chris Lione that long, and you said—**

Tape II  
00:00:00

AF: That I actually met Chris through Don. He was Peter's brother. Mark Simpson was a close friend of Don's next-door neighbor.

**SS: What's Don's last name?**

AF: Yoll. It wasn't Don's next-door neighbor. Peter and Chris' next-door neighbor met Brian Dowell, who also became a very good friend, was a friend of Don's. Basically, Chris and Annette took me in. They told me what to do. They made me food. I basically was human aspic and they held me together. Annette's children were very good friends with Mark Simpson, and I think Mark knew Michael Nesline through a friend that the three of them – the three of them were from Austin, and Mark and Michael had known each other through a mutual friend, Joe Hollis.

Mark and I decided that we were going to hook Chris up on a blind date with Michael Nesline, so we introduced Michael to Chris, and they had a date and it

didn't go well, but he became a member of the family as well. Joe Hollis, in fact, died shortly after Don did, and I've only recently discovered he had Don's job. There were so many interconnections between all of these stories that I'm now telling you. But after Don died, I was in freefall for a couple of years. If you're interested, we can talk more about that.

But about a year and a half before ACT UP, I was trying to get involved politically in New York, because I knew that there was a political crisis involved in AIDS, and if it weren't for the *New York Native*, I wouldn't have thought that anyone else thought of it. There were organizations, of course, doing work around it. I just didn't know any and they weren't national enough for me to know. There were support groups. There were things like that, but there wasn't a political face to it. So I started looking for one, and I went to the Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights meetings. I went to GLAAD demos. I did all of that. Did you ever go to those Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights meetings?

**SS: Once.**

AF: It was like a ring of eight people in the Community Center kind of all staring at their knuckles, very grizzled, and basically talking about Democratic Party politics in New York State and local lesbian, gay issues. They were not talking about AIDS.

After the frustration of that, I actually met Michael Perelman at a GLAAD demo. It may have been the Hardwick demo. I don't think it was. It was a judge. I don't recall. I think it may have been one of the spinoff demos surrounding the Hardwick decision. It became obvious to me that there was no place to deal with these issues.

I had a close friend who I knew from the music and club scene, Jorge Socarras, and Jorge, a friend of his had just become sick, and he knew Don. Actually, he co-wrote some songs with him. He did some work with Don. I introduced them, because Jorge had a band called Indoor Life, which he worked with Patrick Cowley, actually, who did some of Sylvester's stuff when they were in San Francisco. So I had introduced them, and Don really liked his music, and they co-wrote together.

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But because Don's death and his illness, up until his death, were secret, Jorge didn't know that he was sick. But afterwards, he, of course, did. I'd made dinner plans with Jorge and he brought Oliver Johnston along with him. I have no idea why. Oliver, for anyone who remembers him – Well, I don't know that anyone – You'd have to know Jorge also, but you couldn't have two diametrically opposed personas at a dinner table. Oliver was a southern boy, blond, one of those people who wore statement glasses, kind of one of those dandies, but with specious taste, and Jorge was like a vampire. He was dark and intense. I had no idea why Oliver was at the table with us.

We started, and I thought, "Well, maybe Jorge's interested in him." I asked Jorge about this recently, and he has no memory of the dinner. But I couldn't figure it out. We started talking about AIDS, and it became very obvious that we all needed a place to be to continue this conversation, so we decided to form a group. None of us had been in a group therapy situation, so we didn't feel like that's what we were talking about, and we didn't know at the time, but we formed a consciousness-raising group. We didn't know how big it needed to be, but we decided we would all start by each bringing a person that the other people didn't know and see how it went. We were going to talk about issues of being gay in the age of AIDS. That was the idea behind it.

So I brought Chris Lione, Jorge brought Brian Howard, and Oliver brought Charles Kreloff, and that was the group that we met every week. We had a potluck. We'd be at a different house every week. We'd all bring a course. We met every week and we talked about our fears and dating and loneliness and being gay and AIDS. But almost every week we would end up, the conversation would end up talking about politics. So it became very obvious to me, after about six months of that, that we were a political consciousness-raising group as well, and that's how the poster idea came about.

**SS: How did it come about?**

AF: I wasn't sure if you were finished with the other questions.

**SS: How many of the six of you were artists?**

AF: Well, none of us were artists, but there were four graphic designers.

**SS: Out of six?**

AF: Yeah. And Jorge was a writer, and I was an art director. But, of course, I'm saying I wasn't an artist, but I didn't identify as one.

Because of my background and because I remember that period during the student mobilization in the antiwar movement — Do you remember Greenwich Village back then?

**SS: Yes.**

AF: Eighth Street was literally papered with posters, manifestos and posters and diatribes. It was literally like a billboard, the entire corridor between the East and West Village, and I remember that as a very vital way that people communicated in the street. It was free. Everyone did it. I remember it as a part of my adolescence. So I

thought, well, this would be a good strategy for us, where we feel like we're in a raft in the middle of the sea. I didn't know whether other people felt the same way about it, but there really was no outlet for it, and we wanted to be heard and to see also if we could stimulate some conversation about it. So I actually suggested it to the group. I said what I've just said to you. I said, "I'll pay for the poster if you all will split the cost of putting it up, and why don't we work on it." And everyone agreed to it, and then for the next six months we tossed around ideas that eventually became the "Silence = Death" poster. But it was originally conceived as a campaign, so that was the first poster. And because we weren't sure what kind of political responses we were going to be calling for, but we had a radical bent, we decided that it would be better to be anonymous, and we were anonymous until after ACT UP formed.

**SS: So how did you come to the decisions that produced that poster?**

AF: Well, I'd been looking through journals and looking at notes from the meetings, so it's very fresh in my memory. We tried on many different issues, as is typical with collectivity. It really is about tossing out a lot of ideas. Bill Buckley had done his tattoo recommendation, so for a couple of weeks we tossed around what that poster might be like. It seemed startling, it harkened to the camps where people were up in arms about it, it was controversial enough, we thought this would be a good issue for a poster, but as we began to really look at it, we realized, okay, well, so it's a photograph of a tattoo on somebody's butt. Okay, well, whose butt is it? Is it a man's butt? What about the women? Is it a white butt? What about people of color? The issues surrounding representation made it impossible for us to pursue that. We just thought it wouldn't be inclusive enough, and discarded it.

Then we had some poster ideas about a call to riot, which was actually going to be the third poster, but we decided there would be no point in having a call for a political response that was that severe when there hadn't been the first levels of conversation that might lead to even developing a communal response, much less a radical one. So we thought we would start with something that was a shot across the bow, which is what this poster was.

We're New Yorkers, and, as I've said, I have a deep history with the political poster. Sometimes I feel like I was raised with a political poster in my hand, I mean, it's so deep in me and in my family. I have a real affinity for this type of communication. At the time in New York, it was the height of Reagan, and there was building everywhere. In New York City, the place where you're allowed to poster, there are only select places, and building sites is one of the places because they're temporary structures. And there were tons of them. So it seemed like that would be a good place for us to be. We made the decision that it not be hand-wrought, manifesto-ish, it not involve a lot of text, because we would be competing in the public sphere for people's attention, and text is not attractive. We couldn't necessarily narrow down the audience enough to know which neighborhoods to work in, so the text really can only be encountered in close proximity. So we decided against text as the basis for the poster, and decided it would have to be image.

Then we made the decision that in order to compete in an urban context during the height of Reaganomics, we would have to compete for the audience's attention in that context as well and that it had to look slick. We also decided that the poster had to be tiered in its message. This is where I think the most original part of thought that went

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into the poster was. It was the first time that, I think – Well, it wasn't the first time, but there wasn't a lot of political Lefty thought that was Machiavellian enough to appropriate the voice of authority and feel comfortable doing it, but we set out to do it. That was the objective. And the reason we decided to do it was so we could imply – at the same moment we were trying to stimulate political activity within the lesbian and gay community, we wanted to seem threatening outside of the community. We wanted people to think that we were more organized than we actually were, so that when we did our subsequent posters, it would be all the more intimidating. So it was really designed for two audiences, not that you could define either of them. One was inside the lesbian and gay community, which is, of course, very diverse, and then outside the community, which is, of course, the rest of the world. But that's how the poster was conceived.

So it was going to go alongside the commercial posters of the day, and that was our decision, that it would be big, it would be glossy, it would compete in that visual context. We would have it professionally wheat pasted, which in New York you had to do. It's kind of like there are turfs, and there are only two or three services that do it. It's not technically legal, but I'm not sure how that works, but if you don't use them and you put up a poster, they'll tear it down. So unless it's an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven on a lamppost, if it's in that turf, you have to use these people. So we investigated all of that.

I'm giving you background to describe the actual poster. In order to define our space in that context, which was full of movie posters and fashion ads and stuff like that, we realized we had to create a dead zone. We had to make a vacuum for ourselves. A lot of commercial concerns use the strategy wheatpasting a series of

posters, which has become much more popular now but was a new idea then. But we realized that we couldn't really afford that many posters. The way that this turf works is you pay for coverage by duration and by neighborhood, and the city is set up in quadrants, so you choose the neighborhoods, you choose if it's two-week coverage or four-week coverage, and then they will advise you how many posters you need. That is based on weather, people wheatpasting you over or tearing you down, so the replacement posters, and we knew we couldn't afford blocks of posters, a wall of them.

So we had to figure out a way to define our space discretely with one poster, and that's how we ended up with black, to neutralize the context. It was meant to be seen in that context, but it was meant as an intervention into that context, clearly. So then we began the debate over, well, if it isn't a tattooed body, what is the abstract image that will signal to the lesbian and gay community we're talking to them? What is that abstract signifier? And there really wasn't one that we agreed with. We talked about the lambda. We thought it was kind of antiquarian. Younger lesbians and gays might not even know what it was. It was never agreed on. It wasn't universal enough.

We loved the labrys, but wasn't specific enough and the men wouldn't know what it was. We felt like it had the right attitude for what we were about to talk about, but it didn't seem appropriate. We talked about the rainbow flag. We *hated* it. It was ugly. It also intoned coalition work, which didn't exist. It intoned something celebratory. It was too friendly and, I'm not going to lie, just too ugly.

Then there was the pink triangle, which we also hated. We hated all of them. The pink triangle we hated because it intoned victimhood, obviously, but it seemed like it might have the most chance of being clear enough to the lesbian and gay

community, more clear than the other images we were discussing that were abstract, and graphic enough to be intriguing, interesting, compelling, to people outside of the community who didn't know what it was. Then for a long time we thought about designing a new logo, a new image, for the lesbian and gay community, but realized as we talked about it, that would be a separate campaign. And people were dying, and we didn't feel comfortable doing that.

**SS: Why was the victimization issue so problematic? I mean people with AIDS were victims and martyrs, so why was that difficult?**

AF: Well, because in the context of Bill Buckley's comment about quarantine, the idea of a concentration camp intoned agreement with the Right Wing, and we felt like we were in dangerous turf there. Plus, as you know, Jews are not so comfortable with the concentration camp as a metaphor. It defangs it. It generalizes it. There are many reasons why people object to it. I don't have all of that baggage. That wasn't really the issue for me, but it was for other people in the group, and it appeared to be passive, but in every other way also appeared to be true, undeniable, which is how we ended up with it. But as our little caveat, our redesign, we inverted it, a little New Age-y, but a little gesture towards action, not passivity.

**SS: What about the text? How did you come up with that?**

AF: Well, the text, to go back to the original strategic thinking, we realized that there were two levels of encounter. There were not only these two audiences. I should say we worked on this for about eight months, off and on, not constantly. We talked about many other things, and we didn't work every week on it, but it took us a long time to get to what I'm telling you. We realized that the poster would be

encountered on two levels. One would be very personal, in the street. Well, as personal as a public space can be, but New Yorkers are accustomed to being personal in public. And we would need modifying text, and that would be where the text would go. That would be where the explanation would be.

We talked a lot strategically about what we wanted to say, but it became very obvious that we had no prescription. There was no conversation yet. The way we felt would best engage the audience would be in the interrogative voice, which we weren't the first people to do that, but, as you well know, it was very much Gran Fury's strategy as well, to not tell you what to think, to lead you there, like a good teacher will do. They will get you there by asking you, not by telling you.

There were those turn anger, fear, grief into action. That was our vote, boycott, defend yourself, that was ours. That we were definite about, but everything else was a question. What is really going on at the CDC, the Vatican? Why is Reagan silent about it? What is to intone the politics, the greater question, not the death and dying, not the drugs into bodies part of it, but the cushion on which it all sat? So that was the personal encounter with the poster, and then the other was the peripheral one, the casual passerby, the person who might be in public transportation or in a cab or in a car.

Tape II  
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Also, we were aware if you live in New York, there is a thing called bridge and tunnel people, which means people from the outer boroughs, who New Yorkers think of very derisively, but every Friday, Saturday night they're in town. So we were aware that that was part of our audience, too, and that they would very likely be in cars. And the best way, the only way to draw somebody who only peripherally saw the

poster would be for it to be mystical, threatening, hostile, provocative, interesting, intriguing, and that's how we came up with the text, "Silence = Death."

**SS: So when you did you contract with these quasi-mafia poster people, how much time did you sign up for?**

AF: We decided two weeks, which meant three thousand posters. We targeted the East Village, the West Village. Chelsea didn't really exist then, but we decided to do the entire West Side, the theater district, because I lived in Hell's Kitchen, so I knew there were a lot of artists who lived there. So it was SoHo; East Village; West Village; Chelsea; Hell's Kitchen; and the lower Upper West Side. We were looking for areas that were art-related so there would be non-lesbian and gay audience who might be sympathetic, or, as we say in advertising, influencing influencers. That is the strategy of it. But then also to be specifically in the gay ghettos.

**SS: So what kind of reactions did you get?**

AF: Well, here's the thing. As I said when we were speaking at Harvard, there's a very interesting thing that happens when you're engaged in public dialogue in a public space. You don't always get to gauge the response. You don't. Sometimes you do and it's very clear, and sometimes you don't. It's my contention that if ACT UP hadn't come along, that poster could have come and gone in New York streets and been our little secret. Of course, I'm incredibly determined when I set my mind to something. We would have continued to do posters, which might have eventually led somewhere, but all of that's moot, because the first week that they went up, or actually it was the tail end of it, we decided to put them up in the spring because anyone who lives in New York knows that during the winter, street life dies down. We didn't finalize the poster until

December of 1986, and realized we should wait until spring, and thought, “Okay, well, if it’s really full spring, people start to go away, so it can’t be April.” I mean, we were so specific about this. So much thought went into it. So we decided on March, and as we know, that’s when Nora Ephron cancelled and Larry spoke and then –

**SS: So which came first, the posters went up or the meeting at the Center?**

AF: The posters went up.

**SS: Then how much later was the meeting at the Center?**

AF: I think it may have been that week. Larry spoke, I think it was on the tenth. It was the first week, and it was a Tuesday, I remember, because it was the day that we met.

In fact, I should also tell you this. Here’s another interesting aspect to this poster. I firmly believe in the power of the individual voice. Now, that’s contradictory in that ACT UP was communal voice of some sort. It wasn’t an individual. But from a feminist perspective, asking permission is always a bad idea, and it plays into power, and I think it’s just a bad idea. I don’t agree with it. So I think that when I say the power of the individual voice, if you ask people if you should do something, you are shifting the power differential, and most times people will have reservations about whether they think you should do it or not. It’s a mistake to ask, but nonetheless, I did ask a lot of people what they thought of the poster. I didn’t listen to all of them. And almost everyone said, “I don’t understand. I don’t think that’s a good idea. What are you asking people to do?”

Tape II  
00:30:00

I went to Lou Maletta at Gay Cable News. He’s like, “Well, what’s your group?”

I said, "There is no group."

"Well, so what are you – I'd like to cover it or talk about it, but I don't really know what it is. When you have a group, come back."

Then I went to Richard Goldstein. "Oh, I don't really know if I agree with it. I don't really think there could be a response like this." Nothing.

I wrote a letter to Larry Kramer, actually.

**SS: Why?**

AF: Sorry, Larry. But he knows that I wrote this letter. Because he was the loud mouth. He was the only one in the New York community who was talking about the politics of it, and he was getting ink in the *Native*, which was the only way I knew it. I thought, okay, well, here's a person who might have some ideas about it because he sees the picture as closer to – I don't know that I'd say as we saw it, but more closely aligned. So I contacted the *Native* and they wouldn't give me his address, but they told me if I gave it to them, they'd give it to him. And I never heard anything from him. I don't know if he ever even got it, actually.

And I asked an old boyfriend who was living in Portland, and it was like I was getting nowhere. I was getting no love. But I wasn't deterred by that.

**SS: Okay. Could you describe the famous – can I say, how are we doing with the tape?**

**JH: We have about 10 minutes. Are you going to go away from the poster? Okay, just a couple of things. All this questioning of Larry and other people, was that after it went up or before it went up?**

AF: No, before. This was as we were conceiving of it. This is all 1986.

**JH: Where did the expression “Silence = Death” come from?**

AF: Well, it was actually a volley. I had read in *The New York Times* something about the silence of a community being deafening. I don't remember what the context was. It was in reference to a social issue. As collectives work, again, it's about brainstorming and saying everything that pops into your head and everyone's doing it and people are summarily rejecting things and it leads to other ideas. There's frequently a volley, but I remember the actual volley. I could quote it, and it's not because I wrote it down. I don't remember everything, but things I was present for, I can quote things that people have said to me twenty or thirty years ago.

I wrote in my notes, “Gay silence is deafening,” and I brought that to the group and I said, “What about gays?” While we were tossing around ideas for the poster, we were trying to talk about the fact that there was no communal response, which was, again, connected to what Larry was maintaining. I said, “What about ‘Gay Silence Is Deafening’?”

Either Jorge or Charles said – Oh, no, it was Oliver who said, “What about ‘Silence is Death’?”

And then I'm not sure who said, “Oh, no, it should be ‘Silence Equals Death.’”

And then someone else said, “We should use an equal sign.” It was literally that fast. It was four comments.

Then we lived with it for a while before we realized that actually was what we wanted to say.

**JH: And why Gill Sans Serif?**

AF: Gill Sans Serif was the font that was popular at the time. It had a deco reference, but more to the point of visibility, it was quite tall, and Gill Sans Serif Extra Condensed, which was the actual font, was incredibly narrow and very tall, and the poster was an oblong. We designed it as an oblong because we thought from a graphic perspective if the triangle were within a square, it would be separate from the text and also be very complete as a geometric formation and in some way soothing and in another way inevitable because of its formality, which meant that we really only had that bottom part of the oblong for all of the text. And it was narrow because of the standard sheet size, but it also had to be as big as it could be in that narrow space, and any other font in that narrow space would only be about yea tall. So Gill Sans Serif Extra Condensed would be this tall, and that's why we chose that font.

Tape II  
00:35:00

But what we discovered, because the [kerning] was so severely close, people thought it said "Science Equals Death," and once the debate about how science interfaced with AIDS treatment, we realized that it could be misconstrued, and in subsequent printings we gave more space between the L, the I, and the E.

**SS: Now, can you just say the names of all six people and who's still alive?**

AF: We're all alive but Oliver, who died in 1990. Oliver Johnston; Chris Lione; Charles Kreloff; Brian Howard; and Jorge Socarras.

**SS: Okay. Thank you. So let's now move to the famous meeting at the Center to Larry's speech. So what made you decide to go?**

AF: As I said, he was getting ink in the *Native*. The *Native*, while hysterical, it was yellow dog journalism, there's no doubt about it, but they were the only

ones covering even the lunatic part of it, the treatments and touched on the politics. I knew about Larry from reading the *Native*, and I read in the *Voice*, I think, that he was going to replace Nora Ephron, who was scheduled to speak at the Center but had cancelled, and Larry was the replacement speaker. So I said to the rest of the guys in the group, I said, "Why don't we, instead of meeting at someone's house this week, go hear Larry Kramer speak. I don't really know, but he may have something to say, or maybe we might get to meet him and maybe we can exchange ideas. Why don't we go there."

And everyone agreed, so that was where we met that week, was at that talk. I have notes from that talk. I remember what he said, and he made us all stand. He said, "Okay, this half of the room, stand up." And they did. He said, "You're all going to be dead within a year." Then that's how he began the conversation, and it was very compelling. It was a very compelling piece of stagecraft. But, he was extremely hostile and really was holding everyone's feet to the fire. In the Community Center, for anyone who has been there, that main floor had a very low ceiling, it was very tight, was a very tight space, and there was no escaping it. There was no escaping the vitriol and the hostility and how visceral he had made it. Again, as I've maintained, there would not have been a "Silence = Death" as we understand it without ACT UP, but there would not have been an ACT UP because of Larry Kramer if that room hadn't been there.

It's very funny because I – Larry then threw it open to the floor after he read everyone the riot act and insulted and challenged them. *{LAUGHS}* And he said, "What are we going to do?" Actually, people raised their hands, and there were a lot of suggestions. One of them was, "Remember in the early days before GMHC when we had

the AIDS Action Network?” I think was what they called it. I don’t have my notes with me, but I took notes. I took a lot of notes.

And someone else said, “Yeah, we used to meet every Friday morning, have a breakfast meeting at eight o’clock.” I have that in my notes. “Why don’t we meet on Friday.”

“No, people can’t afford to take off from work. If you really want everyone to come, it has to be at night.”

“Okay, let’s meet on Thursday.” And two days later was the meeting that turned into ACT UP. And I have notes from that meeting, and I’ll tell you, it was like a roadmap for the next four years of actions. In that first meeting, we tossed—

**SS: Where was it?**

AF: I’m sorry?

**SS: Where was it?**

AF: It was at the Community Center. People tossed out ideas for political action and almost everything ACT UP ended up doing was there on that list from the very first day, almost all of it.

Tape II  
00:40:00

**SS: So we’re back at the Tuesday night meeting.**

AF: Tuesday night.

**SS: So now we went to Thursday night.**

AF: Right.

**SS: You said that people made suggestions that later became the agenda of ACT UP. Can you say what they were?**

Tape III  
00:00:00

AF: I'm looking for my journal, and I don't know where it was. So I'll just rattle off, off the top of my head. Blocking the bridges and the tunnels. At the time that seemed fairly radical. Of course, there were many people who did do that in other communities as well before we did it, and we only did versions of it in coalition with other people. The NIH. The FDA. The Commissioner of Health. Those are the only ones that are coming to mind, but if you'd like, I'll look for my journal.

**SS: Who facilitated the meeting?**

AF: I think it was either Tim what's-his-name from GMHC –

**SS: Right. Tim Sweeney.**

AF: Sweeney. It was either Tim or Vivian Shapiro or Marine Magnon [phonetic], one of that crowd. I think it was Tim or Tim and Vivian.

**SS: Who were some of the people who were at that first meeting?**

AF: Well, truthfully, I didn't know a lot of them. But I did know them, I did know that crowd. I knew Andy Humm from these meetings that I had gone when I was searching for the soul of AIDS in New York. There were some people from the Coalition of Lesbian and Gay Rights. There was the Lavender Hill Mob. Our group, which had not been named the Silence Equals Death Project until we came out to ACT UP some weeks later. Then there was a lot of people I had no idea who they were. But there were a lot of people there.

**SS: So is that the meeting where the name was decided?**

AF: No. That happened the week before. Again, I should probably have my journal with me. That happened, I have the date, because I remember writing at –

**SS: Do you want to get your journal?**

Tape III  
00:05:00

AF: Yes, if you think it would be —

**SS: Yes, just unplug and we'll get it.**

AF: I just don't know where it is.

**SS: So now we're starting the first early meetings.**

AF: You were asking about the naming. That was the week before Wall Street. It was the first action and people realized we had to tell everyone who we were. Someone stood up. Larry and I were reminiscing about this. No one can remember who it was, and he said, "I've always had this idea. I thought it would be great to name a group ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition To." Well, he hadn't actually fully realized the acronym. I think he proposed it as the AIDS Coalition To. It was that he wanted it to say ACT UP, and I think it was actually hashed out as to what the U and the P would be, but it was what it was.

**SS: Now Herb Spiers says the guy's name was Steve and he was wearing a trench coat. Does that help you?**

AF: *{LAUGHS}* Herb. No. No. I can tell you exactly where he was standing in the room. He did have curly hair, I'm pretty sure. I don't remember a trench coat, though, because why would somebody sit through a whole meeting with a trench coat on? It was at the end of the meeting.

**SS: So how did the whole Wall Street action come to be?**

AF: Well, I think that Larry was really pushing for it. It was about the price of AZT, and Larry had a boner for AZT and all of the questions surrounding it. Well, not all of the questions, not the toxicity, not the failed cancer drug part of it, just the

“We need it. You’re keeping us from it” part. It seemed like a good place to start, and I don’t think there was any disagreement about it.

**SS: Had you ever done an action before?**

AF: ACT UP?

**SS: You personally?**

AF: Many times. Yeah. I worked with the Student Mobilization Committee. I was in the Poor People’s Campaign.

**SS: You’d been arrested?**

AF: Yeah.

**SS: Did they do any kind of training? Because I’m sure a lot of –**

AF: No. There was no martial training. No.

**SS: So how did they get the word out on the action?**

AF: It was the room, I think. There was no phone tree yet. Well, there was a phone tree. Actually, under my bed I started the phone tree. I have the original – There were no computers. Back then before cell phones and they had these things called streets and Letraset, and I actually Letrasetted the phone tree page and have all these kind of blurred ink names on them. So I think we called everyone on the phone tree, and then it was the room, and I think that was it. Plus it actually did start as a coalition and there were members from other groups. Now, whether or not GMHC people came, I couldn’t tell you. But, truthfully, it wasn’t that big of a demonstration.

**SS: How many people, would you say?**

AF: Well, I would say if it was two hundred people, that was a lot. It was not that big. It was on that stretch of Lower Broadway right by the church, and how

many people could actually be there? You know what I mean? There was the effigy. *{LAUGHS}* Larry made such a thing about Joe Papp's Prop Shop doing an effigy of Frank Young, and it was rather tawdry, and it seemed kind of anachronistic, the idea of hanging someone in effigy who, in particular, was deeply involved in the pharmaceutical industrial complex. It was weird. I think like he brought it or had someone bring it, but nobody knew he was doing it, and everyone then was involved with having to figure out how to hoist it. It was a whole thing. It was a whole moment.

But I do remember the post that we hung it from was just slightly north of the church, so that was, in some way, the center of the demonstration, and it didn't go that far north or south from the intersection, which is where we sat to block. A lot of the people there were cops. Not a lot, but there were cops, so that inflated the numbers. I think my estimate would be two hundred people, tops. I'm not really sure about that, but that would be my estimate.

**SS: So what were some of the early analytical directions for ACT UP or some of the goals that were set or brought up?**

Tape III  
00:10:00

AF: Well, again, I think that in the mythos surrounding ACT UP, certain things that were said about it started to become true, like in the way that the Right Wing creates things by saying it, whether they're true or not. But there were certain realities that would be easy to forget. There were issues about communities of color. There were issues about women. They were brought up; they were not resolved. They weren't universally agreed on. But there was a lot more that happened later that actually was on the table from the beginning. There were fights about it. There were disagreements. There was pain surrounding a lot of these issues.

I think that the strategy that won out, as in any collective environment, there is a hierarchy. In this particular case, it was a hierarchy of urgency, and I think almost everything was made in deference to the dying, the sick or the dying. So the arguments that were most compelling were the ones that seemed time-sensitive, and they were the ones related to drug therapies. Ancillary to that were questions of access, but they came later in ACT UP when people who were accustomed to organizing realized that you couldn't have the one without the other. It was the myopia of ACT UP to buy into the idea that if we could just get them to release the drugs, everything would be okay. There were people who thought that, and it was myopic. That was true, but it was myopic because there's much more to it than that.

**SS: Right. Now, were you involved with Steve at this time, I think?**

AF: Steve Webb?

**SS: Yeah.**

AF: Yeah.

**SS: Before ACT UP started?**

AF: No.

**SS: You met in ACT UP, right?**

AF: We met through ACT UP.

**SS: So if you met your boyfriend in ACT UP and then you were going to ACT UP and your artistic collaborators were in ACT UP, it probably was a huge part of your week.**

AF: Huge. Every moment from the second ACT UP started until I completely burned out and left New York City was completely, as many of us were, absorbed.

**SS: What happened to the rest of your life, your other relationships, your job?**

AF: I had no relationships that weren't involved in this issue, and even the ones on the furthest periphery of the gravitational pull of it, the centrifugal force of it, were involved in it. There was no one who wasn't touched by it. But I think that I compartmentalized things. I'm certain of it, because there were a couple of things I was famously dogmatic about, and one of them was not having it be about my personal journey with AIDS, because people's lives were in danger. And while I felt like it was germane, it was germane to me and people who knew me, and not really germane to the conversation. I realize in hindsight that that was a tremendous mistake on my part, and there's probably a separate ring in hell for me because of that. *{LAUGHS}*

**SS: Why do you – What?**

AF: I'm trying to figure out how to say this, because I'm trying to say five things at once. One of the things I'm famously dogmatic about is history, and, in fact, as you know more than anyone, it's taken me a long time to agree to do this because I'm very ambivalent about history on many, many levels, who writes it, who gets to hear it, how it's revised, who owns the stories, who tells the stories, who hears them, and in particular with regards to AIDS, we were sucked into another entropy which was the art world, and it had its own gravitational pull, and its pull is towards cultural analysis and

cultural participation. And I was adamant about not getting sucked into that, because people were dying.

Tape III  
00:15:00

You remember what it was like. Care teams; hospital visits; funerals; finding places for people's possessions; fighting with people's families over what they wanted; people's boyfriends who were thrown out on the street. It was a war, and I felt really squeamish about it. Well, I wasn't squeamish about it. I was adamant about it, dogmatic about it, and I got into a lot of fights with people who didn't deserve it because they were, frankly, people who agreed with me on it, but in the collective work that I ended up doing that related to the art world, I was very dogmatic about it, and I felt like creating history while you're living it is a way that we neutralize what's happening. You're creating an arm's distance at the same time that it's happening. It's like a man living his life as a life remembered. You're not actually living it; you're remembering it while you're living it.

I felt like the issue couldn't be supplanted by all the other questions. It would be very easy to have it be cannibalized by how cool it looked, by how savvy we were, all of that. We *were* clever. We *were* cool. It *was* savvy. But I wasn't setting out to make art, and I was very dogmatic about it, very unattractively dogmatic about it.

**SS: Okay, we'll get to that in a minute, because I want to bring that up again. So ACT UP is beginning, and where did you first fit in or plug in? What kind of work did you do?**

AF: Well, I'm not a person who flings myself into the middle of things. I'm one of those people who, if you had to choose between being rich or being famous, I would choose being rich. It's never a choice that's been offered to me, by the way.

Notoriety, fame is not my thing. There are people who think that's incredibly coy, hearing me say that and disagree with that, because I have been in the center of things, but I didn't really expect to be or choose to be in any way a central player in ACT UP. I really just was there to listen, but occasionally did speak up and also notorious for being bombastic and lapsing into manifesto and public displays of hostility, and I think I attracted some attention and was on the Coordinating Committee, voted to be on the Coordinating Committee.

**SS: Can you explain what that was?**

AF: I can, yes, and, in fact, if I ever found my notebook, there are notes from those meetings. Originally, the Coordinating Committee was meant to just do that, to create the agenda, to figure out what the various needs of the subcommittees were, and at the time it was logistics, action, fundraising, outreach. I may be missing one. So it was to prioritize and strategize about how the next meeting would go and then to bring things to the floor. But of course in a free-wheeling democratic context, which is what ACT UP was, participatory democracy, there was some tension about whether it was necessary and who it was, and we used to joke about being the power clique, because, really, that's all we did. But I think from the outside it might have seemed different. [Michael] Nesline loves to repeat the story—he's told it to me a hundred times—of Larry coming to the Coordinating Committee—sorry, Larry—to ask us to stage a coup, sort of, that we should take power, that there needed to be leadership and we were the ones who would naturally be poised to do it and we should just steer the group, and we were like—

**SS: What was upsetting him?**

AF: Well, I don't know. Larry is leadership-obsessed. He comes from an orientation where leadership is hierarchal. That's not my orientation.

**SS: Who were the other people on the Coordinating Committee?**

AF: Nesline; Steve Webb; Brad Ball; Mike Savino. [Peter] Staley was there for a while. Jerry Smith. I might be leaving one person out, but I think that was it. It was a small group.

**SS: Then where did you go from there?**

Tape III  
00:20:00

AF: Well, there was only a Coordinating Committee for a very small period of time, because, again, in the beginning it was a coalition, and this was the orientation of other groups who had experience with it, they needed some sort of Coordinating Committee, so it was created. It was the will of the floor, such as it was, but I don't think anyone knew whether they thought it was a good idea or not. Someone proposed it, and it seemed okay and it happened. But it very soon seemed obvious to us that it was completely unnecessary, that the business of the floor was being done on the floor and done very well, and there was no need for us to go in there and tinker with it. It was very linear and clear what the floor wanted, and there was no reason that they should be told anything, and if there were, we were not the people to tell it. In fact, Steve came up with the idea of the organizing principles, and we spent some time writing that as a way of capping the existence of the Coordinating Committee, which is eventually what happened, the Working Document.

**SS: And what were the organizing –**

AF: Deb Levine actually has a copy of it, and I probably do, but I don't know where it is. But I sat on the bed as Steve worked on it every night, and he worked

really hard on it and fully considered, in a way that surprised me, because I wouldn't say that I – I'm going to give an aside which you may want to come back to. I wouldn't say that people were uniformly politicized in the same way in ACT UP. It was a process of politicization and there were a lot of people who were not politicized before AIDS or before they entered that room. So it was very tiered, the level of political consciousness, and I wouldn't say that Steve came from a political orientation, but he was so considered that he really managed to construct almost like a constitution, so broad, so universal, so completely considerate of all of the potential pitfalls, but also specific enough that it would really empower the room, and that was what it was. That was how it was written and that's how it was presented to the floor. There may have been modifications, and it was adopted and then completely disregarded because it also wasn't necessary. But it was just a way of concretizing what was happening, which was the room was leading itself, and that was the best thing about it.

**SS: So then where did you start doing your work after that?**

AF: Well, I was very active in the Logistics Committee.

**SS: Can you explain what that was?**

AF: The Logistics Committee was – And I also worked on the Actions Committee. The floor would decide on actions. There would be a period of commentary at the beginning of the meeting where people would propose actions, and they would then be later considered and prioritized, usually at the moment on the room, but, if not, it would go back to the committee and they would then prioritize things by time sensitivity or opportunities that might be presenting themselves. So the Action Committee sort of digested that part of it, and that's part of what the Action Committee did was to do the

research, to figure out what the best time and place would be, who was going to be there, what possible strategies might be to take back to the floor.

The Logistics Committee was folded into the Action Committee at some point because it was duplicative, but the logistics were how many buses would we need; where would we get the flyers; who would write them; who would pay for it; do we need rooms? We would scope out the physical plant, take videos, so people would know what the entrances and exits to the building would be, if it was guarded, when it was open, if you needed a pass to get in, if we had a friend on the inside. That was what the Logistics was, and I loved doing stuff like that.

**SS: What were some of the actions that you were involved in on the Actions Committee?**

AF: Well, I think, again, it was quickly disbanded, and I think we worked for a fair amount on the march on Washington, and, in fact, I went as a representative of ACT UP to the Boston meetings that led to the march on Washington.

**SS: So how was ACT UP received by the other organizations?**

AF: Badly.

**SS: What did they think?**

AF: Brad Ball used to say—and I think it's dismissive, but it's too funny not to say—that we were an unruly middle-class mob. That completely neutralizes the fact that we weren't all middle-class, but it was true that we were an unruly mob, and we got into a lot of fights with party hacks. We broke into meetings of lesbian and gay groups to insist that they take our issue.

*{LAUGHS}* At the March on Washington meeting in Boston, I was asked not to speak by the first half of the first day. It was so hostile. I remember I said something like that we were talking about the actions on the Supreme Court steps, and they were talking about the waves and the agitprop and the safe zone, and it was a whole peace and freedom bent to it, coalition style of organizing. And I said, “While you’re dancing around down there with your puppets, people are going to be getting arrested over here.” And it was like that kind of hostility that barred me from speaking.

**SS: So really, really honestly and in retrospect, why do you think that so much of the gay community was so hostile to what we were doing?**

AF: Well, I think that’s a very good question. It seemed very apparent at the time, but in hindsight, I’m not sure how to characterize it. I believe that there was an insider mentality to a lot of lesbian and gay organizing in New York City at the time, and we were not playing that game; we were interfering with it.

I think also you have to remember that while everyone knew about AIDS in the lesbian and gay community, there was a broad diversity of responses to it. I remember when I wore a Silence = Death button to dinner one night, and the waiter, as he came to the table, he said, “That’s a very violent button.”

And I said, “These are very violent times.” But I was really surprised that a gay man should look at that and be upset by it or offended by it, but people were. People had different responses.

**SS: Do you have any sense of why?**

AF: Yeah, of course I do. I don’t know if they’re accurate. I think that people have a tendency — I think gay men in particular have a tendency towards

compliance and self-oppression. I know that that's a very broad stroke and it's much more complicated than that, but I think that was what was at work there. I think that there were people who were struggling to hold AIDS at arm's distance. I think it was violent. I think we were very hostile and there are a lot of people who have issues with that. And I think that the reason why it became easy for ACT UP to be my every waking moment was I was in a community for probably the first time in my life where I wasn't the most hostile person in the room.

**SS: When Don died, you had almost no support system. I mean, you had the Lione brothers, but you were living in silence. When Steve died, it was a very different kind of –**

AF: Mm-hmm.

**SS: So you had built a community for yourself in those interim —**

AF: Well, that was pretty early days. That was the first year, within the first year. Not even; it was nine months after ACT UP formed. There was a certain mythology around Steve and probably another one around the two of us as a couple, and it was a suicide, and suicide is irreconcilable. All death is, in my estimation, but you can't make sense of it. No sense can be made.

I will tell one story, and it's only because you've asked me personally what I thought. This is going to sound like a critique, but I don't really mean it as one. I went to Steve's memorial service, out to his family, to bury him. In fact, one of the original sketches of the Silence = Death poster, I put it in his coffin. Then I felt like that was a service for people who had no idea who he was. They were entitled to it, but here's the thing that I am quite sure of. You know the cliché about weddings and

funerals, it's, of course, true, but what really is happening surrounding a death is people are vying for ownership of the dead and the death. Your sense of the deceased can be a challenge to somebody else's, and, in fact, that's the strife that people refer to when they talk about the camps that form surrounding death. So Steve's family was having one set of realities surrounding him, and they were parts of his life that I only knew through him, and I believe them to be true because I believed he knew who he was. But it wasn't who I thought he was and who people who were gay thought he was and who knew him through the various levels of his life as a gay man.

So I decided we needed a memorial in New York, and I assembled one with Maria Maggenti's help at the Center. As I said, because I, again, I didn't invent this, but because I was raised in a town which had a Quaker meetinghouse, the way the Quaker meetings work is that there is no leader. People speak when they feel they have something to say, and everyone, anyone, can talk, and that's how I felt this memorial should be. It's how I think a memorial should be, so that people are not – their own memory of the dead is not threatened by somebody else's memory of the dead. I don't believe in a preacher. But I did write a eulogy. In fact, I wrote it on Larry's computer.

I'm very embarrassed to say that I actually told his story as I saw it, and it was very bombastic. It was embarrassingly candid. It was very excessive. But I really felt like it was important to do, and I did, and I told the story of his terrible, sad life, of his life as a call boy, all of it, his drug history, his being abused by his coach. Well, not abused; he was having sex with him. But he was an older man and, p.s., the close friend of his father. His father disowned him over it, even though it was consensual. All of that stuff, the terror of it. But I felt like it was his story, and this was *our* memorial and it

should be true to our experience of it. It didn't have to be this or that, and I felt like it needed to be honest, and I did tell the story. I'm embarrassed to say that I did, but I did.

After this humiliatingly candid, probably diatribe, I then invited everyone else who was there – There weren't a lot of people. It was in one of the smaller rooms up those really weird stairs on the southeastern corner of the building. Maybe there were twenty-five or thirty people there. I said, "So I wanted you to all now if anyone has anything they want to share about Steve, please feel free to."

The first person who stood up, I'd just talked about how difficult it was for Steve, how he navigated through the world through his physicality, that it was his way of negotiating worth, and that being a sex worker is far more complicated than liking sex or needing money. There are other things at work, and I mapped some of that out. The first person who stood up, talked about "I remember him on Fire Island, the first time I saw him and how he looked in a bathing suit," and then it devolved from there. That is what people – That's how they saw him. Part of his what led him to suicide was being seen that way, and I was trying to shift the dynamic of it and wasn't able to, and felt so incredibly alienated that I left town and didn't come back for a week.

Tape III  
00:35:00

**SS: I remember you getting really upset at a meeting right after he died and yelling about something, and I remembered how everyone respected it. In a normal environment, if someone acted out like that, everybody would shun them, but in that environment, it was completely reasonable and people just went on to the next thing.**

AF: Yeah. I think when we were talking at Harvard and Joy Episalla was doing her panel on the funeral, I had spoken on another panel, and somebody who wasn't

at the funerals had discovered the tape, and she was doing the presentation about public performance of political questions. She showed the tape, and so I'd been thinking a lot about political funerals before that. But I do think that in there is the core of what you've just said. I remember because it was the Marys who were conducting the Wojnarowicz funeral that was at question at this other panel, and it was the first time I had seen tapes of it since being there, but it was as fresh as the day it happened. I remember the feeling of watching it so dangerously spinning out of control because it was primeval, what was happening. It was prehistoric, the public mourning that we experienced that day, but, in truth, every day, all of us. And it was in the room and it was there at those funerals. I remember thinking, as people were building bonfire of the posters, and I don't know if you recall, but the first – I don't know if it was the first Queer Nation march, but we snaked through the Village, and during that march we went through certain parts of the Village that were hostile. Somebody pulled a gun, Broadway near Astor Place.

**SS: One of us or somebody on the street?**

AF: No, somebody pulled a gun on Signorile. Later somebody pulled a machete near the basketball courts, Waverly Place. People were throwing bottles of milk out the apartment windows. It was a different world, and we were in one of those abandoned chasms, Lafayette near Crosby Street. It was very unsafe, and as somebody who martialled and did legal support work and had martial training, I knew it was unsafe, but it couldn't be stopped. It shouldn't be stopped. And it was so dangerously close to spinning out of control and being unsafe, but it had to happen. I remember that — I don't know how else to describe it. It was opalescent on so many levels, the pain of it, the importance of it, the danger of it, the sadness, the compulsion, the destructiveness of it,

all at once, and feeling privileged and scared, feeling obliged to let it happen and afraid of letting it happen. Nothing happened that night, but the reason I brought up the other march is that things do happen, bad things can happen in those situations on an abandoned street in the middle of the night with a body in a casket and a bonfire on a deserted street in New York. But that was in the room. That was in the room every week.

Tape IV  
00:00:00

**SS: Okay.**

I want to answer your question, but I just want to give you some background. The Silence Equals Death Project, at some point it was suggested that we copyright it so that it couldn't be copyrighted by somebody else and we would be prevented from using it. It was never intended to be owned and we never prevented anyone from using it, except one case. If you want me to talk about it later, I will. We had to then go to the floor and explain that we were copyrighting it, that it didn't mean anything and ACT UP still could use it. Well, they almost ate us alive.

**SS: Who?**

AF: The floor.

**SS: But give me a name of somebody who almost ate you alive.**

AF: I can't give you a name, because I had a blackout spell, it was so terrifying, and so did the rest of the project. We didn't know what hit us. We didn't expect it. We didn't know what hit us. And Gran Fury had the same experience going to the floor to try and navigate operating expenses for us as a collective.

So Bill Olander, who was the curator of the New Museum, contacted David Meieran and said he wanted offer ACT UP the window of the New Museum, and

David Meieran called me and said, “Bill offered the window, and I don’t really want any part of bringing this to the floor.” So the caveat about how intimidating it could be to navigate art questions on the floor of ACT UP, I believe, is why David didn’t want to do it.

So I said, “Well, I don’t personally know if I’m interested in this, because it is too art-specific, but it is actually a window, so it’s a public space, and I think ACT UP should be made this offer. I’m not in a position to make that decision. I’ll bring it to the floor.” And I did. So I mapped out that he had made the offer and what the parameters were, and basically there were none. There were caveats. It wasn’t heated. I asked them if we could use the window as a kickoff point but then have other actions, and wheat paste the street or do other things. He said, “Whatever. ACT UP can do whatever they want, public, private, ancillary, spinoff, whatever you want. It’s yours.”

So I mapped out those parameters and I said, “So I’m calling a meeting, and anyone who’s interested, please come.” And that meeting was the beginning of the group of people who did the New Museum window, who subsequently decided to continue working together as Gran Fury. That’s the genesis of it.

**SS: So then what happened?**

AF: What happened vis-à-vis —

**SS: When you started working on this.**

AF: Well, I didn’t work on the window. I called the meeting, sat in at the first meeting or maybe the second one also, and then I had no interest in it because it was too, as I said, art-specific for me. So I can’t answer that question. But I do know that, back to Chris Lione, Michael Nesline, Mark Simpson and myself, I remember the

opening of the show, of the window, being out on the street, having drinks and cigarettes with Mark and Tom and Loring.

**SS: Tom Kalin.**

AF: Tom Kalin. Loring McAlpin, Mark Simpson, I think Don Ruddy might have been there. We were just standing out front. Maybe Nesline was there. And we were just talking. It might not have been the first conversation as saying that we, the group, should continue to work together, but Mark really pushed for it, and Mark was the first person I heard say that, and he said that that night. So while I don't know if that's what the genesis was, I do know that Mark really needed Gran Fury and wanted it to happen and pushed hard for it. And I think, as is true with almost everything I've described, it wasn't just one person's decision. Many people felt that way or they wouldn't have done it as well. I just know that he pushed for it.

**SS: So then did you begin to meet regularly?**

Tape IV  
00:05:00

AF: Yeah. So Gran Fury decided to hold – I mean, the group decided to hold regular meetings. The people who had worked on the window decided they wanted to continue to do work like this, and that was the group that was Gran Fury, and in the beginning it was an open committee. When I heard about that, I heard about it that night and said, “Well, actually, I would be interested in that,” because what happened with the Silence Equals Death Project wasn't that I was more politicized than the other members, it's just that I had a different compulsion about it and missed – We did two posters and then basically the group disbanded a little bit, and after Oliver died, it became more of a group of friends. We weren't meeting collectively about this type of work.

So I was missing it. So when I heard that that night, I said, “Well, yeah, I would be interested in that.” I wasn’t a part of the first poster. I think I came after they had met a couple of times and did the “1 in 61.” I think I was there the night that they had the proof of it. Then we met like any other committee in ACT UP did.

**SS: So what were some other projects that you worked on with Gran Fury?**

AF: Well, all of them, but I think I will also say this thing about the tension between agitprop and ACT UP but also the general reality of communicating in public spaces in an image-driven culture. First of all, because everyone is surrounded by images, they think they understand how they work and what they are and what they mean because we all are completely saturated in them. So everyone has an opinion about images, whether they have really given it thought or not. And I think for artists who were doing this kind of work, independence from the floor was somewhat necessary. I don’t think I’ve worked – I was going to say I haven’t worked in any, done any artwork that wasn’t collective. The work that I have been most proud of has been done collectively. I’ve worked in collectives for a really long time.

Let me step back to Gran Fury. What happened with Gran Fury is it was open like ACT UP committees were, but it became impossible to work. At a certain point, a committee can’t decide on an image, and when you present an image to a committee—and anyone who has clients knows this—it starts getting pulled apart. Sometimes it’s for the better, but sometimes it isn’t. It’s a negotiation. And I think Gran Fury, in order to maintain its ability to work, decided at some point it was not going to be able to be a committee and had to operate independently.

Now, I've heard Gran Fury referred to – here's another reason why I am historically ambivalent about history. There was a canon surrounding this work. Some of it's well researched, some of it isn't. Depending on what the person who's writing it has read, they will think one set of things or another. For instance, Gran Fury designed Silence = Death; they didn't. Gran Fury didn't exist till a year after that poster was designed. But because of the New Museum, it became conflated and has become a part of the canon.

Another part of the canon is that Gran Fury was like the art department. We weren't. Just like any other affinity group, we acted independently, we made our own decisions about it, and that was the only way we could work. Just like the Marys didn't come to the floor and say, "We want to do a political funeral." They didn't. They couldn't. They didn't.

So I think there's this mistake that because the work of Gran Fury was so closely associated with ACT UP that we were in some way serving ACT UP or vice versa, and it was a symbiosis.

**SS: Okay. So let's go back to the issue you raised about an hour and a half ago about the conflict within ACT UP about being an art professional and art careers versus working as part of a movement, if I've articulated that accurately.**

AF: Well, I think you're taking some license with that characterization, but you're not far off the mark. I can only speak about myself. I wasn't just conflicted about it; I was adamantly opposed to it. And there were other people I'm speaking of.

Tape IV  
00:10:00

**SS: You were adamantly opposed to what?**

AF: Opposed to having the art part of it precede the political part of the image making, have the art be the point of it, as opposed to the politics of it. I remember at a Gran Fury meeting Tom was very dismissive based on the idea that, “Yeah, situationism, yeah, I know, institutional critique,” blah, blah, blah. He’s very articulate and incredibly smart, and he wasn’t that reductive. But my characterization of him is a characterization of how some people feel about it, that it’s disingenuous to raise that objection because you’re in an image culture, you’re participating in it the second you make a public statement. So it’s disingenuous to object to certain of the terms of it.

In particular in Gran Fury, we were taking art world funding, so how could we really – What really is institutional critique? But I firmly believe, as I do with almost everything else about late-stage American capitalism, that the mission creep of capitalism is everywhere. It’s in everything and it’s a mistake to forget that. I’m very Machiavellian. I really did believe that, I feel like it’s okay to make money in capitalism if you use some of that money against it. I think that it’s okay to take money from the art world if you circumvent it. And there’s nothing wrong with participating in it so long as you know you’re doing that and have negotiated what the consequences might be.

But having said that, I mean, I have been incredibly dogmatic about it and was in Gran Fury, and there were other people who agreed with me, but not dogmatically as I did. I think I was the source of some conflict. Let me put it another way. I think there were people I worked with who thought I was an asshole. *{LAUGHS}*

**SS: Because you objected to them advancing as gallery artists?**

AF: Well, I don’t really think that that was on the table, because that happened later in actual fact. But in the same way that there were people who were

active in Treatment and Data analysis in ACT UP who were very seduced by being asked to speak in front of a panel in D.C., I know I'm not the only one who's noticed this about capitalism, but it is part of the machinery of neutralizing dissent. Everything from sitcoms to hearings, to seats at the table, to gallery installations, to even public art money is a part of it, and you have two choices: you act or you don't. But if you act, you should know the consequences and the full array of potential.

In a case where people's lives were at stake, there was no question. Act. There was no question. If you don't act, people die. If you do act, *maybe* something will work. And if that doesn't work, then you'll try something else. But there was no question. Action. So this was one of the many actions that I was involved with, but other people had different ideas about how those actions functioned, and I was very dogmatic about mine.

**SS: So can you give us a concrete example of decisions that would be made based on where people saw themselves going?**

AF: Well, I don't think it ever affected any particular poster or issue we worked on. It didn't. But the only thing that comes to mind is if we were given a certain amount of money to do an installation overseas, there were people who had no issue with that and there was me. There may have been other people who had issue with it.

**SS: You mean like the Venice Biennale, for example?**

AF: Yeah, or the installation in Berlin.

**SS: What was your issue specifically?**

AF: I thought it was an art junket. That's what I said. I'm not proud that I said that. It's a very unfair characterization.

**SS: But do you still think it was an art junket?**

Tape IV  
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AF: No. I think that somebody had to install the work, but not *everyone* had to install the work, and I didn't feel comfortable installing the work, so I didn't go. But other people did feel okay with it and went. I am sorry I didn't go, in hindsight, because Venice is a good example. There was a lot of tension, and by tension I'm not saying that there was huge disagreement, but we gave a lot of discussion and thought to what the projects were, whether there was a public component to it or not. I would say that everyone was equally sensitive to the issues that I'm raising. I'm characterizing myself as dogmatic. I'm not saying I was the only one who felt this way. So in particular, Venice was an issue for me because it really had no public component. Everything else we did that was a gallery space, we made sure there was, and that was the only reason we would do it. That was the deal with the devil.

**SS: I want to break it down a little bit, because there were people who came into ACT UP having already decided that they wanted to be artists who had dealers who sold pieces to private collectors. They went to training programs and professionalization programs that prepared them for that. There were people in ACT UP who learned how to professionalize *in* the organization and got their professional connections *in* the organization.**

AF: Correct.

**SS: And then there are people who are able to have careers because ACT UP as a cultural phenomenon made certain subject matter palatable that wouldn't have been palatable if there hadn't been a political movement. And then**

**there were people who only made art inside the context of the movement and did not continue as professional artists.**

AF: Right. And then there were other things as well, but, yes, all of those things were true.

**SS: Go ahead, like what else?**

AF: Well, I'm trying to find my way into the ones you've characterized, but there were a lot of things going on, would be my summation.

**SS: So do you feel that there was exploitation?**

AF: Well, we had a phrase in ACT UP. Not Gran Fury; everyone in ACT UP had a phrase: PLOPWAs. Do you remember that?

**SS: People who live off people with AIDS.**

AF: Right. So there was a conscious political critique within ACT UP of that. There were a lot of people who then went on to work at AMFAR, who got jobs at GMHC, who got inside-the-Beltway jobs, who got research grants from the government. It wasn't just the art, in the art context. I don't know that it's fair to say that people – ACT UP was a lot of things. It was a community. There's no doubt about it. You could, from an academic perspective, argue against whether there's a lesbian and gay community, but I don't think anyone could make the argument that ACT UP was not a community. It was. I don't know what it was a community of, aside from people who were in despair, but that's a pretty potent community.

So there were a lot of things going on, and I don't think anyone entered into ACT UP to become something, but I think that, again, this is the process of the mission creep of capitalism. When I went to college, my dad had an AmEx card, and he

said – I know this sounds so stupid when I tell these stories of my family, because it just sounds so made up, but he said, “Do you want an AmEx card? Because that way you could just, if you needed cash and didn’t have it, and I can sign you onto my card.”

I said, “No, Dad, I *don’t* want a card.”

He said, “Why?”

I said, “Because you cannot dip your little toe into capitalism. Your toe’s in, you’re to here.”

I did get a credit card, and, like the rest of America, was caught up in the credit crisis, and now realize how true it was what I said, and I never should have dipped my little toe into it. I know I sound like a survivalist, but it’s also true, as ridiculous as it sounds, and whether or not you believe that I mean that I’m saying it, it’s true. And that’s true of every level of social, political interaction that spun off from ACT UP and was brought into ACT UP.

**SS: Why did you leave Gran Fury?**

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AF: I didn’t. Gran Fury just became impossible to work, because as the issues became more and more complex, the didactic one-liner, the witty rejoinder, was impossible. The issues were too vast. It was too complicated. Of course, in hindsight, I would say that we were naïve about how complicated it was in the beginning, were unencumbered by the reality of it, and were happy to make the snotty rejoinder, as we used to refer to it, and became less happy about it as we became aware of how complicated it was.

**SS: So rather than switch mode, you decided –**

AF: We tried to. No, we tried. I think the thing about Gran Fury, it's probably been told, I just haven't heard it be told, but we had a lot of failures. There was what we called the eye test, the "AIDS is not over for anyone until it's over for everyone" subway poster that was unreadable. We couldn't figure out how — We thought we wanted it to look like a vacation ad, like the kinds of things you encounter on the subway, and so we put a palm tree, but it was impossible to find a color that would make that text pop from the rest of it, and you could still see it was a palm tree. In order to describe what we were trying to say about that rejoinder, we needed this much text stacked over the image. It was in all of our estimations a failure. It doesn't get mentioned very often.

Then there was the *Je Me Souviens* poster for the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art. We thought "I will remember" was a great way for us to enter into the conversation about Canada not doing what America had done. "Don't do what we have done." And that was the rejoinder to it, and it was all about how America handled the AIDS crisis. It was a "what not to do" list. We made our own flag and we used that tagline. Well, we didn't know we were entering into a national debate, a very heated one about autonomy and secession.

**SS: Right, and Francophone identity.**

AF: Yeah. We didn't realize there was a huge secession controversy, so we had some very distinct failures, which we were aware of. We tried doing coalition work. We did a window with PONY [Prostitutes of New York]. We felt very responsible to share our access. Again, if anything I've said paints a picture of Gran Fury of being like this apolitical careerist mob, that isn't really true. These were incredibly smart, very sensitive to the issues group of people trying to do what they could do. So we

did coalition stuff. We felt really responsible to share the access that was being flung to us. We tried to do work with Guerilla Girls. They wouldn't take their masks off. It's very hard to know what somebody is thinking if you can't see their eyes. We understood it, but it just never gelled. The PONY window was really difficult. None of us were happy with it. We did try a lot of things.

The last project that I recall us working on, we did the "Women don't get AIDS, they just die from it," which I love. I think it was very successful, and the part of that project was that we made sure that it had to be not only shown in the key parts of the cities, where it was shown in L.A. and New York, but it was essential it have a boroughs component. So there was, as I say, tremendous sensitivity to all of these layers of issues surrounding it.

The last thing I recall us working on was a comic book. We decided that we were going to do a small handout comic book, like the safe-sex ones, but the truth is we couldn't fill a comic book that wasn't like a comic book that somebody else was making. There wasn't enough text to say – all the text to describe the politics of what we were thinking about, we would need a comic book this thick, and it would take forever to write. We couldn't get it off the ground.

So we had a series of things like this, and it became obvious to everyone, I think, shared the insight that our strategy had withered on the vine, that the moment for that strategy had passed, and while we tried other strategies, we weren't able to enact them to our satisfaction. Some members felt like we should disband, just out of decency, in a way. Why take the access if we couldn't fulfill the mission? But then there were people who felt adamantly opposed to the idea of disbanding, and Mark was one of them.

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We talked, before we sat down, about the white poster. I refer to it as the Gran Fury white album, the four questions. That was Mark's poster.

**SS: Can you explain what that was?**

AF: Gran Fury had disbanded, but Mark – I should say there were two people in Gran Fury who had AIDS. One of them was Don Ruddy, who died fairly early on, and the other was Mark, who died some years later. Mark didn't think the work was over, and I didn't, and a couple of other people didn't, so we made this arrangement. We did a farewell project as Gran Fury, but then nobody minded that a couple of us continued to work and signed it Gran Fury.

So it was Richard Elovich, Loring McAlpin, Mark Simpson, myself. Vincent Gagliostro started working with us at that point, and some other people came and went, but we were basically meeting in Richard's apartment. We did two projects. One was a really bad, or really so good it was bad, pamphlet that we were asked by — One of the national gay organizations, wanted us to do a project in response to the "gay agenda" video that was being circulated in Congress, so they asked us to do something. We did a pamphlet called the "Christian Agenda Revealed," and it was a threefold brochure that was completely eleven-point type front and back, very little images, with text, talking about the Christian agenda. It was all there. It was good. But it looked so much like a Christian pamphlet, we were trying to ape that thing. It looked so much like it that no one would take it.

Then we did the Four Questions, which, as Deb Levine noticed, is from Passover, and Mark was, as I say, a part of – again, Chris and I formed the group that did Silence = Death, and Mark and Nesline and I, who all knew each other before, were in

Gran Fury, and then in the end, Mark and I worked on this poster. So I feel like there's an arc from the Silence = Death poster to that poster. I feel like there is.

So this poster was Mark's poster. He was, I think, angry that Gran Fury had stopped working together. He needed it. He was very much involved in the genesis of it and the maintenance of it. He was very charismatic. People loved him. He was brilliant, howlingly funny, really an essential part of the zeitgeist. Well, everyone was. It was actually an extraordinary collective, and that's a lot of the reason the work was what it was.

**SS: What were the four questions?**

AF: It was actually a dialogue between Mark and myself. Again, there were four or five of us who worked on it, but I wrote — I didn't write. We collectively agreed on, but I was pushing the — The forgotten part of the AIDS crisis, the thing that Gran Fury did not get to articulate, and, in fact, very few people were, was that there were actually people involved in this work and people who were traumatized, and while maybe the moment had passed to talk about, in wise rejoinders, in one-liners, the bigger issues, there was another big issue that was totally left off the table, and it was the trauma of it. That's what this poster was about.

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Again, while I see it as a cap ends on a story arc, we defined its space in the public sphere with white. The poster was basically a big white sheet of paper with tiny, tiny text, so that you were forced to confront it. Scale is really essentially to a message. The idea, the arrogance of the use of that space with its blankness had the same arrogance of the blackness of the Silence Equals Death, but it had no rejoinder, nothing

you could see from a car. You were forced into it, and it was incredibly hostile in that way, more hostile, and intentionally so.

The four questions are, two of them were in an HIV-positive or the voice of someone with AIDS, and two of them were in the voice of somebody who was HIV-negative. There was a tremendous amount of conversation in political circles, in every circle, about the hierarchy of positive and negative. It was in almost everything we did. I don't mean to intone that it was a secret undercurrent or a subtext. It was very much there. People were aware of it and talked about it all the time. There was a huge sensitivity to it, but we felt like there were things that were nothing said about it, so we were very candid.

We chose questions that were provocative. I can't remember the order of them, so it may take me a second to reconstruct. Do you trust HIV-negatives? Because there were a lot of people with AIDS who didn't, who thought there was a subtext to their actions, who felt betrayed by them or insufficiently cared for on every possible level.

Do you resent people with AIDS? Again, I don't remember the order. We were giving voice to things that people weren't saying but we felt were clear. There were a lot of people who felt like younger people, let's use as an example, who felt like they had been robbed of their own sexual history by the fact that people had behaved badly and now there was AIDS. That was part of what's in there, but there were other things as well.

Have you given up hope for a cure? And there was a huge debate in ACT UP, and when people characterize why ACT UP fell apart, which I don't even know if I agree with the characterization that it did – I am going to step aside for a second. When

you're in a media culture and you're using the media as a strategy to comment on the media, you have to be aware that these are journalists and they're writing a story, and a story always has, guess what, a beginning, a middle, and an end. And there was always going to be an end to ACT UP. There was. But there were people who didn't see it coming, who didn't know when you dance with the devil, you don't always win. So I think that the idea of giving up hope for a cure was a part of that process.

There were people who became so absorbed in the idea that you could treat it as a chronic manageable condition. The day I heard that phrase, I knew we were in for it, the day I heard that phrase. Because my mother, the cancer researcher, I once asked her many, many, many years ago, "So could there ever be a cure for cancer, Mom?" A million times over that there's too much money in it. Now, again, it sounds really didactic, but it's also true. There's no money in curatives. There's money in medications for people who are sick. So the second that people agreed to the idea that it would be okay to continue to be sick, I realized that the entire dynamic had changed, the entire dialogue was changed, and that's what that phrase was about.

Then, when was the last time you cried?

**SS: Now have you given up hope for a cure?**

AF: Scientifically, no. No, I think there will be a cure one day, when there's no more money to be made. I think, again, this sounds really high-blown because it intones conspiracies and all of that, but I do know how scientific research in America works. A thing that a lot of people didn't understand was that not only was the Right Wing makeover of America that has been going on for thirty years, but during that exact period, Reagan was dismantling a lot of things, and one of them was how medical

research was funded in America. People from pharmaceutical industries, in order to get grants, not just for the research wing and the science labs of an institution, for the paper in the office of all the other wings of the institution, to get the grants, you had to do certain things, and one of them was having these people on various review boards.

The idea of pure science is a fantasy of the nineteenth century. The idea of science for science's sake is a fantasy of research scientists. It's not the way America utilizes scientific discovery. We utilize it from a perspective of its worth and its commerce, the commerce of it. I'm not saying that there aren't research scientists who in earnest still are working. They are. The question is who gets funded, where the money goes, what's fast-tracked and what isn't. And we know what's fast-tracked. Medications are fast tracked.

I had a friend, Edward, who died many, many years ago of AIDS, but he was also one of the last cases of polio. When polio was declared as curable, they stopped researching it, cold, no more trials, no nothing, no documentation, no paperwork, no research institutes, no studies, *basta*. And Edward got older, his leg withered and got worse and worse, and on top of HIV, he was dying of polio in a way as well. And that's exactly what's happened with AIDS. That's exactly what's happened. Eric Sawyer's had – I think he's on his second hip replacement. He can't get anyone to even acknowledge that it might be a secondary effect of the medications, but we all know that that's true. And there will come a time after we're all gone that it'll just be like that.

**SS: Okay. Very interesting, Avram. You are telling us things that no one has ever said in 108 interviews.**

AF: Is that true?

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**SS: Oh, yes.**

AF: Okay, so now you can tell me what they did talk about. *{LAUGHS}*

**SS: I mean, it's all on the website, but we're not done with you.**

**SS: Avram has found – I found his journal, which says *Comme des Garçons* on the cover.**

AF: In my bathroom. *{LAUGHS}*

**SS: Go ahead. You were saying the meeting was on the nineteenth.**

AF: Well, no, you were asking the date of the meeting when it was named. It was, yes, the nineteenth of March, was the date that the name was come up with.

The notes I have from the AIDS Action Committee, 3/12, which was the Thursday after the – It says “Issues stated Tuesday, 3/10/87.” *{LAUGHS}* I didn’t take as copious notes the way Brad Ball did, but I have my own version of them. “Direct political action; experimental drugs; cost; inaccessibility; education of young; Board of Education refusal to act, e.g., the film.” There was an AIDS safe-sex education film, I think. “AIDS is not white and gay. International conference June in D.C. Homeless PWAs. The idea of a Project Inform office in New York. Making a layman’s guide to experimental drugs. Questions about AL-721.”

Then there’s notes about Frank Young and [Henry] Waxman’s committee. There were strategies for the FDA demands. Then here’s some of the demands on the FDA. Can’t read my writing. “Insurance” something. “Under commissioner and FDA from the gay community. Congressional oversight of the FDA. Expedition of experimental drugs for compassionate use. AZT tested against other AIDS drugs. Reagan. A congressional investigation into the Reagan administration’s lack of action.

Drugs for ARC, not just AIDS,” AIDS Related Complex. “A national coordinator of the CDC FDA. The syphilis-to-AIDS connection. Increase funding for research,” of course. “Investigation of funding, where the money’s going. To take the drug protocols out of the FDA hands. Remove placebo trials.” Then, it’s funny, at the bottom of the list, “Drugs to PWAs now. Condom ads. The focus away from AZT.”

Then some of the action ideas. “A world peace tax fund. Blockade of all bridge and tunnels. National letter-writing campaign. Stop media trucks at the *Times*. Filling the sky with black balloons,” which I love. That has the epic thing that I love. “Blockade Midtown Tunnel for a day. The U.S. recruiting station, Times Square. National coordination of actions,” which you then did go on to do. “Statue of Liberty. Sloan-Kettering. NIH. The Washington conference. Taking over the Gay Pride Parade, making it a Gay Rage Parade.”

**SS: So, actually, we did almost every single thing on the list.**

AF: We did everything. This was at the first meeting.

**SS: Great. That’s amazing. I want to just ask you something about the final Gran Fury poster. The thing that really strikes me about it is that it’s internal. It’s asking ourselves questions. And that’s really where we were at at that point.**

AF: That’s correct. We were articulating what people didn’t want us to know about ourselves. We were personalizing a public space. I think that Gran Fury up until that point made efforts not do that, and I made efforts not to do that, but it became very clear that there was no way around it. I think it was a bold poster, but as I said to you before, I think that it’s amazing what can be done in miniature and how important

things that go unseen can be. It's funny, because when Doug [Crimp] interviewed us for *Art Forum* like twenty years after or something a couple of years ago, it was the first thing he asked about, and I was stunned by it, because I didn't think anyone had seen it. It was a little like what we were talking about with Silence = Death; without ACT UP, it might have come and gone. And that's how this felt. No one discussed it with us. We put it up in the middle of the night. It was gone in a week. It was deeply meaningful, this poster, to me, and I think in a way my favorite thing that we did.

**SS: And Mark died.**

AF: He died a few years later. He didn't die immediately. But he did die, yeah.

**SS: Now can we talk about Anonymous Queers?**

AF: Yeah.

**SS: Which we have nothing on.**

AF: Really?

**SS: Yes.**

AF: That doesn't surprise me, because I got into a lot of trouble for that too.

**SS: So can you tell me how that got started?**

AF: Well, as I say, I've always worked collectively, and I felt like that there were certain issues that were arising as a result of AIDS that were political that weren't just about AIDS, and there was no voice for that. There was Queer Nation, which I loved, that there was, but it didn't have the same voice as some of the other things I was hearing. So I assembled a collective and we called ourselves Anonymous

Queers, because I didn't know where it was going to lead. It led into some areas that I didn't agree with, but a little like the primeval nature of a political funeral, it had to happen. I felt like it had to happen. I wasn't in a position where I felt like it was mine to control.

**SS: Who was in the collective?**

AF: It was a very loose collective. People came and went. So many people contributed to it. Maria Maggenti; Vince Gagliostro; Heidi Dorow; Rand Snyder, sweet guy; David Gips; Walter Armstrong; a few more people. It'll come to me.

**SS: So what was your first project?**

AF: The first project, I had this idea that the opportunity that arose to address a gay audience that would give the most coverage was the Gay Pride Parade, and, of course, ACT UP felt that way as well, and this is part of what I got into trouble for, what we got into trouble for. So we decided to do a broadsheet to hand out, and, again, this is where I lapse into manifesto, and a lot of this work is incredibly didactic, but it's historical in its voice. We are not the first collective to write in very broad strokes. So it was a four-pager, and on the back cover was a piece that David Robinson wrote that I edited and that Vince and I recontextualized.

It started out as, "I hate it when straight people—," blank, and we changed it to, "I hate straights." And that was more the graphic than the tone of the actual piece, so we superimposed a very provocative conversation that was similar to the one that David was writing, but we forced it a step further by doing that. In fact, I told you I collect [Hugo] Gellert, and he was a WPA artist who was thrown out of the WPA for sneaking red stars into everything. The fist is a Gellert drawing, and so we got into a lot

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of trouble for that. We didn't write it collectively. It was a little like a Quaker meeting; everyone wrote what they felt they needed to say. We cross-edited it. It's badly edited. But we did it late at night in Maria's apartment, all in different corners of the room, and, again, there were no computers, so everything was like reams of typewritten pages, with yellow cross-out notes from this editor, and red cross-out notes from that editor, and it was cobbled together. None of us typed, and it was in the frenzy of the moment, and there's a lot of typos and mistakes in it. But that was the tone of it. That was the intention and the tone.

Then we put it together, and we found a – Another thing to say about all of this agitprop is that there were certain things that you couldn't find a printer to do. In fact, Gran Fury, we had a project or two that we were turned down by printers because of the content. So we found a printer that would print this, and got shopping carts that all broke under the weight of 20,000 copies, broke up into teams and passed them out on the side of the march. But because the carts broke, we put the broadsheets on the back of the ACT UP float, and people were furious about that.

**SS: Who was furious?**

AF: Well, at the meeting, people were.

**SS: Can you name one person?**

AF: Karin Timour?

**SS: Right, who's straight.**

AF: I don't know if it was Karin. It wasn't. It was a woman who had just started working with us. She had dark hair. She was very adamant about it. I don't think it was Karin. It wasn't. Also, Deb Levine, actually, it broke my heart, but she was so – It

was like it cut her out to sea when she read this, because she thought it was about her because she's straight. She was in my affinity group. I love Deb and I trusted her with my life, and she and I snuck into Stephen Joseph's office together.

But I felt like, I have cousins who are black, and I felt like it was very much like the debates that happened around race in America in the sixties. It's not for black people to make white people understand or feel comfortable with their struggle. They can say whatever they want about it. The responsibility of people who are excluded is to listen, not to feel like it's aimed at them, and I felt that way about this. I felt like "Do the work." That's how I felt about it. "You know what? You decide if it's about you, and I'm not going to make it okay. This is true. This is how certain people feel. This is part of it."

**SS: Because David's lover had just died, right?**

AF: Yeah.

**SS: Right.**

AF: Yeah, but I think there was also — there have been separatist movements within feminist and the lesbian separatist movement. It's not the first time anyone has suggested this sort of thing. But that conversation was being had in the circles that I was traveling.

**SS: Then what was your next project? Anonymous Queers?**

AF: We did a series of them. We did the Don't Tread on Me. We did some things that weren't hostile. The Don't Tread on Me was a double-sided poster that talked about freedom as a revolutionary idea and tried to recontextualize the lesbian and gay struggle as the American struggle against tyranny, but it also had flames on it, so it

was intended slightly as an incitement. But every piece we did had multi-uses, so the back had the text that contextualized the Don't Tread on Me on the front so it could be wheatpasted either way, and we did stickers that also the backing of the sticker had that print on it, so you couldn't put the sticker up without also knowing the message. It was all tiered, as everything we did.

Then we did patches that we all wore but no one saw, that had the Don't Tread on Me. Then we did those insane necklaces that was a little plastic disk. It was a concentric circle. We meant it as like a joke hypnosis thing, "Believe it. AIDS, homophobia, racism, sexism will end." Then there were other versions that had two meanings on them. We basically strung them and gave them out, and people were dying over them. Everyone took them. So we did a lot of things that were very benign.

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**SS: They were like the anti-rainbow chain things that people were wearing.**

AF: Exactly. That's right. That's exactly right. But, basically, there I was, a Jew, a New York Jew, doing piecework. We hand-strung every fucking necklace. We were sitting there like cursing at each other at three in the morning, but I'm talking 15,000 of them that we did, and then handed them out.

Actually, we worked with the Marys. We gave them the back of one of our broadsheets, so I guess that would be the third year, the broadsheet that did the red ribbon diatribe, and, boy, did we get in trouble for that one.

**SS: You mean "You can't wear red ribbon if you're dead," that one?**

AF: Yeah, and then it said, "Next time I see a red ribbon, I want to hang myself with one," and we did it as a noose. The graphic was the red ribbon as a noose.

**SS: Because AIDS was becoming banalized.**

AF: Yes. I think that all of this was a part of – I know that this isn't how people intended it. I'm not saying that I wasn't moved by the fact that Rodger [McFarlane] had managed to get everyone at the Academy Awards to put this thing on. That was incredibly meaningful, very significant. Really happy that he did it, and helped everyone, helped the whole thing. But I had other issues surrounding it which had to do with its professionalism, it's professionalization and the part of the cultural move away from the emergency of it and into the acceptance of it.

**SS: Well, you don't really know what it means when someone wears a red ribbon.**

AF: It's coded.

**SS: They feel bad that people have AIDS or something like that. It's very –**

AF: Right. It's not action oriented, but it's not irrelevant. But it wouldn't be my choice as a strategy, and I think that it was fair to have a critique about it. But I was struggling with — You know, I wrote that "Trouble with Angels" piece also, which I got –

**SS: What was that?**

AF: I wrote about angels as a signifier, and it was a period in America where – it was for Triple X Fruit. I wasn't taking potshots at Tony [Kushner], but I heard he was furious about it. It was at a moment in time when angel pins were becoming this big thing, necklaces and pins and TV shows, and it was like this New Age moment where the Right was having their way, and it freaked me out. It really did. But there was also,

within the lesbian and gay community, you would start to see like invites for club nights with, like, sexy guys with angel wings. It was turning into a whole thing. There is a fetish around metamorphosis. Matthew Barney is a perfect example of that. And I felt like it fetishized AIDS, it sexualized it in a way that sexualized death. And moreover, it was a signifier of acceptance, and I don't think there's anything okay about death. I really don't. I'm an atheist. I don't believe in an afterlife. I think all of those conversations are fucked up. I think they're an okay personal response. They are *not* an appropriate communal response to AIDS.

**SS: Okay. I want to move on to the Barbara McClintock Project.**

**Can you help us understand why that was created?**

AF: Well, hope for a cure. The impetus behind it was that we saw what was happening. The people who were involved in it saw that this was happening, and we felt like if we didn't seize this moment, it would become too late, and we were on the cusp too late of it.

**SS: Now, you saw that in ACT UP there were people who were moving to the AIDS as a manageable disease rhetoric?**

AF: No. I saw it as the way that images work in America is the puppet master pulls the strings, we dance. And the idea that AIDS was a chronic manageable condition was an idea that met no resistance. It was good news. On the surface it is. Right?

**SS: Right.**

AF: It's better than getting stabbed in the eye with a stick, but it's not a cure. So there were people who, when those strings were pulled, danced.

**SS: Who pulled those strings?**

AF: Well, it's institutional. These things go extremely deep. There were a lot of people who knew that there were profit incentives attached to the pharmaceutical industry. Everyone knew that, but there were levels at which that was okay for people, and some people it was totally okay, and some people were squeamish but better than getting stabbed in the eye with a stick, and then there were people who were really wary of it.

**SS: So who started this project and why was it named after Barbara McClintock?**

AF: Well, Maxine, I think, chose the name. It was named after McClintock because she was the precursor to — She had done all of this botanical research on the exact same genetic discoveries that [James D.] Watson and [Francis] Crick had later discovered. In fact, she was a colleague of theirs. But as is typical of the power differentials between male researchers and female researchers, she was completely overlooked and not given credit until, I think, much, much later, if at all, you could argue. So that's why we named it after her.

**SS: Who was involved?**

AF: It was Maxine Wolfe, Bob Lederer, Mark Milano, and, oh, god, Ennis Bengdahl. Essentially that was it.

**SS: So what was your goal?**

AF: Well, we wanted to reinvigorate the conversation about a curative. We felt like people were way too fast to just go into the conversation of it being a manageable disease, and, I think we all felt really compelled by that. We felt like we

were really swimming against the tide, but we felt compelled to reintroduce the conversation about a cure. And we did a lot of research. We met every week, sometimes a couple of times a week. We wrote tomes. I have a filing cabinet full of the research we did. It was very well researched.

**SS: What were you researching?**

AF: We were researching how science is researched in America, where the funding comes from, how to set up an institute. We researched the Manhattan Project. We researched black ops. We researched all these other ways in which full-fledged efforts had been made in the name of public causes in America, and structured it based on what we discovered. We did an analysis of all of that and structured an institute. We actually came up with an actual way in which it could be done.

**SS: To do basic science surrounding AIDS?**

AF: To do basic science surrounding AIDS, where the money would come from, how it would be disbursed, what the granting cycles would be. It was very specific.

**SS: How was this received in ACT UP?**

AF: Well, it was an uphill climb, as I recall, but it was in the waning days of ACT UP's – well, "waning" is not the right word, and I don't know what it was the waning days of. It was that moment when we did the white poster. It was the moment when Gran Fury had given up feeling they could be efficacious. It was the moment of the TAG debacles. There were a lot of things happening, and I think when people – I just had a fight with Larry about this. He thinks that there was a discrete reason why ACT UP ended. I don't really think it ended and I don't think there was a reason. It was multifactorial, just like AIDS.

So there were a lot of things going on, and I think that's why it became hard. But we did get published. I think Martin Delaney sided with us. We got an article in *Science* magazine. There were a couple of plans being floated, and I think it was heading in our direction because it was very well researched. We had met with somebody from the Salk Institute to figure out what the physical plant would have to be like. Gerald Nadler had written a bill. I don't really know what happened. I know what people say, that it was scuttled by TAG, but I have no basis for explaining how that could be done and whether that was true, but that is believed to be what happened. There was a competing bill that they were sponsoring, and they had deeper inroads and persuaded people to not support our project, and that's what happened to it. It got as far as Congress.

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**SS: So you and Maxine, etc., were opposed or competing with the TAG guys, even within the realm of Congress.**

AF: Inadvertently, yeah, we were, yeah. We didn't see it as competition, because we felt like – I mean, I'm an any-or-all guy. I never felt like something that somebody else was doing was invalid because I was doing this. I felt like everything was what we should be doing and that was good.

**SS: So my final topic here is the multifactorial split of ACT UP, and I understand that you don't consider it an end, but the split is significant. So can you give us a sense of how you understand that event?**

AF: Well, Steve Webb used to say burnout has a thousand faces.

**SS: Burnout?**

AF: Yeah. It's very funny because when we're talking about an oral history project, it's virtually impossible to describe ACT UP. ACT UP was an organism. It wasn't a thing. It wasn't a group. It was an organism. It had tentacles; some of them died, other ones grew. It had multiple heads. It was all things. It was a social context. It was a community. It was a research group. It was activists. It was radical. It was conservative. It was everything. It was a microcosm for the world. And that's why I don't think it's ended. Nor do I think it started out of Larry Kramer's head. Larry spoke, and everyone in the room who was thinking the same thing, who was there, heard him and did something. That's what happened, and that's how it ended. It ended piece by piece, person by person, death by death, argument by argument, burnout by burnout.

I do think that there are other things as well, that because ACT UP was all of those things, if we're describing what it was, we were talking about the concrete aspects of it, what it achieved, what specific goals we did, the CDC, expanding the definition to include gynecological manifestations, there were so many things we did that are quantifiable that I could name in a list. But then there were all these other things that we forget. It was human beings. Well, as you say, people in trouble. And it was an organism, and I don't think we ever made room for that. No one made room for it. As I've said before about myself, I don't think I did either, and I paid a very heavy price for that, for not allowing myself, my personhood, to be involved in the politic of it. There were other people that that wasn't true of, but that was true of me.

I think there were a lot of people who gave up hope. There was despair. We were worn to a knob. Then protease inhibitors, and then Clinton got elected. You can't really say that it was memos on the back of a table. That was a symptomatic of all

these other things that were happening. That what I mean by multifactorial, and that's where Larry needs a quantifiable discrete end to it and a cause to that, because he's a writer, and we know the beginning and the middle. He's writing the end now. But I don't agree with that matrix for this conversation.

I think that the progress of political thought is not cyclical. People say there's a cycle. It's the Left, it's the Right, or a pendulum swing, like it's bound. I don't see it that way. I think of progress as a spiral. I think of it more like a spiral. I think there's certain things that you achieve that build on other things. Then there are other things that don't stick, and once a bell is rung, it can't be unringed. Certain things will not be taken away, other things will, and you have to know that things can get taken away. Rights can get taken away.

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There's no such thing as it being over. If you're a Jew, you know the answer to whether the Holocaust could happen again. The answer is yes, of course it can. It happens all the time, and it could happen to Jews again. So it's a mistake to think, to be lulled into this institutional cushion that things are okay because we have a sitcom with gay characters in it. It isn't really how it works. But it will never be the same as it was, if it gets bad, because it's a spiral. I wouldn't say it's going up; it's going somewhere. It's motion. It's not a Klein bottle.

**SS: Okay, I only have two more questions. Almost at the end.**

AF: Okay. Has anyone else talked about big-picture things?

**SS: Oh, a lot, many people. Many.**

AF: Good. Because I feel like such a blowhard.

**SS: I mean, Jim Eigo, I've got to tell you, his interview is amazing on this.**

AF: Okay, I'll have to watch it.

**SS: Or you can read the transcript online.**

AF: He's brilliant, Jim Eigo.

**SS: Oh, he has a huge big picture that's so amazing.**

AF: Well, he's one of the few people who saw its mechanisms as poetry, and that is how I see it as well. Do you need to plug it into the wall? There's a power strip right there.

**SS: You want to switch your angle? [inaudible background conversation] Many, many, many, many. There are many amazing interviews. I mean, maybe seventy. Most of these people are really – It's such an interesting group of people. I'd say like five people are boring, out of like 108.**

AF: Really? That doesn't surprise me, because that's how it was.

**SS: Yes. It's a very interesting group of people.**

AF: That's how it was.

**SS: Marlene [McCarty]'s is incredible. Rebecca Cole's, I think, is amazing. It explains a lot of stuff. We just did an incredible interview with Charles King. Zoe Leonard's is amazing. There's just so many, you know.**

AF: Yes. As you say, naming these people, I'm like, of course it would be. That's the thing about it. It was incredibly compassionate and human and smart and funny all at once, which I think is rare, incredibly rare.

**SS: Okay. So, two more questions and then we're done. When did you leave ACT UP?**

AF: Well –

**SS: Let us just say that you met your beautiful boyfriend in ACT UP, Phil [Montana].**

AF: I did.

**SS: So you are one of two surviving relationships from ACT UP.**

AF: Is that true?

**SS: Richard [Elovich] and Daniel [Wolfe] being the other.**

AF: Oh, that's right. Yeah, we've been together like twenty-two years now. You know we met at the installation at White Columns. Did you know that?

**SS: No.**

AF: Yeah, I was there. I actually remember after the meetings we would go to Montana Eve and all debrief, everyone would get drunk and howl, and we took the whole restaurant over. We were assembling teams to do the installation at White Columns where we'd been offered the gallery. Peter McQuaid, do you remember him?

**SS: No.**

AF: Willie Smith's old boyfriend, was at a table, and I went over to – I'd actually eyed Phil at a meeting. Do you remember Allison from the ISO?

**SS: Of course. Allison Smith.**

AF: She had this very funny voice. [imitates Smith's voice] She talked like this a little bit. She was in the middle of speaking, and I looked over and there was this incredibly beautiful but beet-red, like, sunburned boy. It was Phil. I thought, "God,

he's cute. Okay." I thought, "Okay, what can I say to get his attention?" I leaned over and I said, "Do you have a Bic pen? Because I think she needs an emergency tracheotomy." It was like the weirdest come-on line, but he laughed, and I thought, "Okay, this guy's cute."

He was sitting at the table with Peter McQuaid, so I went over to Peter and pretended he wasn't there and said, "We're doing this installation. Do you want to help?" And he lunged at it, and that's how we met.

Anyway, what did you ask me?

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

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AF: Well, as you know, I'd formed many collectives. Anonymous Queers. We were doing a lot of other work. So I didn't really feel like I was leaving ACT UP. I stopped going to the meetings, and I think that probably was '96, '97? Ninety-five? I'm not sure. It was probably a year and a half, another year after the McClintock Project. Do you have a date on that?

**SS: No, but '95 is very late. I'm not sure that that's –**

AF: I don't know. I don't know.

**SS: Why did you stop going to meetings?**

AF: Well, I do feel like the ball had been taken away when the treatment issues, which had been purposely pushed as the major focus of the group, again, based on the hierarchy of urgency, there were people dying, so drug therapies were essential to the work we were doing, but once that became professionalized within our group, once people started to – There was a moment at the beginning of ACT UP for a long time where everyone actively participated in it. There was a Research and Data, Research and

Treatment Committee, but they reported regularly to the floor, and a lot of other people were in various disciplines and had things to offer from the floor. So it wasn't discrete, those conversations. As it became more and more discrete, the floor became more and more detached from what those actual issues might be.

I think there was a lack of mooring at a certain point, and that's when I stopped going because I thought, "Okay, well, I'll just go to actions. I don't really have anything to offer here." Gran Fury had stopped working. The issues seemed to be too complex for those strategies. I believe that text was really the only way to approach it, so I started writing, and a lot of the projects I did were text-heavy. And I felt like the strategies were changing. The world was changing. The strategies were changing.

**SS: So what happened to your life when you left ACT UP?**

AF: Well, I think that another thing that people forget about political activism and political movements, is they don't exactly go away. They ebb and flow, and that does run on a cycle. After you've been politically active for a while and you've noticed that, you don't feel so compelled to prevent something from stopping. You see something as having a life and knowing that there will be a moment again. That's kind of how I see the gay struggle, see the question of AIDS, see all of these questions. So I would say that I retreated back into my life, but that would be a little reductive, because I haven't stopped writing and I've been asked many times to participate in formations of new groups. Nothing has come of any of it. I've done political work for AIDS organizations, logos and posters and things like that. So I sort of am seeing myself in hibernation.

But I think I also need to say that the question of HIV-positive, HIV-negative synchronicity or asynchronicity, as a surviving member of an asynchronous couple born of ACT UP, it doesn't go away. It doesn't get easier. It doesn't.

**SS: So do you ever think about doing a work about that?**

AF: I think I am doing work about that.

**SS: That's what you're writing about?**

AF: Yeah, I'm working on a book.

**SS: Great. Fantastic.**

**SS: Final question, and we ask everybody at the end of the interview, in your view, what was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what was its biggest disappointment?**

AF: You should have asked me that at the beginning of this conversation. That is a very complicated question.

**SS: That's okay.**

AF: I think that its biggest achievement was the proof of the potential for spontaneous community that diverse to be a decision-making entity that was so efficacious, but also at the same time that it did that be incredibly humane, hysterically funny, passionate, trusting, furious, and also in doing all of that, prove that it can be done, which I don't know if I'd say it's a first, but it sure felt like one.

I'd never experienced anything like that, and, as I said, I was raised in the Left and worked in the Left. I don't know. My dad, I remember during ACT UP, I would come back with these very high-blown conversations about what we were doing, and just like an old Lefty would do, he would just shake his head and say, "There's no

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such thing as revolution in America. Can't be done." Maybe the Bolsheviks felt this way, maybe the Socialists felt this way, maybe the Trots felt this way. I don't know. Maybe there were other moments in history. I just haven't experienced one like this. And I do know that my dad was incredibly disillusioned by the fact that things didn't change here, so maybe he felt that way. I don't know.

But it felt like a first to me, and I think that was its greatest achievement. If there's a point to history, it's to hear that this could happen. The other things are momentary, ancillary and, as I said, you're locked in a dance with capitalism. The achievements about concrete medical advances, I think are up for question, in my estimation. Yes, things did happen that we participated in, but who's to say protease inhibitors wouldn't have happened anyway? Who's to say? Who's to say that the pharmaceutical companies – the idea that we made them do something is part of the picture. We did hold their feet to the fire, but they took advantage of us as well. So they would have found their way. Medicines would have come about. We would not have participated in that process, and maybe it would have been worse. So that's why I wouldn't say that that's our greatest achievement. I think that that's evanescent or the proof is in the pudding or still under development is what I would say about that part of it.

**SS: And what about its biggest disappointment?**

AF: I'm not sure what you mean. Disappointment to me?

**SS: Yes, to you.**

AF: Or disappointment in terms of its achieving its goals?

**SS: To you.**

AF: Biggest disappointment. Well, I know this going to sound incredibly inauthentic, but I would say that my biggest disappointment is that we weren't able to save the lives of the people whose lives we weren't able to save.

**SS: Right.**

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AF: I think that that would be my personal — I really did feel, I think a lot of us did, like we were saving lives, and I think we actually were. We definitely were. But as anyone who went through it knows, and I think it's worth saying to remind people, that it was a different time. People were slipping through our fingers like grains of sand. There wasn't a day that went by when somebody didn't die. And, I think I really did feel like I could prevent that and wasn't able to, and I don't know what I would have done without ACT UP, because there were other people who felt the same way and helped me through it or made it better or made it slower, the death.

I guess the other thing I would say I was disappointed by is the missing of that. After the conference in Harvard, I felt a serious postpartum. Even though it was a weird little conference and a very motley group of people there, I felt a serious postpartum afterwards, and I think that I probably haven't been honest with myself about that part of it. That would be another disappointment, a more personal, not a more personal, but a different personal disappointment.

**SS: Thank you, Avram.**