

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

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Interviewee: **Vincent Gagliostro**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Vincent Gagliostro
February 26, 2005**

SARAH SCHULMAN: So the tapes are forty minutes.

Vincent Gagliostro: What's that?

SS: Each tape is 40 minutes. So after 40 minutes we'll stop and change tapes. And you can go as long as you wish.

VG: What's that?

SS: We can go as long as you wish.

VG: Oh god.

Jim Hubbard: OK, OK. Here goes.

SS: Ready? OK, if we could start you can say your name, where we are, how old you are and today's date.

VG: OK. My name is Vincent Gagliostro. We are in New York City on Houston Street. It's July 8th, 2005 and I'm fifty years old.

SS: OK, look at me, not the camera.

VG: Oh, look at –

SS: Me.

VG: Look at you.

SS: Yes.

VG: OK. So do it again?

SS: No, it's OK. You don't have to do it again. It's just that –

VG: OK, so I don't have to look at the camera. Fabulous.

SS: OK. So Vince you went to Hackensack High? So were you born in Hackensack?

VG: I was born in Hackensack. Yeah.

SS: So what did your parent's do?

VG: My mother started out as a beautician and owned a beauty salon and then, you know, raised us. My father was a buyer for a supermarket chain.

SS: Were they born here?

VG: My father was born in Italy.

SS: And your mother was born here?

VG: And my mother was born here.

SS: So did you grow up in an Italian environment?

VG: Yeah, pretty much. It was kind of a split personality Italian environment because my father's side of the family was very, very old world and refused to speak English. My father spoke English. My father was probably the most modern. My mother's side of the family was very, very modern. My grandfather was an architect and he came here, and the kids had to speak English. It was a very, so it was kind of like—I'd go to one side, and OK. It got interesting as I got older because they didn't understand — I was very political since I was thirteen, in the anti-war movement and all that kind of stuff. So when I started showing up at their things with various buttons on it got interesting.

SS: Cause your family wasn't against the war?

VG: They just, you know, didn't think about it. My father's side of the family. My mother's side of the family — I had an aunt who was probably responsible for all of my activism. She was my mother's partner in this beauty salon, but she always wanted to be a journalist. And finished high school and that was that. And so she was very, very outspoken. And we would get into huge, huge arguments? And I would — many years

later, as I got older and I would talk to her about things, you know. She said — I always thought that she disagreed with me, but she didn't disagree with me she just didn't want me to be disappointed. Which was kind of wonderful —

SS: What were her politics?

VG: Her politics were very liberal. But we would have — she was kind of the belief that there was no point in trying to take Richard Nixon down because he's there.

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Kind of that kind of — accepting, but very liberal. And she didn't see the point in protesting and stuff like that for whatever reasons, which was interesting because she was very fiery about stuff. But, like I said, somehow it just boiled down to she didn't want to see me disappointed, but didn't disagree that I could make a difference.

SS: Did you have anyone in your family or your neighborhood who was drafted? Was that a topic for conversation?

VG: No, no.

SS: OK, so how did you end up on the anti-war side of things by age thirteen?

VG: Well I was in— Let's see, yeah I guess it was 8th grade. Yeah, '68, and I — I'm not sure. Sometimes I think it's your genes. I really do. It was not only the anti-war movement. I organized a demonstration against our parish church because there was this young priest who would have a group of kids go to, at the time, these projects at Newark— to have them like paint and clean things. A lot of parishioners had taken up a petition to have them transferred because they didn't like the idea that their kids were being taken to these awful neighborhoods. And six of us stood in front of the church with signs. And my mother was coming to church. Oh, hi, so that's where you went to this

morning. That kind of things — I really don't know because there was no incident. And I just started—

SS: But that sounds like it was about of some type of racism on the part of the—

VG: Yeah, I think so. Even going — I went to Catholic school. Even there, I think, some of teachers that I had — they had lay teachers and nuns — but some of the — There was a few pockets of renegade nuns. It was a volatile time in history so that had to come into the classroom at some point. It was a very kind of advanced Catholic school in a lot of ways. It was very liberal and until you had to decide whether you were going to a Catholic high school or a public high school.

And I'll never forget — it kind of cinched the deal for me. I decided to go to Hackensack High instead of a Catholic high school. I was in the boy's room one day at a urinal and I felt this hand on my shoulder. I was hoping it was going to be one of the jocks, but it was a nun! I turned around and she was like, "That's what's going to happen to you if you go to Hackensack High School." I said, "What is going to happen to me, a nun is going to come?" I was hysterical. She was like, "You're going to get attacked". I was like, "Oh my god." To this day I can't go in a urinal. It was such a strange crazy time because I was so politically active and thoughtful. And what she was insinuating was that Hackensack High School was a very controversial school. It was one of the first three high schools in the country to be fully integrated and it had a very, very good reputation in terms of education. I was really anxious to go there. To kind of have people other than white, Irish and Italian people in a classroom. And to see what—

Just out of curiosity. Because that wasn't my circle, and it soon became this incredible experience. I think that we are all magnets for people and I think that if you're a particular magnet you will attract the kind of people that will inspire you and influence you. To this day my senior English teacher, who I just had lunch with on Sunday. There were these few people in my life growing up in that age that kind of helped me create the political side. A lot of sides of me. But one side definitely was the political side.

SS: You said your grandfather was an architect?

VG: Yeah.

SS: Did you start to emerge as an artist around that same time?

VG: Oh yeah. Yeah, very much so.

SS: And did politics and art come together for you that early? Or were they separate?

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VG: I guess — I mean I made posters, kind of rag tag posters. Not as sophisticated as I would do later on, especially for ACT UP. I was always the display person.

SS: Do you remember any of the posters that you made?

VG: Probably not. I am trying to think of the one that I made for the church protest. I guess that was the precursor to St. Patrick's. Six to ten thousand — I think I probably did the typical — put a Hitler mustache on the pastor's face or something like that. Yeah, it's vague. But I think we probably did some stuff like that.

SS: So were you already committed to becoming an artist by the time you went to high school?

VG: Yeah, I knew. I remember, speaking of the posters, artists like John Lennon and Yoko Ono printed that poster of the My Lai massacre. A friend of mine — we lived in a garden apartment complex — we taped the posters on people's doors. I remember one morning I hear this banging on the door. It is like six in the morning, and I hear this banging and moaning, "Your son!" I come out and say, "What's the matter?" "Look at what my child has to look at when he goes to school in the morning!" And I was screaming, "Your child should look at this!" So, yeah. And they were artists to me and I was very interested in music also and that and very kind of interested in personalities, actually. Speaking out. I would go and hear Jane Fonda speak and all that kind of stuff. Someone once told me that if you decided to see Jane Fonda speak you were automatically put on the FBI list. That's good.

SS: Nothing has changed in your whole life?

VG: Nothing has changed, it's so sick.

SS: When did your homosexuality become integrated in this? At that time?

VG: Then, oh yes, I was very out in Hackensack High School, totally.

SS: Did you have a boyfriend?

VG: No, little dalliances. But, oh yeah, it was very — all the jocks loved me because I was friends with all their girlfriends and they knew their silly girlfriends were safe. So it was kind of cool. Yeah, yeah, I was very, very much out. I would listen to WBAI in my bedroom from when I was eleven and twelve and that kind of thing, and one of my first — I came to New York whenever the first pride march was. I came with this girlfriend of mine. It was great then, because I didn't mind the fact that when we got there, she was marching with the small dyke contingent at the time — they said I couldn't

march with her. It was like totally OK with me. I'll find you. I was like, "It's OK. I'll find you." As opposed to at this time, it's a joke. You have to be with a group to even march. So —

SS: So what was that first pride march? What year was that?

VG: When was that? I was like — I was in high school—So it had to be—Either '69 or '68.

SS: Was there a rally or anything like that?

VG: There was a rally. Yeah, we went to a rally in Central Park.

SS: Was it uptown?

VG: Yeah, it was uptown. It was in Central Park. It was — not to be — I don't think of it nostalgically. It was just that it was political. It was always — when it can be compared to today. Today it is just not political. You have to sneak your way into a march and hand out a broad sheet just to be political.

SS: Show us the broad sheet that you handed out at Gay Pride.

VG: It says, "We will not protect you. We are Pink Tank."

SS: Can you summarize it?

VG: Yeah, I mean basically it's — it came about as a group of us got together to think about — we were all kind of thinking about, thinking about, something and we sat in my living room. It was very much like — I wasn't totally involved for the most part in the creation of the Silence = Death poster, but I had gone to some of the early meetings because they were all friends of mine and it was basically a support group kind of feeling. It started with all of us talking about where we are at. All of the sudden you could hear the same things that we were all saying fifteen years ago. We were horrified, terrified,

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angry, fearful, fearless and all felt that this time we've got to get this message out. It's really personal. We're being threatened. We have to become the bigger threat. We have to really — if we're being threatened, they're so threatened by us. We have to give them something to really be threatened by. So that's kind of how this came about. And given the politics of the people in the Pink Tank group we decided once again — as we have in the past many times — decided that the message had to be directed to the lesbian and gay community and not to the politicians. Because the lesbian and gay community has sold itself up and down the river. And if we don't watch out there is going to be no turning back.

SS: What does that mean to you?

VG: It's when the entire history of a movement gets kind of reduced down to a wedding cake. It scares the hell out of me. And I knew that I was going to be even more scared once I started to hand them out. It was very nerve-racking. I felt like a total stranger. People took them — a lot of people — there was very little resistance to taking them. I started to then get selective to who I was giving them to. Because there were a lot of tourists and they weren't gay. With cameras and stuff like that. And they wanted ten, and that kind of thing, and they were just not going to get it. A lot of people would pick it up, and the kind of comments that I would hear would be, "But, I need protection." I would say, "Please read it. You don't really need protection. You don't need me to protect you. You don't need marriage to protect you." What was very interesting when people were hesitant you'd come up with kind of like lies to give them something that could take them. I started to just say, "It's a ad hoc group from ACT UP." And people went, "Oh." And they took it. Which really kind of encouraging and very

empowering. I was very surprised. I tried it a few times, especially as we got lower down town and we realized — I turned to my friend Avram [Finkelstein], and I said, “Avram, look at the float we are next to. There were a bunch of naked guys on the HX float. But, we can’t compete. We can’t get their attention to take the damn things.” But as we started, a lot of those guys, as I said to them, “We’re some folks from ACT UP who got together.” They went, “Oh.” And they took it. Which kind of gave me a lot of hope and interest in continuing the project because when I say that it’s our — we haven’t reduced our movement down to a wedding cake. The politicians have reduced our movement down to a wedding cake.

SS: Well what’s different in the historic moment between today and right before ACT UP was created?

VG: I think, what’s different is that right before ACT UP was created, we were — ACT UP was able to communicate it’s message because there was — because people didn’t think they knew anything. Or enough. Today, I think, in a lot of ways, it’s very hard. First of all, you cannot communicate the way we communicated in ACT UP anymore. People know too much. We were talking to, into a listening that was open to hear because no one knew anything about anything, really. Especially about, or around, AIDS. No one even knew that AIDS could potentially be a political minefield. There was curiosity, which is always great. There was a lot of fear, which is always great for a provocative activist group. Because propaganda feeds on fear. But today, there’s kind of this weird fear. There’s fear like when someone says something like, “I need protection.” People want — what this — going back to your question — what this book is about is that marriage won’t protect you. The closet won’t protect you. TV isn’t going to protect

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you. Will and Grace isn't going to protect you. None of this stuff is going to protect you. And ultimately, we are under attack. Aside from — I've shown some of my ignorance— But aside from women and gays and lesbians, I don't know the past — right now we have legislation that's being introduced against us. Gay and lesbians — this is the first time in history where elections have been won, presidents have been elected according to the polls, because we've got to stop gay marriage. I'm not sure that we asked for it. We bought into it because we see a way to be protected. Then we'll have the same—It'll be the same for us as it is for them, but it already is the same for us.

SS: What's the same?

VG: It's like—I can make sure that if I get hit by a truck, the person that I lived with for the last 28 years, Richard, will be allowed to get into my hospital room. I can do that. I don't need to be married to do that. If I want to make sure that my fortune gets left to Richard, I can do that. It's my right as a human being under the constitution. I don't need gay marriage.

SS: So why do people want it?

VG: Because it is symbolic.

SS: Of what?

VG: It is symbolic of acceptance. It is just like — a number of years ago I was sitting in a meeting with the—over the military. Avram and I were invited by David Mixner to be the graphic designers for all of the materials. And all the powers that be in the gay community were sitting at this table. I said something that elicited this response from somebody, I don't remember who it was, was going to tell me what my problem

was. I said, "Please. What's my problem?" He said, "You're not a victim." I said, "I've gotta go." I said, "You've got to be kidding." So for me —

SS: So you think that the wish for acceptance is misguided?

VG: I think it is totally misguided.

SS: Why? Could you explain that?

VG: If you ask somebody, "What does it buy you?" I think you would be hard pressed to hear anything that they can't buy already. It's this mentality that permeates the lesbian and gay community from, I think, the beginning of time. That we don't deserve "it." Whatever all the "its" are. When I ran a weekly gay and lesbian magazine. Somebody —

SS: Say the name of it.

VG: *QW*. Somebody at ACT UP came up to me and asked me why it looked so good. That it didn't — basically he was saying that it didn't deserve to look that good. It didn't deserve to have a glossy cover. That's insanity. But that's what leads us to this state. That's what led us to the state we are in. How do you walk around thinking that you don't deserve a magazine as beautiful and as amazing and as provocative as *Vanity Fair*? But in the same breath desperately seeking to be part of the mainstream.

SS: And what is your answer? Why do people feel that way?

VG: We are the mainstream!

SS: What is the source of these negative feelings?

VG: Oh, god, I think you'd have to go the individual's analyst couch.

SS: But, millions and millions of people? It's not individual, right?

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VG: Because I think that it is so strange because people we think that we will gain power through acceptance and through being the same and being like everybody else. But what is interesting is that I say, “Are we fooling ourselves and are we really giving up the power we have because you are not a victim. You were not oppressed. Unless, you’re getting something out of it.”

SS: So you feel like you’ve never experienced oppression as a gay man?

VG: No.

SS: Not from your family, not from—

VG: Never. I could just look at it personally and attribute it to the fact that it never fazed me.

SS: Why is that?

VG: Because it just didn’t seem like I was doing anything that anybody else shouldn’t be doing. You know, if there’s a war going on that you disagree with how can you live in the United States and not say something about it? If you agree with it? I don’t care whether you disagree or agree. I don’t understand being oblivious to the world around you. And then going into a voting booth and voting. What are you voting for? What’s that about? Just because you can?

SS: Let me ask you differently. I am asking this specifically to you because many people are emotionally destabilized by the cruelty of homophobia in their lives. And you are saying that it hasn’t happened to you?

VG: It hasn’t happened to me. I’m not saying, yes. And everybody has to work it out however they need to work it out. I’m not going to play Tom Cruise and say, “You don’t know what you are talking about, all Brooke Shields had to do was change her

diet.” I mean how could he speak for a woman in post-partum depression. He’s never been pregnant. He’s never delivered a baby. For god sake, it’s asinine. I didn’t have a family that was in any way oppressive.

SS: OK.

VG: In fact, it became oppressive in another way. I once got very angry at my mother because it was my first or second year here in New York, and I was visiting and she was driving me back to the city because she was going to stay over and we were on the George Washington Bridge and I asked her her opinion about something. And she said, “Yeah, sure that’s great.” I looked at her and said, “How can everything I do be OK with you? How can everything be great?” I said, “I’ve never felt so left out. Everybody complains about their mother and father. My father’s dead, so I can’t even complain about him any more. And how can I complain about you, you’ve always let me do anything I wanted to do.” So, in a lot of ways, that’s what sent me to the shrink.

SS: Just to anchor what we are talking about. If you have a type of emotional support then certain kind of political oppression get mitigated in some way. But many gay people, it’s part of that oppression; they don’t have that support system. So there is a relationship between the absence of support and their desire for social acceptance. Don’t you think?

VG: Absolutely. But, it seemed that for a moment there were leaders in the lesbian and gay community that could tell the story differently.

SS: Who were you thinking of?

VG: I have the worst memory for names.

SS: Who were the people who inspired you?

VG: People who inspired me, let's see, Larry Kramer for one. I knew him before ACT UP from his books. And I immediately got that voice. It's funny. People that inspire me — Gloria Steinem, Bella Abzug. A lot of women because when I was in high school and active in the anti-war stuff and McGovern campaign and everything, somehow I was around a lot of these women. A lot of these women were kind of like — like Gloria Steinem was friends with some congressman who was running in New Jersey, that kind of thing. I would always go to a lot of the women's rallies and stuff like that because it's kind of where it was happening. It was volatile. I met Jane Fonda twice — there were these really powerful voices that happened to be women that were, I think, saying something more to me than just what they were saying. They were teaching me to not be afraid to speak and to have an opinion about something. I'll never forget, we were — Who was it? — Bella Abzug was a friend of this guy also, this congressman. We were sitting in his campaign headquarters that day, and they were really good friends —

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SS: What was this guy's name?

VG: His name? I know his last name was Lessman. I think it was Art Lessman. She was visiting, and I think Gloria Steinem was just visiting. I don't think they were friends or anything. They were complaining about something. She was there to kind of help or something and she just — nobody was paying attention to her, so she dumped over the table and said, "Now, I've got your attention." I'll never forget it. I was with Larry and a few people from ACT UP and there was this conference in the Marriot on 45th St and I just knew where it was going to go because we had this idea, we had our fake blood, and we were going to drop fake blood on the food.

SS: What was the conference?

VG: I forget what it was. I'm going to be awful with that because I just forget.

SS: OK.

VG: So just all of the sudden Larry said, "Vincent get over here!" Takes the whole buffet table with me and we dump it. Forget about drops of blood on the food. Just forget about it; just dump the whole fucking thing all over the place. Then we ran, we ran. And I flashed to that moment when I was like fourteen and Bella Abzug dumping this table. Over and everything. But now our speaker—I'm going to get into trouble cause I'll start saying—

SS: That's OK, go for it.

VG: People like Joan Garry and GLAAD, just all of it—I did a piece for this thing called Gay Organizations Won't Protect You. That's a huge problem right now. Gay organizations, they're—

SS: Well, when ACT UP started we had all these gay organizations and they weren't doing anything then either.

VG: Well, yeah. I think that is why ACT UP started. The people like Larry and myself and some other people that were kind of involved in the Gay Men's Health Crisis, and stuff like that, they were doing something for a minute, but — you know what it is? It's like — I think what happened to activism was the minute you individually as an activist or as an activist organization start to try to do it right, you're screwed.

SS: What do you mean right?

VG: Because if you start thinking whether you're about to do something is the right way or the wrong way — well, I'll give you an example. At an ACT UP meeting,

in the later years of ACT UP, not late late, but — I'll never forget one whole meeting was talking about getting arrested and putting a limit on the number of people getting arrested. And I said, "How the hell are you going to put a limit on how many people get arrested? Are we just going to have a little area where we are going to do something and those people can get arrested, but the other one's can't get arrested?" I said, "Think about it, look at what we're talking about? The action is no longer about the issue. It's about getting arrested." That's what I mean. It's kind of like, that started to become the right way to do demonstrations. Which leads me, I think, a round about way — an answer your question — is that there are no issues. There are issues but the action around, in our community — whether it's around rights, constitutional rights or AIDS care or research or anything. They're not looked at as issues.

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And the problem is that the issue is that these are issues and these are hugely unresolved issues and very dangerous. Because if you — I mean I'm working on a film, a project right now that I'm writing, that's part autobiographical, it's part fiction. The centerpiece is based on a short story a friend of mine wrote, William Wilson, called *After Louie*. It starts out with, "I think I know how I got the AIDS virus." And then gives you this whole history of the Mineshaft and the instructions and these questions. It's wonderful. Right now the film is called *The Future of AIDS*. And the scenes are about — It's a kid sitting at a table talking to his boyfriend about this piece that he's reading in a history book that Larry wrote about some people dying, and then asking him if he's got a hard-on or something. So, it's kind of — for me it's that there is a future to AIDS is our fault. We fucked up. We believed the hype. We believed that it was no longer a fatal illness. There's nobody I know today that isn't dying of AIDS. But, it's not — we

gave up and we blame our giving up on, 'We're tired.' I blame — I didn't do stuff for a number of years, and—Because the only thing that I could think of doing was asking questions because you can't tell people, "Get off your ass and demonstrate," anymore. Because it doesn't resonate, it just sounds like, oh, them again. I'm afraid that we're all in for a rude awakening,

SS: OK. Are we near the end of this?

Jim Hubbard: We have about five more minutes.

SS: OK, let's switch tapes.

VG: I'm so bad with names....

SS: So let's go back in time. It's 1980; you are not an oppressed homosexual. You've already met the man you're going to spend the next three decades and more with. When did you start to become aware of AIDS?

VG: I can tell you exactly when. At the time we had always rented a place in Long Island with Richard's brother, and at the time, his brother's lover, myself and Richard. And we riding home one Sunday night and listening to one of those radio talk shows and it was about the *New York Times*' article so it was just that. That's kind of — that was the moment where something just kind of hit me.

SS: Do you have any recollection of what your first thought were or your reactions to this information?

VG: It was very—I felt very distant from it because the talk was about it was a result of promiscuity and I never had even been to Fire Island because I was like an Easthampton, Southampton boy. My friends in arts school, parents had places out there,

so that's kind of where I went, I didn't go to Fire Island. I felt very distant as political of a person I was, it was oddly not my world.

SS: But also, and this connects to what you are doing now, gay people, at that time, never found out about ourselves through the mass media.

VG: Never.

SS: So wouldn't it be odd to hear something about yourself on the news that you had no inkling of?

VG: Yeah. Yeah.

SS: So when did it become part of your reality?

VG: It became fiercely part of my reality when my best friend died in '84.

SS: Who is that?

VG: His name is Don Yowell. And he was actually Avram's boyfriend. And I guess they kind of met through me, kind of surreptitiously. Don was a musician, a songwriter. And we lived in the same apartment building.

SS: How do you spell his last name?

VG: Y-O-W-E-L-L

The affinity that we had was that we were both totally in love with Laura Nyro. And at the time I was babysitting a friend's piano. And I didn't play the piano, I just thought it would look good in the apartment, so I said, "Bring it over." And I worked in an ad agency, and Don didn't work, he was a songwriter. So I would come home and he'd either be there or one day I came home and there were like every Laura Nyro album laid out along the floor with a note on the piano: "I just needed a hit of Laura. Call me." So we just had this extraordinary relation. And on top of everything else, Laura Nyro's

father was a piano tuner and he would always tune Don's piano and he said, "You've got to get him over her!" Which he did. And from that I met Laura and this whole thing. That is kind of who he was to me. He was very promiscuous. Don could not go down to laundry room and not have sex. None of us never knew how he did it. He lived with these two other guys who were close friends, Peter and Chris Leone. So it was like a dormitory but it was this huge building, it was very funny.

So Don was the first person who ever took me to the Mineshaft, which was this underground place where men went to have sex. But I thought it was a bar also. And it was but—But we were downstairs and I had a beer in my hand, and I thought, "Where'd Don go?" Then it was like, "Oh, oh, oh!" I was like, "Don, Don, Don!" And people where like, "Shhhhh!" I was like, "I'm leaving." It wasn't that I didn't like it, but it just wasn't my thing.

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So that's who he was. And he started to get sick probably in like early—like late '82. But it was like—It wasn't anything, it was like this, that, and the other thing. But it wasn't AIDS, that kind of thing. He was very protective of me. He never really ever told me the truth about his health. And I guess, as I said, I think I was still distant from all the talk and all the chatter about the "Gay Disease" because I didn't know anybody. So what ultimately happened was that I ran into Don. I was at the ballet, and he was there. We didn't know that we were there on the same night. He was with Avram and he looked awful. We went out to dinner and he said, "I'm going to London because I'm working on some record and blah, blah, blah." And he left, and I said, "He's lying." And three days later I got home and I was listening to my messages and it was Peter from upstairs, "Vincent called me." I went to myself, "Don died."

SS: Three days later?

VG: Yeah, and that was in '84. There was no longer a distance.

SS: So he had AIDS and he knew it and he and Avram didn't talk to any of their friends about it. Did Avram know?

VG: Yeah, yeah. I'm trying to remember the whole fabric of our world then, and wondering why it was like that. I'm not sure. For me, I know when Avram—I was very angry. But what Avram said to me was that, "Don made me swear that I would not tell you."

I've learned to respect that. And later on when I had an exhibition in Hanover, Germany, and it was being curated by this guy, this sociology professor, Lutz Ebor. He was very interested—He was into this whole high art/low art thing. I was always very argumentative. I told him that he cannot have ACT UP posters and hang them in the gallery. First of all I said, "It's not history. And until somebody tells me that no one will ever die of AIDS again it's not history. So, it's not to be looked at as history." It can be documented, but documenting it does not mean hanging it on the gallery wall. I said, "There are many ways for people to find out about stuff." So I wouldn't do it. So I said, "I don't know if you want to exhibit my drawings, but I'm not letting you have the political stuff to put on the wall. But I will do a piece for you about where I'm at today." It ended up being a video piece. It was called, *When Did I Forget*. It opens with a Laura Nyro song and opens with, "In 1984 my best friend Don Yowell died of AIDS." I think I made the piece in 1987 or '88. And it said 1987. For the sake of argument—1987, When Did I Forget? It opens with a Laura Nyro song and my favorite character in the world, Peter Pan, so it's Mary Martin. What I did was that I took all of the ACT UP graphics

that I had ever done, or anyone I had ever done, and made slides of them. Put them in a carousel backwards, projected them on the wall, and videotaped it. And that was the videotape.

There were a lot of questions. The whole piece was questions. It was basically, “What are you looking at?” What I didn’t realize that there was a slight language problem because the first time that it was seen was in Germany and people kind of didn’t get it. It was kind of great because it was connected to my first real connection to AIDS. It was kind of — what I think, as an activist, I think it’s always been personal for me and not. It’s personal for me, but not about me. But I have to draw from who I am and my self and what I see. When it’s successful, if a poster’s successful, if a newsletter’s successful it transcends that and you can find yourself in it.

Tape II
00:10:00

SS: Did you worry that you could be infected at that time?

VG: Not at the beginning and then I did go through this whole kind of paranoia. I tried to think—When it started to be like, it’s not about promiscuity, and this could be anyone. It could be one person — so yeah. And I went through a period when I was breaking out in hives and I thought — a friend of mine said to me — I said, “How can you tell whether it’s a hive or a lesion?” He said, “Well press on it and if it stays the same it is probably a lesion.” I said, “I don’t think it’s pretty helpful, but I’ll try it.”

SS: When you were feeling paranoid was your relationship to AIDS activism different then when you felt you were secure that you were not HIV?

VG: No, I don’t think so. No. It’s interesting for me, thinking about it now— It’s personal but as I said, but I think because it’s when I’m here sitting working on a painting or doing whatever I’m doing versus when I’m out on the street handing

something out. It's not. Making a painting is about me. Making a piece of propaganda is not. But it comes from me. It comes from my point-of-view and my observations and my decisions about things and what I want to say. So it is my voice and I am trying to sway you. But the thing is that I'm not going to sway you if you somehow can't find your voice in the piece. So that's always been the distinction that I make. It's very personal for me.

SS: So when Avram started to invite you to these meetings, which was to become the Silence = Death Project, can you characterize those meetings for us?

VG: A little bit. I really was on the fringe of them. Because it was—

SS: Who was there?

VG: Let's see. It was Ave. It was Chris Leone. It was Oliver Johnston who was pretty much the designer of the piece who I was in school with at Parson's School of Design. He was in my class. The first person who invited me to it was actually Chris Leone, who said, "You should come, it's really like this support group." And it's interesting because that turned me off. The notion of a support group. Because I was very not into any of that. Any psychology or any of that. I had gone to a shrink for a year when I was seventeen and left when he said that I should come twice a week. I said I couldn't afford it. He asked me, "What are you eating?" I couldn't make the connection. Then I finally made the connection that he was saying that if I was eating food that was too expensive, that I could cut down, that I could then come to him twice a week. I said to him, "I think our sessions are over. I don't think so." I was very off that.

Tape II
00:15:00

Even to this day. Avram jokes with me, I'm not a process person. I have an idea. I don't care if it's right or wrong. I went to print it and stick it somewhere. It's not that I

don't — I respect process and probably everything I've ever done that's been good has come out of a process. But I'm always like the one in the meeting who's really got ants in his pants. Just do it! Just do it! Just do it! I can't talk about it kind of thing. So it was not my thing to kind of massage an idea. And I learned that later on when I got involved with Gran Fury. Talk about process. It was just too much.

Getting back to it. My experience of Silence = Death was that. So I stopped going before the nitty gritty design of the poster.

SS: Did you believe that silence equals death?

VG: Yes, absolutely. Absolutely. To me, that's what was moving then— What came out of those meetings. And that's what moving to this day. Those two words and that equal sign should just be emblazoned on everybody's minds; gay, straight or otherwise. Because that is ultimately leading us to — has led us to the world we are in today because we're—

(Pause)

SS: Had you been involved in any gay organizations before you came to ACT UP?

VG: Yeah, early on I would go to all the meetings at the Firehouse.

SS: For GLF?

VG: Yeah, I was always at those kinds of meetings doing stuff. Anything kind of pre-Gay Men's Health Crisis kind of stuff. It was more gay rights kind of stuff.

SS: Were you active in GLS? Was it GAA?

VG: GAA

SS: You were in GAA?

VG: Yeah, Gay Activist Alliance.

SS: That's what I thought.

VG: Yeah, I mean you'd go to the marches and you'd hand out things. That's kind of—I was like the weirdest person. It wasn't my social world, which was really odd. I never hung out at gay bars. I have plenty of gay friends, but I also — my problem was that in art school, I was involved in the art world. In those days, big artists that were my teachers they had parties at their lofts. Everyone and their mother was there. Sylvia Miles was there. She was always there. That was my world. Warhol was my world. So there was no delineation of sexual preference. Everybody was after everybody's ass. So I always wanted to be with my friends. My girlfriends couldn't go, at this time especially at this time, it's not that they wouldn't go to a gay bar if they'd let them in, but they wouldn't let them in. So it was not my social world, so it was really just politics for me. I would go, do my thing and I wouldn't hang out. In school, I had this painting teacher who was so hot and I had this incredible crush on him, and all the girls loved him too, and I knew he was gay. So I got myself to be his apprentice and his assistance. We had a little thing. Once he said to me, "You don't seem gay." I went, "Well I am." He said, "So where do you go?" And I started to tell him. And he said, "Well those aren't gay bars." And I said, "Well my girlfriends can't go to gay bars." My favorite bar ended up being Studio 54, that was my world.

It was interesting for me because my politics have always been politics and my social world has always been something different.

SS: But ACT UP changed that for you?

VG: Yes, ACT UP changed it. ACT UP definitely changed it.

SS: And why is that?

VG: For me, it was the first time that in a group of people with all of the anger and the fear and not so many—I mean arguments, but I guess ACT UP went through different phases of arguments. Early on, what changed and created my social world— Was that there was this whole sense of trust.

Tape II
00:20:00

ACT UP was around for about — I went to, I went to the second meeting, or whatever kind of thing. I wasn't at the first one, but I was at the next one. Avram said to me, "Here you should talk to this guy. Vincent can do amazing posters." There was this acceptance. This guy didn't know who I was, but because you were there you were trusted. I think that created then a social world that was part and parcel to the activist world.

When you're planning the kinds of demonstrations, especially the ones that were being planned very early on, that were very, very secretive. Very undercover — even City Hall and — but then when I started getting involved in a lot of the ancillary group things with Peter Staley and Burroughs Wellcome — the affinity groups. I was very involved in the — unlike a lot of people I'm a huge fan of Peter. Peter and I are very dear friends and I take enormous amount of credit for telling them to get off their butts. To many people's chagrin started TAG — I just got tired of hearing them complain about ACT UP. I said, "Come to my apartment and start something else. I don't care."

It was kind of thrilling to — when I knew we were going to be inside the stock exchange and come hell or high water the stock exchange was not going to start on time. I knew that that we could do it. So my whole—To do that, to pull that off, you have to

live and breath with each other and trust the fiber of every single person's being to pull something like that off.

SS: Let's talk about that action specifically. Can you really go through that and tell us how it got organized, when it got organized, who did it?

VG: Yeah, pretty much. We had a meeting scheduled at the ACT UP office and I believe that it was the one that was on 8th Avenue at the time. In that big building. Peter, we were waiting on Peter to decide whether we were going to do this or not. And he was out of town. He was doing something else. It was like four, five in the morning and we decided that — we spoke to him, and we decided that that was what we were going to do.

We didn't weigh the pros and cons and say, my god, this is going to involve the FBI and CIA even though, again in a different way — this was dangerous. But all of a sudden when the next time we met we got so charged by the way we had to do it. How are we going to get IDs?

SS: Can you explain what the goal was and what the exact action was?

VG: The goal was basically to — the point of it was to lower the price of AZT. And so it was basically an action, really, Burroughs Wellcome. The only way — we had decided that the only way to do that was to affect their stock. So we decided that the only way to do that was to stop the stock exchange from opening. So we thought, "OK, we can do that." And so that was the goal. Because, as any of these goals, we figured, well that'll get 'em. That'll lower the price of AZT. That was the goal. That's what was so incredible about those kinds of actions. That was it. It wasn't about making a statement. It was just to lower the price of a drug. And that—When ACT UP was brilliant, that's when we had brilliant successes.

SS: So out of the realm of the symbolic?

VG: Yes, totally out of the realm of the symbolic. It was just to do one thing and one thing alone. But what we got off on was what we had to do to make that happen. Get the fake IDs. The strategy of what kind of suits are we all going to wear? And we can't rely on the Associated Press to take pictures so we have to figure out a way to get pictures taken, from the inside, get the film to someone on the outside and get it up to AP. And we did.

Tape II
00:25:00

SS: Can you tell me those three things?

VG: OK.

SS: How did you make the IDs? What suits did you wear? And how did you get the pictures out?

VG: OK. Grey suits. Of course, grey suits. I don't know how we got — I don't know how Peter got the IDs. I don't think anybody knows.

SS: But he got IDs and you copied them with your brilliance?

VG: Yeah. But I don't know how he got them. I didn't ask. But, all I know is that we knew exactly — what should be in the pockets. There had to be a pencil. The whole — it was like — I don't even know — I left it up to him because he was on Wall Street. He knew Wall Street.

I guess my biggest job was to facilitate it. To be one of the people that make sure this happens. That's when I had to give up the idea of going inside myself, because everybody tried to make me realize, with not too much difficulty, that I was really good at making it happen. I was a really good director of operations, so to speak. So I was the one to figure out how to get photos taken, which I did. I had Victor Mendolia inside with

a camera and he knew exactly where I was going to stand. And he knew exactly where I was going to stand, and as they were coming out he knew I had one chance to catch that roll of film, and I caught it. I'll never forget it. When I had it in my hands some guy comes up to me. I don't know if he saw it or not. He said, "So is there anybody else inside?" I said, "Well there's a lot of people trying to trade." He said, "You know what I mean." I said, "No, I don't." Because I wasn't in a grey suit because I couldn't be in a grey suit. I'm this—I was like, "Leave me alone." And then I had somebody set to take the film from me and go get it processed and sent out. It's extraordinary. And to watch it happen as it was happening.

SS: What did they do inside?

VG: Basically we had fake dollars—We made these kinds of fake dollar bills with a Burroughs Wellcome criminal message on it. We had a foghorn, bell and a banner. So the dollar bills went to the floor. We sounded the foghorn and bells and just released the banner and I think it was like, 9:04, and the stock exchange hadn't opened, which was the first time in the history of that. And we decided that if we made that happen it would lower the price of AZT, and it did.

SS: And how did doing that get to the lower price? What's the exact — I mean wasn't every stock effected? Why would Burroughs' stock be more affected?

VG: The price.

SS: Their price went down?

VG: Yeah. I mean they would probably say it had nothing to do with the demonstration.

SS: The prices of their shares go down?

VG: No, the price of the drug went down.

SS: And how long did it take after that?

VG: It was not too long; it wasn't even a few months. Because it was really — if you keep your focus on what you set out to do. We set out to lower the price of a drug. And we believed, and started to see evidence, that PR for these companies was very important to them. It almost became whether it was Hoffman-LaRoche or Burroughs Wellcome, they get caught in a Catch-22, because they're not going to sacrifice profit for bad press. They are too stupid for that. They are too greedy for that, which is kind of in opposition to what I said. But it's not really. Bad press is not good. Especially at that moment, in that climate.

What happens is I think is in any drug company like that then, when they did acquiesce is because they saw that they stood to make an enormous amount of money if they look like our friend.

I will never forget one day in ACT UP, I think it was Hoffman-LaRoche that wanted to give ACT UP ten thousand dollars, and there was a whole discussion. I, of course, was in the minority that agreed with Peter that thought we should take the money because that wasn't going to stop us from doing an action at Hoffman-LaRoche. That is why ACT UP worked when it did, because it wasn't personal. It was just about what we need. We could use that money. We don't need to have a discussion. Oh now, we are not going to have a demonstration against Hoffman-LaRoche. We are actually going to have a discussion about having a demonstration at Hoffman-LaRoche, and take their money.

Tape II
00:30:00

But the problems that started to arise at ACT UP was that the philosophy became what the organization started to be about as opposed to just doing it. Getting up and citing something that you wanted to effect and figure out a way to just do it. And not philosophize about it. There's no philosophy in activism. There is no word of philosophy that's worth it's metal as far as activism is concerned.

SS: But were there any, as you put it, philosophical realms or ideas that you opened up to in the course of your time there that you may not have held in the beginning?

VG: I don't know. No.

SS: How did it change you to be in ACT UP?

VG: The big change was that I never thought that I was a public person. I know this sounds insane—Given the fact that I protested a Catholic Church when I was thirteen and I just—To me it wasn't—I just never thought that I'd ever be able to get in front of a camera and get poked by a fellow activist and say, "Cry!" OK. I just never thought that I was able, I guess, be manipulative as an activist. That's what changed me. I learned that it was OK. That my job was to manipulate you. To get you to believe that what I'm telling you was true.

SS: And were you telling the truth?

VG: Hmmm?

SS: Were you telling the truth?

VG: Yeah. We were right. ACT UP was right from day one. Whatever ACT UP is doing now, they're right. It's that simple.

SS: OK. Tell us about the time you cried on television.

VG: Oh god. It was — Dinkins was in office. Oh god, I'll never forget that. Dinkins was in office. It was me and Mark Harrington, and kind of that usual set of suspects. We were trying to get into, we were having a demonstration there of some sort. It wasn't like a huge thing, but it was something. It was just a lot of bullshit. Dinkins was seeing us. He wasn't seeing us. He was seeing us.

So we just kind of — I don't know how we got. I guess it didn't matter then. We didn't have to deal with the ramifications of terrorism at the time. So we walked up the steps and basically knocked on the door. And I think it was his person at the time, Denis DeLeon.

SS: Yes.

VG: Yes. And he opened the door like this. It was like out of a movie. And Mark's and my face are at the door and there are camera's inside. And we said, "Is Mayor Dickens going to see us or not." And he started to basically tell us no. Mark just went, "Cry!" And I cried.

SS: What did you say?

VG: I just cried. I said, "How could you?" And I know where that whatever — I mean god knows what I was saying. It made it on the 6 o'clock news. My mother called me and said, "What was going on? What were you crying about?" And I said, "Dinkins wouldn't meet with us." And she said, "OK."

It was just moments like that that led me to, I guess, to a change of who I was as a person. As an activist. It gave me license to be the manipulative person I always knew I could be. Because I always believed, I always, I'm very free with my opinions.

SS: Do you remember a particular moment of authentic grief?

VG: Authentic?

SS: Grief connected to ACT UP.

VG: I'm sorry, what?

SS: Do you remember a moment of authentic grief?

VG: Uh, huh.

SS: Connected to your ACT UP experience?

VG: Yeah. There was the FDA.

SS: Tell us what you mean.

VG: 'Cause I had gone down there — I wasn't in Avram's affinity group. I was down there with William Wilson, my friend William Wilson, Ingrid Sischy — Who at the time was at *New Yorker* and was starting to write a major piece on AIDS activism and stuff like that. She asked me if I would videotape. If I'd bring my video camera and give her that tapes. So I said, "Yeah." And so, I started—It's interesting the grief, in a way. Because when I started to videotape stuff other than the group actions where there'd be these meeting with all the different affinity groups. They were all really sad. It was all very serious. It was very serious.

And as much as ACT UP had done up to that point, I think it hit home for a lot of people when we were down there. I mean it just, just from my observations from a video camera, and even their fear of my video camera in the different groups—The paranoia. It was very sad.

SS: What had hit home?

VG: What hit home was what we were up against.

SS: And how would you characterize it?

VG: It seemed impermeable.

SS: And what was the force against us?

VG: Bureaucracy. And to get that not a word of truth was coming from that building was probably one of scariest moments of my life because I felt threatened. I felt my life was in jeopardy, because if I did get infected, what was I going to do? There is no truth about this around me. It was that demonstration that made it.

I think everything that I did after that, as a member of ACT UP, really came from a very—I wasn't afraid to really have it come from a very authentic—to use that word—place.

I had such a charge behind the demonstration at St. Patrick's and it might have had something to do with my Catholic upbringing. I'm sure. And the hypocrisy that I very early on experienced. But, I was ruthless with regard to that demonstration.

SS: I want to into that later.

VG: Yeah. But it was then.

SS: I want to ask you to make sense of something that I don't have a satisfactory answer to. These individuals, these bureaucrats. Whatever, these government officials. These were human beings whose names we know. Whose faces we have looked at. Why were they lying? And why were they not doing what needed to be done?

VG: I don't know if this is a satisfactory answer, but I think they were lying for the same reasons that anybody that worked for an organization. But just—Because—It would effect their careers. I know that it doesn't sound like a satisfactory answer, but I'm convinced that what — because the FDA should not be a political institution. And it is a

political institution. It shouldn't be. So if you work in a political institution, if you run the FDA, then you have to reflect the politics of the White House.

Tape II
00:40:00

So that's why they lied, because the White House was lying. And you know — question the White House? The White House is the White House. Ronald Reagan was beyond a liar. First of all, he was lying to himself. But so if you worked for Ronald Reagan, you have to tote the party line. That's why it was unconscionable. The sad part is and I think again, at the FDA, The sad part, what contributed to the sadness was that you just couldn't believe that when it came to the health of people that their conscious didn't figure into the equation.

SS: But this issue that you're raising – ruthless lying in order to build a career. This surrounds us on all sides, because there were openly gay bureaucrats that made that choice. There were people who were in the closet and are still in the closet. There were artists who would not connect to a political movement. There were people at every element of this who chose their careers over ending the AIDS crisis. And we were surrounded by them. We still are.

VG: Yeah. I wouldn't treat—I wouldn't discriminate between any of them. I would treat them the same way I treated them.

SS: So how come you didn't do that?

JW: You're going to have to hold that thought. We need to change tape.

Tape III
00:00:00

SS: OK, you're on.

VG: Oh, OK. What was I saying?

SS: We were talking about career ruthlessness.

VG: Career ruthlessness. I can't believe he brought that up because it came up in a conversation this morning with Daniel. You asked me why I didn't do that. It really didn't occur to me. And if it did, I wouldn't have known how to do it. To this day, I have gallery owners who have known me for ten years and don't know I'm a painter. It's just like — I don't know why that is.

SS: Did you ever have confrontations with people on a one-to-one basis, who you knew who were in the closet and who wouldn't be part of the movement. Or who felt that it was career suicide to be seen as — not be a political person? Larry [Kramer] was always screaming about that.

VG: Did I ever have — let me see, did I ever have confrontations? Yeah. Yeah. I was probably — I would scream at somebody if I wanted them to do something and they wouldn't.

SS: Let's talk about your posters. What was the first poster that you did for ACT UP?

VG: Let's see—The first ACT UP poster? Oh, let me see. What was it? It was— Oh, damn. It was before the FDA. {PAUSE} Let's see. It was an AZT poster.

SS: The Coca-Cola one?

VG: No, because that was like not for ACT UP. It was — I didn't do anything for City Hall. So whatever was after that — Is when I started doing stuff.

SS: Did you start doing posters independently of Gran Fury?

VG: Yeah, I mean I was the one—I started doing the posters for ACT UP right after City Hall.

SS: What were some of the pre-Gran Fury posters that you did?

VG: They were for like the NIH. The NIH was all mine and Avram's that we did just for ACT UP. And NIH was—We had this vision where we were going to surround the NIH in flames. And we did these posters that were die-cut flames in my studio. We left my studio knee-deep in foam core. We just couldn't believe that—I had these circular saws, jigsaws. Avram and I kept looking at each other and, "We're out of our minds." They're like, "We're insane." We are two people cutting all these posters into flames. I think they said, "We're Fired Up." Of course, what else would we say? I'll never forget, we didn't get them all done. So some of them were just left square. And they all got stuffed in the bus. As we were getting out of the bus and handing out the posters and they started handing out some of the square ones. And I said, "No! Not the square ones. Those are just if we need them. Everyone, now you all gotta like circle this bloody place. And we've got to hold up the flames." It kind of goes kind of like—For a minute the demonstration became about the flames, the posters. But we had this—We had planned this idea of the kind of photographs we wanted to release and that kind of thing—So we had this vision of what it was going to look like. Well it didn't. We got tear gassed, so that was the end of that.

Tape III
00:05:00

That was kind of like the big — before them there was some smaller things —

SS: When you would design a poster would anyone have to approve it?

VG: ACT UP. We brought it to the floor of ACT UP.

SS: Every poster?

VG: Pretty much.

SS: Did you ever bring in something that they vetoed?

VG: Yeah, it was for the Stop the Church action.

SS: Oh, what was it —

VG: Um...

SS: Oh, I remember that one.

VG: Oh, you remember that one. I had done this poster with these—I said that they were nuns, but they weren't nuns. They were Iranian —

SS: They were Iranian women in full chador with guns.

VG: Yeah, with guns. I didn't understand why that was a problem because it just so worked for the message. I think we snuck some of them in. I think they ended up at the demo anyway. Of course. But it was probably — there were very few incidents where I think that anything I ever did got shot down. It was pretty — it got annoying at times and my whole not wanting to beat something to a pulp before you just go ahead and print it, kind of thing. But I understood. I wasn't into the process, but I understand process. I understand that, especially in ACT UP, that was a very empowering kind of process. To have a floor talk about a graphic, and it was very empowering for me, as much as it was for the entire floor. I never felt disempowered. I wasn't hard — I just didn't get the whole problem with the Iranian women with the guns, but I didn't take it personally. It was like — it's my problem, not theirs. It kind of speaks to my philosophy in a lot of ways, about political graphics, or even to borrow the now kind of boring statement, "By Any Means Necessary." It didn't matter to me. It was just, again, this is something you heard about. Doing the right kind of thing, or being correct about it. Its like — if I'm going to be correct about a thing of propaganda, it can't possibly be a piece of propaganda.

SS: Well, you did these AZT posters?

VG: Yes, *Enjoy AZT*.

SS: OK. Well wasn't that in the Coke logo?

VG: Yeah, we appropriated the Coca-Cola swirl.

SS: Can you talk a little bit about what was going on with AZT and ACT UP's position with AZT when you were working on the posters?

VG: Yeah. What was going on with it was that, with AZT, was that it seemed that we were buying that that was the answer. And that, for a moment that was the drug that was saving lives. So we should support that drug. And it got — when the voices started to — they had some voices of dissent, about that drug, that we're not talking about the dangers of that drug, and why it was necessary to pursue other treatments and drugs. That voice was perceived as an unnecessary voice of dissent because we don't want to damage where we've already gotten to. And that, I think — when I started over years to think about in retrospect — the AZT poster was born out of a very, very dangerous moment in ACT UP. Which is why it met with a volatile reaction. Because people were personally offended by it. Somebody said to me, "You're not even positive. You don't know what AZT means to me, how dare you?" How I translated that for myself was that, we are in big trouble. Which was born out when, as time went on, and cocktails started to happen, we just kept buying every solution and afraid to criticize or diss something that — no one was talking about side effects. That's really what that poster was about.

SS: But you're also raising something that was a big tension in ACT UP and eventually led to the split, which was some people with AIDS — not all — Who felt invested, personally for their own survival, in a particular thing. Felt threatened by a larger, as you might say, philosophical discussion that might challenge or expand

the particular thing that they felt protected by. And that's a long-term tension in ACT UP.

VG: Well the biggest — it's so eerie how I could sit here today and see the relevance of the piece I just did, *We Will Not Protect You*. Look at the word you just used. Whether you were some fierce AIDS activist or some closeted gay boy, all along is all we've been looking for is protection? It's like how could you, what have we been willing to accept? What are the side effects that we've been willing to be OK with for that protection? That is this abstract idea. How on earth could, how could you feel threatened by a poster that's raising issues that you better be aware of, if you want to live? — is basically what we were saying. Because we were artists, and political artists and graphic designers, we were able to have at our fingertips ideas that were added to the provocative nature of the statements. Like the Coca Cola — Enjoy AZT. *Enjoy AZT* was something that Avram had wanted to do that poster for two years before we did that poster. I don't know how we did it. We were just sitting here one day, at my studio at the time, and Avram was like, "We've got to do it. Let's just do it. Let's not try to get it approved by ACT UP. Let's just print it ourselves." And that's what we did. We started to do that. We started to do that with the NIH. We printed the *Enjoy AZT* poster was in conjunction with *NIH*. But we didn't put the ACT UP logo on it. And the Bush Serial Killer poster was a NIH poster that we didn't put the ACT UP logo on it. The Day-Glo poster we did. And we did the sticker with the flames. That was all approved by ACT UP. But it was interesting that you couldn't get a poster that said, "Serial Killer," approved by the floor of ACT UP at that time.

SS: Why? What was the objection?

VG: I don't know, but we never thought to bring it.

SS: So you just assumed it?

VG: Yeah, we assumed it. There were certain posters and things, and communications that Avram, and myself, and a few other people, Victor Mendolia, and a few other people wanted to put out there that we didn't want to change a word of it. We wanted it to say it the way we wanted to say it. Just as political activists and artists. And we didn't care whoever knew who did it, or didn't, fine. We didn't sign it, it didn't matter. It was just an ad hoc piece of stuff to throw on throw on the street.

With the *Enjoy AZT*, I must have been the most naive person in the world to have no idea of the reaction that that poster was going to get. I got punched — it was just violent.

SS: You got punched by whom?

VG: I'd rather not say.

SS: Ooohh, OK.

VG: I'll just say David,

SS: What?

VG: I'll just say David.

SS: David, OK.

VG: It's so hard for me to sit here and say you can't. If you are going to affect change, you can't make it about you. And it's hard for me to say that to somebody who is relying on a drug to stay alive. All I can say to them is that my little poster is not going to take that drug away from you.

SS: But also, a lot of times, artists — and you're not doing this — if somebody responds in a negative way to something they made, they interpret that as being censored.

VG: Oh yeah. That's bullshit.

SS: — or being criticized, but it just means that you are part of a dialogue.

VG: That's all. I mean that's the whole idea. We talked about if we were going to have a contact number on this *We Will Not Protect You* piece. And we decided not to because we were not a group. I mean everyone went to Cooper Union that night in hopes that Larry was about to form a new group, and he got a kind of violent reaction. The negative reaction that he got by the people that were questioning him — I can safely attribute that to these kids, they were just pissed off that Larry wasn't starting something. So it was always—And that's how I think that those posters for ACT UP, those posters that were done without the endorsement for ACT UP—Like the *Enjoy AZT* and *Serial Killer*, and a number of other things kind of gave birth to The Anonymous Queers and that infamous piece we published called, *Queers Read This*.

SS: Yeah, and that was you, David Robinson and—

VG: David Robinson, Avram, Maxine Wolf, Heidi [Dorow], and Tracy Morgan.

SS: And what did that say? It was mostly handed out at Gay Pride?

VG: We handed it out at Gay Pride. That Gay Pride. The front of it said, *Gays Read This*. The back of it had the now infamous piece called, *I Hate Straights*. If I knew then what I knew now, as a graphic designer, don't make the largest words, I hate straights, because no one's ever going to read the piece. Because David would say, "If

you'd just read the piece, that's not—" I said, "Why'd you let me do that?" Well it looked good.

SS: Well, why did you feel a need to do that, because ACT UP was at its height?

VG: Because we started to feel, because I started to feel that I no longer had anything to say to Washington. And that I started to sense that there was something going on in our community that was not good. And that we started to believe some of the stuff we were hearing out of Washington and we started to trust some of the people that were saying some of that stuff. That was a red flag to me.

SS: This was post Clinton?

VG: Oh no, no.

SS: So this was during Reagan?

VG: This was Bush.

SS: Bush. So what were you believing?

VG: We were kind of trusting the NIH and the FDA. Because more drugs were around and things were looking, it sounds stupid to say, better. It just seemed to be. We thought we were winning. Especially when Bush wasn't re-elected. We thought we really won. And that's when I said to myself, "We are in big trouble." I was very, very involved in the Clinton campaign. I was very involved when Clinton was in office. Started with the first thing he decides to do — the draft thing. Not the draft thing. The don't ask, don't tell thing. And then be foolish for them to hire me and Avram to do it. I saw—I knew we were in trouble. This is crazy.

Clinton is an amazing man. I don't think, in my lifetime, I'll experience a president with a heart. Because I think he really cared, and he does care. But, there were a lot of people — he still had all these people around him who, let's face it, he had all these people around him who wanted to please him. If it pleased him to have a successful Don't Ask, Don't Tell campaign, so at the end of the day there wasn't really a lot of depth going on. But what I started to see happen in our community — I remember when Dinkins got elected, I sat in Maria Maggenti's apartment and we all cheered and we all hung on his speech, waiting to say the word, gay. And when he said the word gay, we all cheered. And I cheered too, but I felt really weird about it.

SS: Do you think that the government can ever do anything for gay people?

VG: No.

SS: Why?

VG: The mechanics of it. It's not set up. The government can't do anything for anybody but itself. It's about sustaining itself. That's what all governments are. And we happen to live in a democracy where we see, sometimes, a fairly decent guy trying to sustain the government, or a complete and total moron like George W. Bush trying to sustain the government, who makes statements like, "The French don't even have a word for entrepreneur." It's scary! {Laughing} I mean he really thinks that. When he says stuff like that, they don't know that he is going to say stuff like that, so what do you do? He was joking? Come on!

SS: You think that people should always be in an oppositional relationship to the government?

VG: Yeah. I'm an old-school leftist. Not a very intellectual one. But history has proved to us that the government has never done a damn thing for anybody. None of us would be sitting here talking about the things we're talking about if the government was doing anything for anybody – doing anything but sustaining itself. And it's fine. We need government. There are laws in the books that do protect us. But other than that it is kind of a useless thing.

SS: Before we were talking about fame and careers and now we are talking about the system and the government. Now when Gran Fury was started there were tensions around these questions. Can you explain some of that historically so we can get a clear—

VG: Tensions around—?

SS: Career versus activism.

VG: Yeah. That's probably — it's the reason why Gran Fury kind of disbanded. Because in Gran Fury there were, I guess there just were artists who were involved in Gran Fury just happened to have careers. And they didn't have — it was kind of like you're damned if you do, your damned if you don't. And you do have a choice. A career is as important to me as it is to any of the members of Gran Fury that have been accused of using it for their career. I've used it — I don't think anybody says, "I'm a painter and I'm going to go this gallery and tell them that they should see me because I'm a member of Gran Fury. And do you know what Gran Fury is?" It doesn't work that way. You are approached. I've been approached a zillion times. How many posters do I have? Could I sign them? Could I sell them? I didn't not sign them and not sell them because I am

this great wonderful moral person; I just come from this naive point of view that if someone wants one why can't they have one. It's just a piece of propaganda, formally.

SS: Do you think that people who were on career tracks made different formal choices on how they constructed posters for ACT UP or graphics for ACT UP?

VG: No.

SS: No. So that aesthetically Gran Fury was united —

VG: Yeah. Gran Fury had an aesthetic. To this day, Avram and I will joke about it. I did something with a signature, don't use a script. That was a Gran Fury kind of thing. Gran Fury always had an aesthetic. It was just that group of designers. You are lucky when you get a collective and there is just a common aesthetic that just seemed to work. But it was — the aesthetic came first. What was attached to it from the outside came from the outside. Nothing was ever done to please a gallerist or a magazine. Do it if they wanted if they wanted it. We were very savvy graphic designers and artists. So if you are good at what you do, you know how to make it provocative. You know how to make it tasty. You know how to make it sexy.

SS: Who was in Gran Fury?

VG: Let's see. Avram Finkelstein, Don Moffett, and Charles — I'm not good with names.

SS: Charles who died? That Charles?

VG: No. Um, Kreloff. Charles Kreloff. God, what's his name, Bill something-or-other. I'm so bad with names. Sorry.

SS: So what posters did you do with Gran Fury?

VG: Let's see. I did — I'll work backwards — I worked on, it wasn't a poster, it was *The New York Crimes*.

SS: What was that?

VG: *New York Crimes* was a kind of facsimile of the *New York Times*. It looked just like the *New York Times*, but it was called *The New York Crimes*. What we did was that everything you read in the paper had to do with AIDS. What we did was that we put it in the vending machines of the *New York Times*, and just kind of watched people read them. It was amazing how far people would get before they'd realize they weren't reading the *New York Times*. That was kind of the first project I worked on.

SS: So who did you work on that with?

VG: That was with Don Moffett and Avram Finkelstein. And we did up in the offices of Avon.

SS: Why? 'Cause who was working at Avon?

VG: I was. Don't ask me why we did it there. We all had our studios, but whatever. And then we did—

SS: Do you think that's related to the Bob Gober newspaper work?

VG: I don't know. Then there was a pamphlet that we did. I did a lot of pamphlets and those kinds of things. At the end of the day, there weren't that many posters that Gran Fury ended up doing. There were a series of ads that were done for Artforum.

SS: What were they?

VG: I think the closest thing to any kind of accusation of careerist was that Artforum invited Gran Fury to do a series of pages because they used to have this "art

project.” Gran Fury never said it wasn’t a collection of artists. Gran Fury was not an AIDS activist group. Gran Fury was a group of artists with an activist bent, who were political activist group, around the subject of AIDS. And they were artists. Nobody made any bones about not being an artist. As artists, we were always thrilled to be invited. We were invited to the Venice Biennale.

SS: Did you go?

VG: No, I didn’t. So, as artists you were thrilled to see a billboard up. That was our job. And then Gran Fury kind of went, then there was a lot of riffs.

SS: Can you tell us about just one?

VG: Judgments. Just judgments about things that we are talking about. Like, does he have a gallery because he is a member of Gran Fury, or does he have a gallery because he is a good artist? Now who is anybody to sit there and answer that. I don’t know. I have an opinion about whether someone is a good artist or not, but that is neither here nor there.

Then what happen was Gran Fury started meeting at Charles Krelloff’s place. Gran Fury hadn’t done anything in a bit, and then we decided to do something. So we did a poster with a series of questions. A big white poster with four little questions. Not very visual.

SS: What were the questions?

VG: Let’s see — “When was the last time you cried?” That was the last thing, I think. “Do you know anybody who is HIV-Positive?” “Do you trust” — and that was a weird one. “Do you trust someone who is HIV-Positive?” Something like that. And it went up.

SS: What was the point of the poster?

VG: The point of the poster was to change the tactic of a message. We had decided that we didn't have any statements to make. That we only had a bunch of questions. And that poster, that took a year. That was the closest thing I think to my— The few experiences I had with the Silence = Death group was the closest thing to a support group that I was ever involved in again. Those questions — to arrive at those four or five questions that were on that poster. They got there through a lot of tears and a lot of sadness and a lot of fights and a lot of hurt feelings. It was a very, very emotional piece.

SS: What was at stake? Why was it so contentious?

VG: We thought that it was the first time, in a while, that a poster was going to go up addressing the issues that we had been addressing for so many years in a different way. We didn't know if people were going to write answers to them. We had no idea. Because as usual, there was never a mechanism set up to gauge the results. There was no contact number. It's interesting because what we've all learned over the years, when you do something like that, the press is only going to be interested if they can attribute it to something, somebody or a group. So we signed it, Gran Fury. But nobody really knew — when you sign stuff — even in the heady of Gran Fury, it wasn't listed in the phone book like ACT UP. It was listed in the phone book, which is fine. It's kind of — again we did it for us because we felt we had to do it. Somehow we ended up in this room, and this is what came up. And then was able — as any artist is always faced with, whether you're doing a political piece or painting, it's not yours when it's done. That has always been so easy for me. Because I am so not nostalgic about anything.

I was once interviewed for *New York* magazine and the piece was supposed to be about, did I think then was more creative then now. Then was the eighties and now at the time was the nineties. I was like, “I don’t think this will be a long interview because, no.” There was like silence on the phone. “Sorry, I’ve never been more creative in my life then right now, at this second, actually talking to you.” And that was the end of it. We talked for a little bit but that was kind of the end of it.

SS: I just want to take a little break.

VG: Mmmm, hmm.

SS: How are we doing?

JW: Five minutes left?

VG: There you go.

SS: I just need to stretch.

SS: OK, Vince. So how did Stop The Church happen?

VG: You really want to know?

SS: Yeah.

VG: Victor Mendolia lived on 34th street and 8th Avenue and we are on the roof of his building, completely bombed out of our minds, screaming off the top, because Cardinal O’Connor had just said some hideous thing about something — I think it was the abortion thing. We were like, we know what we have to. We have to have an ACT UP demonstration against St. Patrick’s. That’s how it started.

SS: So then what happened? Did you come to the floor with it?

VG: Yeah, we presented it to the floor.

SS: What did they say?

VG: We did it.

SS: Was there any objection at first?

VG: Not actually, at first there wasn't so much objections but as we started to introduce themes and different things people started to get concerned over how much — the whole notion of offending. Is that going to kind of backfire? It was definitely rough going to get it really to happen because — you have someone like me who has to meet with — what was the name of that organization, the gay Catholics?

SS: Dignity.

VG: Dignity. Oh god. See? I was sitting there totally respecting what they had to say but not understanding how they could participate in a religion that hates them. When you are coming from that place, it's very difficult for someone like me to be concerned about offending people because I'm offended.

So we kind of got through it with what I think — Very powerful graphics.

SS: What are some of your favorite graphics from that?

VG: My favorite one is just putting crazy spiral eyes on Cardinal O'Connor. I don't know why. *Know Your Scumbags*, I didn't do that, Richard Deagle did. That was great. And then the kind of doing in conjunction with WHAM [Women's Health Action Mobilization], which was, I think, something kind of challenging for ACT UP because ACT UP is not an organization whose purpose is to deal with abortion rights. But it was kind of easily decided that you just couldn't have a demonstration against the Catholic Church if that wasn't an issue.

SS: Who were the principle organizers from ACT UP and from WHAM?

VG: The principle organizers from ACT UP were Victor and myself. I don't know who they were from WHAM.

SS: OK. So what did you have in mind? What actually happened?

VG: What actually happened was close to what we had in mind. Really what we had in mind was — there was never much to popular discussion. Any discussion in our meetings about disrupting the service. In fact the discussion was that we would not disrupt the service. Even Victor and I didn't have to be talked out of disrupting the service. Because it just didn't — our point wasn't to the people at mass. Our point was never to tell you not to practice your religious beliefs in a building. Our demonstration was really — actually what started to happen was that the name “Stop the Church” — there were two phrases, “Stop the Church” and “Stop this Man.” “Stop the Church” was a phrase that was met with a lot of objections. I understood the objection because that wasn't what the demonstration was about. The demonstration was really a demonstration against Cardinal O'Connor much like a demonstration citing Koch as an enemy or Albany.

JW: We have to change tape. Can you hold that thought?

VG: Oh, sure.

SS: So if your plan was to not stop the mass, what did you envision?

VG: I guess it came to the closest thing to an awareness campaign demonstration that maybe ACT UP ever got to, because it was basically to demonize Cardinal O'Connor.

SS: Yeah, but what did you think was going to happen? What was your plan? What was the action that was not going to stop the mass?

Tape III
00:40:00

Tape IV
00:00:00

VG: The action was just a demonstration in front of the church. We kind of had no plan.

SS: So who organized the inside the church?

VG: It was kind of not organized. It was Tom Keene who was very involved—I didn't know about it. I didn't know it was going to happen.

SS: Where you inside the church?

VG: No.

SS: OK, I was inside the church. People knew to go lie on the floor.

VG: These were affinity group actions.

SS: Oh. Which affinity groups?

VG: They weren't official affinity groups. They were groups of people in the meetings who wanted to do things. The kind of things they wanted to do couldn't be brought to the floor of ACT UP because they would know that they were going to do them. It was like left up to the people who wanted to do what they wanted to do to just do it. We didn't have any support outside for the people who were going to lie down in the church.

SS: And you honestly didn't know that people were going to lie down in the church?

VG: No.

SS: And were they going against the expressed wishes of ACT UP?

VG: Well if you construed it as that was disrupting the mass, so yeah.

SS: ACT UP never chose to disrupt the mass?

VG: Yeah, no.

SS: See, I didn't know that till this minute.

VG: I was just like—I can't believe they just did that. It was the host. It was Tom Keane spitting out the host thing. What was discussed in terms of inside, inside of the church was discussed and it was agreed upon that anything that would happen inside would not disrupt the service. How those two things happen, I don't know. Because the thing is that I know that the discussion of desecration was obviously not part and parcel to any planning meetings. Discussion on how to do something inside the church and not disrupt the church occurred, but what was decided was that we don't want to know about it.

Tape IV
00:05:00

SS: But who made the facsimile of the church program that was handed out?

VG: Oh, I did.

SS: Oh, you did! Vince, you're not telling me the story. You have to tell us. This is for history.

VG: It's like memory.

SS: You forgot?

VG: The thing is was that we were handing them out, but that was the action inside the church. Yeah, we planned it, but that was not a disruption because it was actually being handed out as people were going into church because in the Catholic Church there is always a thing that you get.

SS: So who started the yelling?

VG: I think it was Tom. Yeah, I think it was Tom Keane. I'm pretty sure. I knew, just personally because he was a friend of mine that he was going to do something

because he was hell bent on it. The thing is that — me, Larry and the demonstration up at the Marriott — no one planned to turn the table over and destroy the place. It's the same kind of thing. That just happened to be the church and quite frankly I don't see the difference.

SS: How did you get seven thousand people outside?

VG: We campaigned. It was the fiercest campaign to get people. To get to that demonstration.

SS: What did you do to build for it?

VG: Posters. A poster campaign. An advertisement campaign. We did ads in the Village Voice. Stickers. We did stickers, zillions of them, all over the place. There were two things, I think for me about that action was that I found out how many people had a problem with Cardinal O'Connor and I found out that if the religious world — I found out how much power they had.

SS: How did you find that out?

VG: Because we were threatened by them.

SS: In what way?

VG: I had phone calls from Cardinal O'Connor's office. I was followed by people that I know worked for Cardinal O'Connor.

SS: What did they say to you?

VG: They didn't say anything. They would follow me to find out where I lived. Where I lived at the time was on West 16th street and it was an old building, a little old brownstone, and the mailbox was a slot mailbox. Every day there would be heinous

things on the floor, threatening me. It was very similar to things that you kind of hear out of the mouths of the religious right today. You know, religious nuts. Crazyes.

SS: What did they say when they phoned you?

VG: What do you mean?

SS: When they called you what did they say?

VG: You're going to rot in hell. All of that kind of stuff. Some said, "We know you live at 21 West 16th Street and we are going to kill you." I thought, great, so they are defending the Catholic Church and they are going to kill me! Fabulous!

Then one day I was walking home from an ACT UP meeting and this guy is like following me. You know when you are being followed. And I turned around and he was really, really cute. And I was like, "This is not right." So I turned to him and said, "Can I help you?" He said, "What?" "Well you're following me." "No, I'm not." I said, "Yes, you are." He said, "No, I'm not." I said, "OK, fine." So I'm walking and he is behind me and I said, "You're following me!" And I said, I'll save you, "21 West 16th." I think it was the FBI, not the church, because then a lot of us started sharing those experiences. My phone was tapped.

SS: How do you know?

VG: It's really interesting. That was the only action that I've ever been involved in with ACT UP that showed you how strong the whole notion of religion is in this country and the threat. It showed you the threat they are. It also showed me how easily they could be threatened.

SS: Did you ever look for your Freedom of Information Act file?

VG: No, I never had.

SS: Did you feel like ACT UP was infiltrated?

VG: Oh, totally.

SS: Where there people whose names you know — I'm not going to ask you who they were — who you feel were working for the police?

Tape IV
00:10:00

VG: Yeah, I know so,

SS: Do you think that they came to ACT UP under false pretenses pretending to be someone who they were not?

VG: Yes.

SS: Or do you think that they were gay people who got compromised?

VG: No. They came. Because I personally kicked people out of planning meetings. I told them the meeting was going to end if you didn't leave. So you could stay and we'll talk about something else, or you can leave.

SS: And these were people who were in ACT UP?

VG: Yeah.

SS: When I turn off the camera I'll ask you some more. How about Ratzinger and now our pope?

VG: What kind of world are we living in?

SS: He was a major figure in Stop the Church.

VG: I know, I know!

SS: Can you explain what his role was at the time?

VG: There was the famous Ratzinger report?

SS: What was that?

VG: It was the whole — basically their treatise on homosexuality. It's interesting though. It's one of those things, that demonstration. There were so many important issues like that. That kind of got sidestepped. A lot of it was our own fault. Because I think it was probably the only time. I just don't think any of us were ready and equipped. Ready for what we were up against and equipped to deal with it at all. That's why I say what I heard about what went on inside the church I was like, "What happened?" It was totally out of control. It was totally out of control.

We would meet at what's-his-name who lived right near the St. Patrick's Cathedral. He bought a painting of mine, and now I'm going to forget his name. Tall, tall, glasses—Well anyways a member of ACT UP lived right next door to St. Patrick's Cathedral. We had a number of meetings where we'd see St. Patrick's out the window. So it was completely out of control.

We had no idea that that many people were going to show up. And it's one of those demonstrations where I think, sitting here today, once again I can say, "We were right." Look at what is going on now. If anybody wants to write history that was, I think, a turning point in the relationship between the church and the rest of the world. Because I see the two as very separate things. The Church is in it's own world.

Here's a very funny anecdote. I do this transformational work with the Landmark Education Group, which was way back when it was originally EST. I really believe in the work and was managing the seminar about a year ago and Cardinal O'Connor's assistant was in the seminar and he recognized me. It was very funny. And I would say for over a year, if I went inside St. Patrick's Cathedral and somebody that worked there saw me, they would know who I was.

SS: How did you feel when the barrage of negative response happened after the event?

VG: More intent. Because I had a lot of interviews. I was interviewed on WABC radio, and what's-his-name was the other person, Andy —

SS: Humm?

VG: Humm, who was not a fan of mine. He started talking about just how disgusting the whole thing was. And the interviewer said, "So Vincent is there anything you wouldn't do to make your point?" And I said, "No." And he said, "So you would kill someone." I said, "I didn't say that." I said something like, "Well you know, it goes to point—Just keep speaking for us, that's all you people want to do." I'm paraphrasing now, but I was a brat about it then. I was just like, forget about it.

Tape IV
00:15:00

SS: I only have one last question. Looking back, what was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what was it's biggest disappointment?

VG: its biggest disappointment is that it couldn't see past its nose. I don't mean that in a glib way. It just couldn't get over itself. Its biggest achievement is that I think it changed healthcare. It changed the healthcare system. It'll never be the same again. I think that it is singularly the reason why healthcare changed. I think ACT UP changed the face of healthcare in this country.

SS: That's it. That's all I have. Thank You.

VG: You're welcome.