

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

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GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Interviewee: **Alexandra Juhasz**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project  
Interview of Alexandra Juhasz  
January 16, 2003

**SARAH SCHULMAN: So, let's start – if you could just say your name, how old you are, today's date and the address of where are.**

ALEXANDRA JUHASZ: I'm Alex Juhasz, 37 years old, this is Pasadena, California, in the middle of January, 2003. I think it's the 16<sup>th</sup>.

**SS: So, Alex, do you remember the first time you heard the word AIDS?**

AJ: That was not the question I expected. No. But, I remember in college – it was probably, like, 1985 – my friend Jim [Lamb] telling me about a gay cancer that he was worried about. And that's my, sort of, like, where I know there was a stomach of feeling, clenching. But, I don't remember when AIDS got attached to that knowledge.

**SS: So, when did AIDS first come into your life?**

AJ: You know, I guess it was probably [19]85, '86 – and, at that time, I was an activist on my college campus to learn gay and lesbian stuff. And, it was probably within that context that I was very, very vaguely aware of it. I mean, it was not something – I mean, you know on a college campus in New England, it was just not something that seemed in any way, relevant.

And, I probably only knew about it in the slightest way because – I don't even think at that time, in that space, it was necessarily even a gay issue, that gay kids would be organizing about. But, I must have known about it then, because by the time I came to New York City in '86, I was primed. My interest was primed.

**SS: Now, what campus was this?**

AJ: Amherst College.

**SS: And, what was your activity? The gay organizing?**

AJ: The gay organizing was simple for gay students to be out. I mean, so, again, I know – you know, you don't know it's a different world, but the world doesn't know it's a different world. I mean, in '86, my two closest friends were the only out gay man and out gay woman on the campus – two students. Everyone else was in the closet. And, they were, you know – bore this incredible weight of being out, in a context, where, you know, the world wasn't out, where no one was out. And there was a group of students who sort of were behind. And, there was a gay and lesbian organization with one man and one woman who were out. So, the organizing was simply to create a space on the campus around gay and lesbian –

**SS: Now, before that, have you been involved with other political activity?**

AJ: Yeah, feminist stuff on my campus. And, you know, even as a high school student, and in college, a lot of feminist stuff. So, we did a lot of – I was at this really uptight, conservative, elitist institution was where I learned to be an activist. I learned to be an activist there, because those of us who were different, who were progressive, who weren't model Amherst students – although, in some sense, we were model Amherst students – knew each other and were supported by this institution.

So, it's like the one time in my life – I'd say, AIDS activism, perhaps being another, where there was institutional support in some funny way, and real way, behind what was, at the same time, an attack against those very institutions. So, at Amherst College, I was part of group that brought feminist and gender studies. You know, that was a lot of organizing behind that. It brought a sexual harassment policy. We did that for a year, too – that started peer education around rape. You know, so a lot of feminist stuff.

And, I don't know – I guess that bridge between lesbian and gay issues and feminist issues wasn't real for most students on the campus, but it was for me, because a lot of my friends were lesbian or gay – that I knew through the feminist organizing, I guess.

Tape I  
00:05:00

**SS: Did you know other straight people who were making overt commitments to gay and lesbian issues at the time?**

AJ: My other feminist friends – and we were a little click. Look, I was in Northampton, basically, in the '80's, and to be a feminist, was to be a lesbian. So – and we were fully and deeply committed feminists and we understood ourselves as feminists, and the practice was – I mean, that is the lesbian community in America.

A lot of the women, who taught in institutions around us, came out of that school of feminist thought. And, that was the practice.

**SS: Did you have any teachers or professors who represented that point of view?**

AJ: Jan Raymond at U. Mass. And, you know, my lesbian friends adored her, adored her. And, Eve Sedgwick – interesting, Eve doesn't inhabit that practice herself, but that Eve was another figure, where a feminist, intellectual and political position was transitioning in front of our eyes into a gay – I mean, you know, she invented, one could say, she says, people say – queer studies. It was happening on my college campus right then – she was teaching there then. So, you bring that to mind for me – that that discussion was happening on an intellectual level with my professors.

But, yes, there were other women in my very close group of friends, who were straight who – as a political choice, and a social choice, we didn't tell people that we

weren't lesbians. It may not be the right decision, but this was the decision we made at the time. It was a form of solidarity.

**SS: Now, in terms of your family and the men that you were involved with, was there any misunderstanding about your commitment to lesbian and gay**

AJ: You know I come from a lefty, intellectual family. My mother's a lesbian. No – not in college.

**SS: Was your mother a lesbian when you were growing up?**

AJ: No, she was straight. She became a lesbian when I became a lesbian. I did it first. No – and not the men, either. I mean, you know, I dated people who were like me – who were progressive and intellectual curious. I mean that was intellectually unknown at that time – to think about that, to think about gay and lesbian and feminist politics as an intellectual framework. It was exciting.

**SS: And who were you in that moment? Like, what kind of life were you anticipating?**

AJ: In 1986, before I came to New York City? You know, I wanted to be – I was a sheltered good girl, who wanted to be edgier and more radical, and I fell in love with a gay man, and that was the first radical thing I did. And, he took me to the – God, it's probably still there – a strip club on Times Square.

**SS: It's probably still not there.**

AJ: The Gaiety. He took me to the Gaiety in 1985. He led a secret life as a stripper – even when we were in college. And, when we were in New York, after that, he was a hustler and a stripper. And, imagine this, like, straight girl from Colorado, and,

like, I was – I don't know – 20 years old, and I went to the Gaiety and watched him strip. I mean, that felt very radical at the time.

**SS: But, that's unusual for an Amherst student to be a stripper.**

AJ: He was a weird kid. He was an incredible guy and went on to be a very successful actor in New York, and had a lot of life, like a lot of gay men lead.

**SS: So, who was the first person in your life that had AIDS?**

AJ: Well, people that I met in AIDS activism.

**SS: Okay, so you came into the movement, before you had personal relationships?**

AJ: Absolutely. And, in fact, I came into the movement as a political act.

**SS: And why did you choose – of all the locations of struggle?**

AJ: It was the place. I mean, I was trying to remember, you know, what happened, and I had a job in downtown New York – the summer of '87. It was the Department of Juvenile Justice – I was making a video, and I was on my lunch break, and there was a rally and maybe somebody knows what that rally was, because I don't.

**SS: It was City Hall.**

AJ: No, it was the summer of '87. It was a rally in a kind of triangle space – I've seen video images of it, since. So, it was maybe two or three months after ACT UP. And, I had remembered seeing the signs already. And, I walked up on that rally, and I heard people talking, and I thought, they are talking about America; they are talking New York; they are talking identity; they are talking about what's wrong – exactly in a way that I want to speak.

And, you know, I had been in New York for a year, and couldn't find a place to be a political activist. And there it was. And it wasn't – it was like – it was nascent. But, again, as a feminist, coming into AIDS activism, this was exactly the issue around which everything I was already concerned with crystallized. That's what it felt like, as a political choice.

**SS: Now, let me ask you a really big question. Okay – so in ACT UP, there were people who came in with a world view like yours – and that this spoke to that view. And, then there were people who came in to get a boyfriend, and then there were people who came in because they had AIDS and they wanted to live.**

**What was the relationship between people who had a broad social vision and people who came in for a personal reason?**

AJ: Well, I think – you know – look, ACT UP for me – especially in the early days – and I guess I probably joined – I'm thinking – I started going to meetings in the summer of '87 – it was the place of education. It was a place of education. It was like – I graduated from college, and I'm looking for a place to continue to be educated, and there it is. So, people were talking to each other. I mean, there was also great riffs – and I'm sure people have told you about this in ... and you knew who you couldn't talk to, or who wouldn't want to listen, but, but all of those people were learning from each other. So, you know, there was an incredible – the politicians, who were in the room – and I would not call myself one of those people – I was a kid, you know – the grown-ups, I mean, all of us would sit – I certainly sat in awe of the knowledge they had of American civil disobedience and American organizing.

And, you know, there were a lot of people in the room, who would bring up history, who would bring up tactics, who would bring up other struggles. The gay men, and then women in the room who were HIV positive were constantly speaking about, you know, you need to hear me from where I stand. You need to – we have to stop this conversation. I mean, those were the – we were, at the most respectful, listening to each other, educating each other.

And there were lots of moments that weren't respectful, too, of course. I'm probably painting an overly optimistic version of what it was. But, you said, three kinds – politicians, people who came in who were HIV positive and people who wanted boyfriends.

And, my God, that was like totally hot and sexy and that was another reason to want to be there, because, it was, like an incredible social scene – even if you were a straight woman. There was a lot of sexual energy and tension and passion in the air. And that feels good.

**SS: Did you ever have sex with anyone in ACT UP?**

AJ: No.

**SS: Do you think you were kept out of that because you were straight?**

AJ: I don't know. It wasn't what I was there for. I mean, it was what I was there for, but it felt great. I mean, I was a fag hag at that time. You know, that's what anyone would call me. I was a straight woman who had a lot of gay male friends, and a lot of lesbian friends. And, I loved being in rooms with gay men. I loved going dancing with gay men. It was exactly like being at a disco, you know? It was sweaty and people were – it's what a fag hag – and you know, I use it only in a loving way – loves about –

Tape I  
00:15:00

you're in a sexual situation where you're not implicated. There are just looks everywhere and people touching each other and, you know, it was hot, and it was fun to watch, you know? It wasn't why I was there. You know, of course, my cohort was almost entirely the women in ACT UP. And, you know, I think it became complicated, given that most of those women were lesbians – that I wasn't a lesbian, and that created some tense moments.

**SS: Like what? ...**

AJ: Yeah, I mean, I can remember – I don't know when people found out that I was straight, but I'm thinking I might have been around the Cosmo demonstration. I remember being at Rebecca Cole's house, making the signs. You know Rebecca Cole now has a television show. Have you seen it? Have you seen it? Do you know who Rebecca Cole is?

**SS: Yeah, she's a florist or something, right?**

AJ: She has one of those designing shows – where, like, you design somebody's house for a thousand dollars. I couldn't believe it. I was watching TV this summer, and, I'm like, that one was an AIDS activist with me.

**SS: She was the first woman to work on the AIDS hotline. I remember her.**

AJ: I remember her very well. And she was, actually extremely vocal, extremely articulate spokesperson in the first year, or so. It was at her house, and we were making posters and stuff, and I think that that was the time when there was a lot of socializing going on, and I think that it became apparent – you know, I think that – my memory may be wrong – that place was, that group was so rife with – like any group –

intrigue and feelings and – I always thought that, you know, Maria [Maggenti] and Maxine [Wolfe], who I had different feelings about, but esteemed both of them for different reasons, you know, were really pissed at me when they found out that I was straight. I always felt that way. I always felt a little bit –

**SS: But, wasn't Rebecca straight at that time?**

AJ: Rebecca was.

**SS: Yeah.**

AJ: There were others of us. I think that Margaret – I can't remember her last name – Irish.

**SS: Well, there was Suzanne Phillips, the doctor, who had started the PWA Coalition and Iris Long–**

AJ: Yes, yes, yes, but do you remember this Margaret woman?

**SS: Margaret? [Margaret McCarthy]**

AJ: With brown hair – and looked very dyke-y like me, and was straight. I remember her. There were quite a few of us. I don't think there were any straight men, but there were quite a few straight women. I don't know if there were any straight men at all.

**SS: Well, there was John Kelly. Remember him?**

AJ: No.

**SS: There were a few. Anyway, so how did you get there? So, you went to the demonstration, and then what happened?**

AJ: I chanced upon it. You know, it was in the air – the signs were everywhere.

**SS: But, how did you get to a Monday night meeting?**

AJ: I went.

**SS: You didn't know anybody who was in ACT UP?**

AJ: No, I went.

**SS: So, what did you see when you got there?**

AJ: Exactly what I wanted to see – exactly what I wanted; the same thing my students want now; the same thing anybody wants who is politically disgusted with our society and wants to be in a room with other people who are too, and who wants to be in community – to be in a progressive community. I mean, you just felt it. And it was probably really small when I first started to go, actually. It became very big very quickly. It was this mix of, like, sexiness, fashion, style and an intelligence and a goal and community. And, I haven't felt it since, in the same, you know – with that same vibrancy. And, you know, I mean, I think – again, I don't want to romanticize it, because it was born from grief, and it inspired grief. But, it felt really incredible, too. I mean, and I think, part of why it felt so vibrant was because so much was at stake, really. And, I mean, that was very clear – even when everyone was flirting, and even when everybody looked so beautiful. It was clear, always in that room – what was at stake for people.

So, I know that's what I felt. I felt like I was in a place where I wanted to be, in a place that I wanted to belong. And, for me, ACT UP was – I probably started working at GMHC – volunteering at GMHC at the same time. I can't remember which one came first.

**SS: What were you doing? Were you a buddy?**

AJ: No, I went – I actually, like, knocked on Jean's door –

**SS: Jean Carlomusto?**

AJ: And she had been probably working there. It was probably the summer of 1987.

**SS: Now, had you seen her show?**

AJ: No – I – so, I can't remember this part very well – which came first? Well, I know that I went to the action – whatever it was – it was a speak-out or something first. And then, I volunteered – I knocked on her door and I said, you know, I know how to make video, can I work? Can I help you? Can I work in your department? And, you know, Jean probably had been doing it for two or three months. It probably wasn't very long. And, I said to her, I want to make a show on woman and AIDS. And, at that point, Jean wasn't making that model – that half an hour model that then got – the thing that GMHC – She hadn't made – she was making the talk show kind of format. And, she said, sure, you know? So, I was doing that at the same time.

**SS: Now, how did you know that there were women with AIDS?**

AJ: I don't know. You know, I don't know, because in 1986 – this is the other thing – you know, I teach an AIDS class, I have some sense of how little of this history anyone knows. In 1986, or '87, there was no representation of them. It was not knowledge that anybody had. It was kind of outside – except for, this is not true – in the mainstream. When I decided to make this piece – I decided to make a piece on women and AIDS because I was a feminist and I thought about things through women's experience. And, I didn't know, and I was a graduate student. So, I thought, well, I'll research it and I'll make this documentary. And, I just started talking to women around New York. And there were lots of people who knew women who had AIDS.

**SS: There was one article in the Village Voice by Peg Byron about women with AIDS that came out –**

AJ: What year?

**SS: I think it's '85 or '86.**

AJ: Yeah, because once, once you – once I tapped in, I can remember almost everyone I talked to, and there was organizing that had been going on, within social service, within the social service community ... more or less, at that point ... the minority, AIDS Task Force, the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, the project that Amber Hollibaugh is doing through the Commission of Human Rights. I mean, those are all – all of those organizations are starting to talk about serving women at that time. I actually remember specifically going to a meeting, where it was, like, women who worked in New York's, sort of service, provision, went to talk about women and AIDS. It was, like, the first time that had happened, during my research.

Denise Ribble – it was just when people were starting to talk about it, and, you know, that's the thing about ACT UP and AIDS activism, you know. It became – the movement from it being kind of secret knowledge to being public knowledge happened very quickly. And the organizing – and it wasn't just ACT UP, it was, you know, an entire infrastructure was built in New York City, I think, very quickly. And, from when I made that video, you know, to a year later, two years later, I don't know – to now, when everyone knows, of course. That's a different –

**SS: So, you made that first video with Jean or --?**

AJ: By myself.

**SS: That was shown on Jean's program?**

AJ: Yeah, and then with Jean, you know, sort of –

**SS: And who was in it?**

AJ: Denise Ribble gave us a safe sex show; these women at Montefiore Hospital, who were doing needle exchange and two women – what was her name? She was also in ACT UP. I – she may have been straight, too. She was Irish. Do you remember her? She was –

**SS: Did she have AIDS? Karen –**

AJ: No, she didn't have AIDS. She was a – she worked in a drug program, and she was a priest, or something like that. She was really cool. They talked about, they talked about, they talked about women who were using drugs. And, Suki Ports – she ran what was then called the Minority AIDS Task Force, and Denise Richardson, she worked for a city organization that did black outreach or black organizing for the black community around AIDS. And, what was her name? Yolanda –

**SS: Serrano.**

AJ: Serrano. And, several HIV positive women.

**SS: So as far as you knew, that was – you were not aware of any other video?**

AJ: That was the first one – *Women and AIDS*.

**SS: That was the first one. What was it called?**

AJ: *Living with AIDS: Women and AIDS* – it was made in 1987 and a couple of things came right behind it. And, there were newspaper articles. Actually, you know what? Now, I remember – in '86, there was a ton of mainstream press about AIDS, because that was the year – and that's why I was interested in it. Now, it's all coming

back. In 1986, there was all these, like, Time magazine, Newsweek magazine, had front covers – like, women are at risk, heterosexuals are at risk. There was this kind of – it was around Rock Hudson, probably. And, I thought it was all bullshit, and I thought, you know, there's all of this sexism, homophobia, racism that's written into this – like anyone else who was politically conscious would be able to see that in second. And, so, I wanted to unpack that, as an intellectual and academic task. And, I knew that I could. It was easy. It was, like, there to unpack. It was just ridiculous that no one was saying it yet. I mean, that's what was so intriguing and frightening and horrible in 1987 around women and AIDS. Like, anyone with the tiniest brain in their head – anyone, anyone who thought about it knew that people were being stupid about it.

**SS: Well, what were they saying that was ...?**

AJ: They were saying that women didn't need to worry. They were saying that it wasn't a woman's issue. They were saying – this was, literally, still the time of the four H's – I mean, there were these really stupid ideas.

**SS: What were the four H's?**

AJ: Hemophiliacs, homosexuals, Haitians and heroin users. Those were the only people who needed to worry.

**SS: Now, have your ideas about how women get AIDS – have they changed over time? The modes of transmission?**

AJ: No.

**SS: How do you believe that – in what way can women get infected?**

AJ: Women did and do get infected by using drugs, by having sex with men who use drugs.

**SS: Okay, when you say, using drugs – in what way? Like, literally, what is the mode of transmission?**

AJ: If you shoot drugs with a needle and you don't clean it, then there's this blood with HIV, and it gets passed from person to person.

**SS: Okay, so if people share needles.**

AJ: So, if you share needles and don't clean them. And, I think, at the time, and still to this day, that's the largest number of women who get it. No, that's probably not true – internationally; by having heterosexual sex with a man who's HIV positive that's unprotected.

**SS: And, do you think that's a mode of transmission?**

AJ: Yes.

**SS: Do you think that's a common road of transmission?**

AJ: Yes. Look at the demographics in the world, I mean –

**SS: Okay – but, we're talking about – the global and U.S. at that – in the '80's –**

AJ: At that time?

**SS: Yeah.**

AJ: Yes, I thought, women need to be told to have safe sex. This is crazy. You're going to kill people.

**SS: Now, let me ask you a question, Alex. How come there never was a heterosexual sexually transmitted epidemic of AIDS?**

AJ: In the United States?

**SS: Yeah.**

AJ: Well, do you have a theory?

**SS: I don't know? I don't know the answer.**

AJ: I think that what happened is, for reasons that I sort of understand and sort of don't, it stayed – it probably has to do with sexual patterns – American sexual patterns. It stayed relatively contained within certain communities in the United States, which were and are gay men and communities of color. So, it is a heterosexual issue in communities color – poor communities of color. It was then.

**SS: So you think that –**

AJ: And that has to do with drug use.

**SS: But, are those women getting AIDS through drug use or through sex?**

AJ: I think both. I think that there's a lot more men who are HIV positive who are poor men of color because they're drug users who then have heterosexual sex with women, in this country. So, it didn't move into the straight heterosexual, upper middle class, middle class community, in the way it did for gay men –

Tape I  
00:30:00

**SS: Because those men were not infected?**

AJ: Because of the way that drugs are a classed problem, classed issue in our society – a raced and classed because of class.

**SS: So, you're saying that because white, upper middle class men who are straight do not become infected – that's why there was no predominant heterosexual epidemic among the middle class.**

AJ: Well, you're asking – I'm probably not the best person to ask, but that's what I believe. Sure – because they're not using drugs.

**SS: Okay.**

AJ: And look at the – it was always an issue for poor women of color – '86, before.

**SS: Well, this leads into the Cosmo demonstration, which – this is what it was about. But, before we get to that – so, when you came to ACT UP, and – how did you decide where you were going to work, and who you were going to work with?**

AJ: I was a feminist and I worked with women.

**SS: So, was there already –**

AJ: No.

**SS: The women's caucus didn't exist at the beginning.**

AJ: No, we organized it.

**SS: Who started it?**

AJ: I don't know.

**SS: Okay.**

AJ: Maxine? I don't know. Me? I don't know. I don't know, I don't remember. There was a few of us. I mean, we sat together. I can remember where we sat. The women would sort of sit together.

**SS: Where did you sit?**

AJ: Well, can you imagine the room? I don't know what direction it was. If the – if I'm where the facilitators, I guess is what they were called, upfront – we were right there.

**SS: Okay, so you used to sit –**

AJ: Up close – right up front on these – were they benches or chairs? And, then, the men would stand in the back and move. It was like walking – and then, there

was, like, a certain social thing going on ... standing, you know? But, the people sitting were, like, working a little bit harder, you know what I mean, during this? There's a whole, big, standing moving thing. And, you know, I used – I always wanted my friend, Jim to come. He would occasionally come – didn't come very often. And, he was always a mover in the back. It was, like, that was much more social. And, so, we were not being social. We were sitting there, and then we sort of started to clump together. And then, there must have been a meeting.

**SS: Did you work on anything before the women's caucus got started?**

AJ: I don't think so. Now, the other thing I have to say is that – I don't know if this comes up here, but it certainly seems important to me to talk about. My attendance was sporadic, and I eventually – I left very early, you know. And, that – there was a number of reasons for that, for me. And, I can go into greater detail, if you want me to, but part of it was because I was doing this other work that took up a lot of time and energy, making these videos. That was part of it. But, a lot of the people that I met, making those videos, were very critical of ACT UP. So, there was a tension within the AIDS community from the very beginning, about sort of what kind of work to do – what counted as activism – allegiances and alliances that had a lot to do with race and class primarily. And, most of the people that I was dealing with, around women and AIDS were feminists who were coming out of women of color organizing. And –

**SS: Like who?**

AJ: Well, some of those women that I've named and then other women, you know, that I've worked with on other projects. And – say, for instance – Brooklyn AIDS

Task Force – well, I worked very closely with a lot of those women. That – very active, very alive, very committed activist group of people were quite uncertain about ACT UP.

**SS: And what was the problem?**

AJ: Well, you know – to put it one way – in the eyes of those activists – people who saw themselves as activists – people who were working within, already a kind of nascent – the beginning of a AIDS infrastructure – you know, it was, it was to be arrested and to be that flamboyant, spoke – smacked of a kind of elitism and privilege that these women themselves who worked in these agencies were skeptical about, but certainly the people they served – I mean, are just, you know, as far as they were concerned, you know – this was not the communities that they were serving.

Tape I  
00:35:00

So, that split, that tension between what it meant to be providing services for gay white men, and what it meant to be providing services for other communities that were organizing, was alive. And, you know, you've said to me, and I agree with you, that that wasn't actually what was happening in ACT UP, but it certainly was how ACT UP was perceived.

**SS: Okay, so since you knew both – go ahead.**

AJ: I was just going to say – you know, the other thing is – that was one reason, but – I knew – there were feminists that I knew, who I respected a lot – myself, included, who were also somewhat – what's the word I want? Oh, it's not skeptical. You know, how could it be – this organization that came from nothing – that took to itself the languages, the languages of feminism, the languages of gay and lesbian civil rights; the languages of civil rights had so much money, had so much –

**SS: What's the answer?**

AJ: You know the answer – had so much power, so quickly. If you did something through ACT UP, it had infrastructure, it had support. If you did it anywhere else, it didn't. That feeling – you know, you know, as a feminist who knows that no women's organization we'll ever belong to will have the clout of ACT UP; that no lesbian organization will ever have the clout of ACT UP. That was also alive for me, and it provided a kind of learning experience and attention.

**SS: What did you learn?**

AJ: That men have access to money and power – especially white men, and lots of gay men.

**SS: So, what about the lesbians and people of color inside ACT UP – were they able to access any ...?**

AJ: Yes.

**SS: In what way?**

AJ: Just take it and use it – if you were willing to do it. That's what I was saying – it was like being an activist at Amherst College. If you're willing to do it there, you know – it was an incredible learning lesson about power, about how you can be as smart as anyone and not have access to it and you can – it's like, it's like a lot of the people who came to ACT UP – the politicians, who had come from other organizations and who had worked in struggles that stayed small and stayed poor and stayed invisible and stayed all the things they did. It's not like people were smarter in ACT UP. It's not like – you know, the issue was different. I can't put a gloss across them all – but, you know, people just tapped into money, the places where there's power. You know – the heads of hospitals, the heads of news agencies, the person who runs The New York Times –

whatever it was, you know? And, if we didn't – if someone at ACT UP didn't know those people, they knew how those organizations run; they knew how they ran, as insiders, because people who worked at them, in a way that, in organizing that I've done since, it just hasn't been the same immediate access to, kind of, both money, and kind of structures of power.

Tape II  
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AJ: So, Sarah, can I tell you two quick things – context things. First of all, you know, women were always in power in ACT UP – that's the other piece.

**SS: Like who?**

AJ: Well, I can't – you know, I'm thinking of Maria, of course.

**SS: Maria Maggenti?**

AJ: Yes, but, Maxine Wolf, and then scores of other women. Those were the two most obvious. I've mentioned their names before.

**SS: What kind of power did they have?**

AJ: Real power.

**SS: Like what? Say specifically.**

AJ: You know, they ran the meetings. There was always a woman facilitator, wasn't there? I don't know.

**SS: Maria was facilitator for a long time.**

AJ: I remember that. Women spoke a lot. There were very few women in the room, and they spoke a lot. As much as – you know, it was dominant, vastly dominated by men, in numbers. Women had a lot of power in that organization and were usually treated with a great deal of respect, for the knowledge that they brought about politics and organizing. And, it is true, that a lot of the men in the room really had never done

anything before and were quite eager to be educated and respectful. So, women were, you know, in charge committees and – I just remember that, from the very beginning. So, that's one important piece. The other important piece that I haven't said is that, you know, the year of '87, I was in the Whitney Independent Study Program – studio program, I guess is what it's called – and a lot of Whitney people were part of ACT UP. And, that's something that we haven't really addressed – kind of, like, artists and cultural workers and intellectuals, you know – because I was also a graduate student, at the time. A lot of people that I knew, from the kind of art scene were members of that community. So, so, that's another reason, you know, why it felt like home. That's another piece of why it was a very natural place for me to be.

**SS: Let me ask you something. Okay, you said, women have all this respect and leadership. What about women's issues?**

AJ: See, you know there was this – I don't know – there's this funny way, and it's sort of – I guess there's some ambivalence that I'm sort of talking to, that I felt internally, about knowing that I was at this place that was sort of completely accepting – this place that I felt tense about being in, you know – that I loved being in, and I also kind of already had a critique of it. So, I mean, that kind of that ambivalence. I'd say that same kind of ambivalence would describe the relationship of the organization as a whole to women and women's issue. So, look, women were central figures in that organization and always have been and still are. Women made demands that women's issues were taken seriously. Were they taken as seriously? Well, probably not.

**SS: What were the major campaigns around women's issues?**

AJ: Well, you know, the biggest demonstrations – the big demonstrations that I remember, you know, was Cosmo and all of its fallout. And then, of course, you know, Stop the Church – which is an incredible, was an incredible moment, you know – I thought – later. That's really – what was that? '89?

**SS: And how is Stop the Church related to women?**

AJ: Well – I mean, Stop the Church, as opposed to almost – okay, in most of the other demonstrations, women's issues might show up on a flyer – a handout. They were fact sheets. I don't remember exactly what they were called – fact sheets? At every demonstration, and there would be a list of demands. And, you know, women's issues would make it on only one or two of those demands. Stop the Church was an incredible moment, I think, in American organizing. I mean, it was this sort of ah-ha moment, where political movements, through moving on their own timeline and with their own history, sort of realized that they were talking about the same thing. So, I'm talking about reproductive rights – a long history, ongoing, organizing specifically around abortion and AIDS. And the idea – well, wait a minute, it's the same – when we're talking about the Catholic church, in a way – Stop the Church; when we're talking about the laws of the Catholic Church and the policies of the Catholic Church and what the Catholic Church was telling Catholics in America around the world. It was the same problem. And, you get this moment where gay men realize – and of course, we're talking about gay men. We're talking specifically about a group of gay men who were single issue – you know, they came to AIDS because they were dying, and they needed help. And that's what they were doing, and all the power to them, for making that decision. But, you have this moment – incredible discussions going on, on the floor about that for

Tape II  
00:05:00

months and months about what it meant to link that to other, you know, histories of oppression and fighting oppression in the United States, really.

And, not every single gay man in there was convinced, but a lot of them were, and it was an amazing demonstration. And, it was – actually, wasn't it also sponsored by WHAM? Women's Health Action Mobilization? It was co-sponsored, I think. It seemed kind of cool, you know. That's how progressive politics in America sort of would have to work – if they were ever going to work.

**SS: So, do you think that the women in ACT UP were able to successfully use the resources in ACT UP, on behalf of women with AIDS?**

AJ: No.

**SS: And why is that?**

AJ: Well, the way you frame the question makes me see something. You know, it wasn't – ACT UP was always in a process of self-education. So, the issues that women face are issues – when you talk about AIDS – are issues about race and class in America. Sex, following. Those are not exactly the same issues, at that time, when ACT UP was in its, you know, early stages, which is really, only when I was there, that the gay men in that room – the majority of gay men in that room – were fighting. And there was always a presence – vocal – of gay men of color; gay men who were poor working class; gay men who came out of organizing around gay liberation. Those voices were there, but it wasn't the dominant voice. The face of AIDS continues to change and I haven't been involved in AIDS activism enough to know what those conversations were like, as people just had to become educated. But, at that time, you know, those were the minority voices

in the room. They were listened to, and, again, with respect, but it wasn't the dominant focus.

**SS: Do you remember a specific campaign or demand that was brought by women, that was not supported by the floor?**

AJ: I don't know. No. I think – no, do you?

**SS: Well, we're interviewing you.**

AJ: I know, but I think that if it was brought up, it passed, you know. I think that there was a level of support, but it simply – you know, it would be one out of 30 things you'd hear. And, there would have to be a lot of organizing already by the women to get to the point where that kind of demand would be made. Now, I was trying to remember the name of – it was like 10 days in a row of actions – do you remember what that was? It had an official name.

**JIM HUBBARD: It was what everyone refers to as "The Nine Days of Rain."**

**SS: It ended with the kissing in a rainstorm ...**

AJ: Well, do you remember that that was – is this the same set of events – it was an international set of days, I remember, where the women went to Shea Stadium.

**SS: Yeah.**

AJ: Okay, well there was actually a split in the women's group about that.

**SS: About Shea Stadium?**

AJ: Yes – about what the women's day was going to be – what the women's event was going to be. And, that split says a lot about, again, my relationship to ACT UP, and kind of, probably close to when I left. Half of the women wanted to do the Shea

Stadium event. And half of the women wanted to do a much more direct – you know, what you call direct service. They wanted to do education in high schools – safe sex education in high schools.

**SS: Let's just slow down – can you say what the Shea Stadium event was?**

AJ: The Shea Stadium event was a, you know, classic ACT UP event, in the best and worst sense. It was, you know, a media event. It was a media spectacle, and it worked. And, it was the women's – okay, so it was nine days, and women had one day. And we had to figure out what we were going to do, and what the dominant, you know, the thing that the women organized was buying a block of seats at Shea Stadium and then, creating a kind of sign panel thing, right – so that – and there were several messages that, that, the ACT UP contingent created by, you know, flipping the signs. And the famous one is, Men Use Condoms or Beat It. But, there was also messages that got put up on the board. I mean, it was a big – and it got, of course, tons of coverage in the press. It was very – it was funny, and public and savvy and sexy and all the things that ACT UP is. There was another contingent within that group – myself included – who wanted to do, sort of grittier, hands on service work.

**SS: And what was the – why were people opposed to that concept?**

AJ: Doing the second?

**SS: Yours, yeah.**

AJ: Because it wasn't sexy. I mean, and I think, you know, that's simplifying. But, that – to me, internally, imagine that most people – a lot of people who are in ACT UP probably had that same kind of internal, you know, conflict. The longer I stayed in AIDS activism, the long – you know, AIDS didn't go away quickly. You know, a lot of

people I know ended up doing what looks more like service provision. They moved out of ACT UP into what would be called service provision. They worked with – they became doctors; they, you know, started working at – you know, of course, this enormous AIDS infrastructure developed and people start working in it – at Amfar, at, you know, pharmaceutical companies. I mean, people started doing these jobs. And, again, this goes back to my early remarks about a kind of critique that surrounded the idea of ACT UP, which had to do with, you know, who has the means? What kind of activism is it, that this kind of post-modern display for the media? And, what other kinds of work need to happen? And, ACT UP was particularly good at the post-modern display, and lots of people in ACT UP also wanted to do the hard work, the one on one work, you know. And, I think most people left ACT UP to do that work, although lots of people figured out a way to do it, within ACT UP, too. So, that split was, was close to the end for me at ACT UP.

**SS: Now, what about treatment activism?**

AJ: What about it?

**SS: Where does that fit in, in that split?**

AJ: Well, it's an interesting question. That's such a complicated question, too. I mean, a lot of my friends ended up being in TAG – I guess – is that what it was called?

**SS: Yeah.**

AJ: And, initially – well, they were always kind of thought of as the kind of wonks – they were like the policy wonks, you know what I mean? They were doing a kind of activism that felt very product-oriented and, you know, was, like, making of papers and – you know, those documents that they would create. But, it's funny, because

I guess in the history of the organization, a lot of resources eventually ended up flowing in that direction. So, I'm probably not the best person to talk about that.

**SS: But, do you see that as a kind of service provision?**

AJ: Yes, I did. But, you know, the history of that changes, because of course, what happens then is you get, you know, AIDS activists sort of written into pharmaceutical industry, and my sense of it, is that really comes right out of the work that those people were doing. I mean, that they became so knowledgeable about treatment that they end up having to be absorbed. And, I had several friends – that's what happened with them. You know, like, who ended up working at Amfar, for instance – which isn't necessarily a bad thing, but it's not the same thing as doing the work at ACT UP. And – no, I did see that. And, I think in the eyes of ACT UP – especially in the early days, that was really thought of as, sort of, really direct, you know – hands on in this more, like, intellectual way. Those people were incredibly smart and I worked in that group for a little while. I can't remember when – and I have this incredibly vague memory of being on a sub-committee that actually went to a hospital, and I just can't place it. It was three of us – two men and me. And we had to talk to, like, the head of the – some department, and it was about drugs. And, I don't remember what we were doing. But, I did that for a little while. And, you know, I think the other thing that happened, as you know, is that people got really sad.

So, the fun, the glamour, the big media events, the way that the group could create a feeling changed. That's another reason it's not political – that, for me, you know, meant, like I wanted to do more hands-on kind of stuff – one to one. And, to me, it's also laced to this critique of money and power, and, like – how, like I say, ambivalent I felt

about having access to it, and not being certain I knew how to live with it, which is, like – that’s pathetic thing to say, but – oh, my God, you know, most of the women who did and do have AIDS fall completely outside of the world that ACT UP lived in, owned, took control of for, you know, for however long one would date that.

**SS: Let me ask you a couple of things about power. Now, there were men in ACT UP with enormous amounts of access and power. Given that that was so, why were white gay men with AIDS so initially abandoned by the culture?**

AJ: Because they were gay.

**SS: And to what degree did that mitigate the access?**

AJ: Not at all. I mean – see, the closet functions so profoundly then, in a way that it doesn’t function now. The closet doesn’t really function. You don’t have to think about the closet to think about being gay, to understand what it is to be gay in America, to understand gay access to power. But, at that time, those men were in the closet, and had power. And then, they got AIDS. And suddenly, they were not in the closet – not by choice, because they caught a fatal disease. So, they were abandoned because they were gay in a society that was completely homophobic and AIDS activism and queer activism that came on its tail – or is the same thing, or whatever – you know, has, like, completely changed in some – at least, about visibility, you know – maybe only about visibility – how one can be gay, you know. There was that many gay men in power then, and there’s that many gay men in power now – it just that they’re all out, you know.

Tape II  
00:20:00

**SS: Let me ask you an even bigger question, because you’re raising really interesting things – how do you win, if you don’t have power?**

AJ: You don’t. You don’t.

**SS: So, if you're building a movement, and you're actually trying to achieve some kind of concrete transformation –**

AJ: That's the lesson in ACT UP.

**SS: Can you explain that?**

AJ: I mean, look. Well, imagine – I was 22 years old – growing up at this time – so, by the end I'm 28 or something, I don't know. You have a taste for imagining that things could change. You have a desire, I didn't experience the '60's – a desire for community and culture – counter-culture based upon another set of values. And then, it happens. And not only does it happen – in a certain sense, in some senses, it wins. Like you say, it wins. It didn't win, in that a lot of people died, but, I mean, that's a very short period of time. The face of AIDS has changed remarkably in America, and it's because of what ACT UP did, which is, you know, transform the meaning of AIDS – which transformed the money behind AIDS. That's winning – it won, and it did it because there were resources behind a set of ideas that were principled. Many other movements have principled ideas behind them. The ideas were not more principled.

**SS: Does this change the way you think about political strategy? This realization that there must be some place of access ...?**

AJ: Well, look, think about it. I think queer activism – the stepchild, the sister – I don't know, the brother of AIDS activism – you know, also has a lot of this same kind of power, without the principles. So, there's a lesson to be learned there, as well.

**SS: Which is?**

AJ: Well, I think, somehow, I don't have any control. If power and principle line up, things can change in a way that matters.

**SS: Okay, good. Well, then, let's go back to the Cosmo demo. Can you say – just tell what the story was there, and how you got involved in it?**

AJ: Well, there was an article that came out in Cosmopolitan Magazine – I could probably remember the name of the guy who wrote it, but I can't – do you remember?

**SS: Yes, Gould, Robert Gould.**

AJ: And he said, you know -- he's just one of these flakes, and there's this flaky information continues – he's always coming out about AIDS, HIV, that – there's all this misinformation – women didn't need to worry about HIV because – is this what it was? Women didn't need to worry about HIV, because the vagina was rugged – is this right? Oh, I don't know, there was all this – it was really crazy and it was – do you remember the details? The rugged vagina – was that part of it?

**SS: Yes ...**

AJ: And, it was, you know – let me just say this – there was a lot of misinformation. The misinformation was race – there was all this weird stuff about Africa. There was this really racist stuff about why the figures were different in Africa. So, maybe it was like, that there was the rugged vaginas were in Africa. I think that's right – that African women had their rugged vaginas.

**SS: African sexual practices were more vigorous.**

AJ: Were more vigorous – I don't know, and – but, it was just a slew of misinformation, and it was based on, like, overt sexism and racism, basically. And, this was a time when women activists were trying to educate women to practice safer sex – heterosexual women. And, that was a time when there was a lot of women in ACT UP

who were looking for something to latch on to. The timing was perfect. It probably wasn't a very important article – you know what I mean? It's like, how many read Cosmo, actually? But, again, because ACT UP works the best within a media spectacle, within a media environment, you know – this was what it was. So, you know – it's like, the thing comes out in Cosmo. Very quickly, there's a demonstration, and then, as is documented in Jean Carlomusto and Maria Maggenti's video – you know, an ongoing media event where the women who demonstrate end up on the talk shows.

But, really, the purpose of the event – the purpose of the demonstration was to get into the mainstream media that women were being miseducated – that women needed to be educated, that women needed to understand that they were part of the picture – that they – you know, it's a sexually transmitted disease. And really, you know, it took awhile for people to understand that. Again, it shouldn't have. It's a very simple idea. It's apparent to anyone who thinks about it for a second, and it was really criminal, really criminal – just, you know, heart wrenchingly criminal, that it took so long for it to be understood in that way – just, it's a sexually transmitted disease, and if you're having sex, you need to be aware of it. And, that's really – it was this perfect opportunity for women to hold onto something that was about women's sexuality and HIV. So, I don't know if you want more about Cosmo, but it did feel really –

**SS: And what was the action? Because with ACT UP, there's always an action, right?**

AJ: Yeah. I didn't go to that action. I just made the signs for it.

**SS: Why didn't you go?**

AJ: I don't know. It was cold. [LAUGHS]. I don't remember. I made the signs. Maybe I had the class. I don't remember why I didn't go.

**SS: It wasn't like you were close to the action ...**

AJ: Oh no. I didn't go. You know what's really funny, I was reading that book, and, you know, it said that –

**SS: Which book?**

AJ: From *ACT UP to the WTO* that at the ... It's called "Stop City Hall" – what's it called? The second one –

**SS: Target City Hall?**

AJ: "Target City Hall" – there was a thousand people there. And in my memory of it, there was a hundred thousand people. And, it's funny, because I went to the anti-war march here last weekend – there were 15,000 people there. I mean, it was a big demonstration. My memory of those events is that there always scores of people. And, 1,000 people's really not that many. It's a small demonstration. I imagine them all. I remember them all as being really big. And, I couldn't even tell you what that's about. But, you know, if I think about the Cosmo demonstration, there were probably 30 women there. I've seen images of it, right? I wasn't out – what did they do? They went in front of the building and stopped Helen Gurley Brown or something like that, I don't remember. But, there probably were 30 people there. My memory is that they were all so big. And, I can actually – now, that I think of it, I can remember – I don't even remember the name of it, it was another demonstration, and we were marching in a circle in front of an office building in mid-town. And, I think it had something to do – it was a pharmaceutical company. They had their headquarters there. And, again, it was a ragtag

group of people. It was probably 200 people marching in a circle like this. But, my memory of it – you know, it was big. There were always a lot of cameras there. There were a lot more cameras at those events, those little events, than there were at this 15,000 people march I was at, you know, five days ago – a lot more cameras.

**SS: Our cameras, or –**

AJ: Their cameras. And, that's back to this thing about power. And, I don't understand it fully. It wasn't just that the men in ACT UP worked in those organizations, and understood how those organizations work. I remember, like, understood how faxes work, before anyone did faxes, and all that. But, it's about the sexiness of it, and about the anger of it, and about the passion, that you don't see in these other demonstrations. It doesn't pull people together in the same way. That's why I felt like there were a thousand people there. I mean, the energy created in an ACT UP demonstration, is not the same energy I felt at this anti-war demonstration. The anti-war demonstration was like people plodding down a street. It felt very good to be there, for sure. But, it was a kind of humble, you know – we're the losers, we're the, you know, whatever.

Tape II  
00:30:00

You never felt that way in ACT UP. It's completely bizarre, that 100 people can feel like a hundred thousand. I mean, we felt like we had power. We did. And, I said this at the event that Jim [Hubbard] organized, you know, where we were looking aback at those videos – all the videos that people made. And, part of it is, we said we had power, and then, we just did. That was part of it. And I think, you know – ACT UP, this is still a demonstration of ACT UP's power, that it can archive itself, you know. The women's movement hasn't archived itself like this. The gay and lesbian movement hasn't archived itself like this – anti-war movements – you know, whatever.

ACT UP has its pulse – AIDS activism, as represented by ACT UP has its pulse on cultural institutions – the cultural institutions; institutions of images and thoughts that create memory and create meaning. They did it – it did, we did, at the time, and we will be remembered because we're archiving ourselves, because the Ford Foundation is paying you to do it. And the Guggenheim paid before that. I mean, that's what AIDS activism had; that's why the cameras are there. That's why, I sort of wanted to talk to you about how we were all in the Whitney together, and how we were all graduate students and professors and – I mean, you know – it wasn't just that we had contacts with where money is – I'm sort of thinking of this out loud. It's that we were also where culture is made – not necessarily where money is, but that we had that capital as well, and it was the convergence of actual money, actual power, and intellectual capital and cultural capital, that I don't know comes together in quite the same way, in other movements.

**SS: And why were these people in ACT UP ...?**

AJ: Well, primarily because they were gay. And there'd been gay people in academia and gay people in the arts, ruling.

**SS: What about people inside ACT UP who did not come from power.**

**Now, I know that you – I want to get into your work, in a minute, but – I know that you've worked a lot with women with AIDS. Did you have contact with the women inside ACT UP?**

AJ: They came after my time. I really think that that's true. I think – you know, again, I was probably gone by '89, and I think that a kind of large influx, if there was one – what my sense is – that women, women who were HIV positive and had AIDS

began to be very, kind of, dynamic activists, within ACT UP a little after me – women of color.

**SS: Now, what about white people who came to ACT UP and were not upper middle class, were not super educated, did not – you know, regular rank and file gay people who came to ACT UP. What was the class dynamic that you observed? Being a highly educated person yourself?**

AJ: Well, the way I would, the way I would characterize that is that it was – would be primarily characterized by class, by race. I mean, it was a class issue that would be understood as a raced issue. And there was a lot of tension on the floor, around race. I don't think it was characterized as class, as often – and a lot of conversation about that – ongoing. But, you know, we were having this conversation about another AIDS activist we know – who, although he doesn't come from an upper class background, sort of poses as one. I think there was a lot of posing. I mean, I just think that – you know, that wasn't the feeling in the room, so if you – if, as I remember it, there was a certain set of, you know, behaviors and mannerisms and way of talking and a set of values that people performed, that were classed – that have to do a lot with gay male culture, probably. Now, remember, you know, struggles around housing issues? And organizing around housing issues? I remember that activists – I'm pretty sure he's still alive – he was homeless for many years – Michael Perrilli.

**SS: Michael Petrelis**

AJ: Michael Petrelis – is he still alive?

**SS: He is still alive.**

AJ: And he was a – he was homeless at the time.

**SS: He was at Bailey House.**

AJ: Well, before – and then he lived at Bailey House. And he was the sort of voice of the downtrodden, who spoke in the voice of everyone else – you know what I mean? That was – I think, in a certain sense, he's a perfect example of what I remember. You know, he was homeless. He was homeless, but he – you know, he talked like he had gone to –

**SS: So, would you say that for white people who were not upper middle class or upper class – that that was not evident, or that that was not visible?**

AJ: Yes. I wasn't aware of it. It's the same experience for me of going to Amherst College or something like that. It's, like, you know, you pass. That's part of why you're there, I guess. You know, that's part of the sexiness.

**SS: So, would you say that people experienced upward mobility by being in ACT UP with access to other people who had more money?**

AJ: Yes, yes.

**SS: Do you think that was an attraction?**

AJ: Yes. I think money – you see, the gay community is really complicated and there's lots of spaces in it, and lots of ways that people live who are gay. A lot of them don't have to do with having money or power. They don't want it, or they want it, but they don't have it or whatever. That was not what ACT UP – that was not what ACT UP was to me. ACT UP was, like, a kind of reflection of a certain kind of white, gay male privilege. It was campy, it was fabulous. It's connected to power and class – upward class mobility.

And, you know, there was a certain – there was lots of people who didn't speak like that – always, but that was the dominant. I don't know, did you feel that way?

**SS: Well, that's a whole other conversation we're thinking about.**

AJ: I know – this is my memory, and it was a long time ago. And, you know, I was always ambivalent about ACT UP. That's why I wasn't certain why you wanted to interview me. I mean, I came and I went. I had a lot of problems with it. A lot of my friends didn't belong to ACT UP – consciously.

Tape III  
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**SS: You are well respected and well known everywhere for the video work that you've done with AIDS. And, I know that a lot of that work had to do with women who had AIDS – or, who were HIV infected. Can you talk about how you got started with that work, and take us through the trajectory of it?**

AJ: Well, the beginning of it was the women and AIDS video that I made for GMHC's Living with AIDS cable show – and worked on with Jean Carlomusto. And, I was – I guess importantly for me, a graduate student at the same time in cinema studies, and one of the big ideas that I was trying to work through, as a scholar of documentary and as a feminist scholar, was how to represent people ethically. And, how to work through divisions of difference and power and otherness more ethically than it's been done with a camera. It was an intellectual and also political and practical concern of all of my work, and it came to a head for me when I made the Women and AIDS tape, which was a very traditional TV documentary – this format of it. And the women with AIDS, who I worked with, you know, were women with AIDS who – you know, one of the women I interviewed kind of hooked me up with, and I went to their houses and I interviewed them, just like a journalist would do. And, you know, these were women

who were dying, and I was talking to them about their dying. These were women who were living in very severe forms of poverty and women who were abused. I mean, as all this stuff comes up – by their husbands, when you're interviewing them. And then, I was leaving with my camera – doing this thing which I find completely unethical and also creates a system of representation which is about distance and judgment and, you know, providing for people who are not sick or who are not poor, or who are not black or who are not HIV-positive – a sense of self-security. So, my practice after that was a self-critical one.

**SS: How many of these did you make, before you had this revelation that you didn't want to do it that way anymore?**

AJ: Well, I made just the one – *Women and AIDS* – and then I made two more tapes for GMHC Living with AIDS show, which – you know, I was experimenting with different representational models. And then, eventually did this project – the WAVE Project, which I did with Brooklyn AIDS Task Force. You know, so it was trying to move closer and closer to both a film practice and a political practice that was about mutual involvement, collaboration, kinds of exchange between people who are different, but who have political allegiances. And the camera – the power of the camera becomes a manifestation and a metaphor of a set of social relations that I was also interested in thinking about as a political person. So, what it would mean to say, like, well, I'm a – at the time – straight, white woman, who's HIV-negative – like, what the fuck am I doing in this movement? Like, I really felt, I had to take account of that, as one always has to, in movements. Should I not be here? No, the answer is, not that I should not be here, I have things to contribute. Okay, well, how can I think about my participation in this

movement and refigure it, to be one that's more complicated. So, the camera is a way to think about that. But, so, you know, across this body of work, that was a set of experiments, I guess, to think about other models of representation and other models of cross – cultural-cross divides – other divides – you know, race, class, HIV status, activism, you know. Organizing.

**SS: Before you contact Brooklyn AIDS Task Force about this project – who were you in dialogue with, about these kind of practice questions?**

Tape III  
00:05:00

AJ: Well, see, this is something I haven't talked about yet. But, you know, I think that one of the reasons why – say, wasn't completely ACT UP reliant, was that the community of AIDS video activists that I was engaged with was very lively and very feeding for me. And – so, I was engaged with that community, I think – friends, people I met who were doing this, who, you know –

**SS: Who were some of those people?**

AJ: Well, everyone in Testing the Limits. Do you want me to name them?

**SS: Sure.**

AJ: Gregg Bordowitz, Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt – is that her name? David – I don't remember his last name – Meieran, Jean Carlomusto, Amber Hollibaugh and Alisa Lebow and Katy Taylor. These were people who were lesbian and feminist activists who found jobs in the New York Commission for Human Rights AIDS Task Force, that was making a lot of video at the time – Catherine Saalfield and Ray Navarro; then all of the people who were involved with Diva TV – Jocelyn Taylor, Zoe Leonard – I imagine Ming [Ma] was involved with Diva TV – James Wentzy – I mean, just tons of people – I could go on and on.

You know, this is what I was saying about cultural capital, intellectual capital coming together. I mean, that's who I am, and an academic and a video maker, with a political agenda and an intellectual – politicized intellectual position, and we were talking to each other about – we were doing – Tom Kalin was in the Whitney Program with me that year. You know, Tom was making AIDS tapes at that time. We were talking about this stuff. And then, I was talking about it in graduate school, too. A lot.

**SS: Did you have a particular teacher that you were in dialogue with?**

AJ: Well, you know, my mentor is Faye Ginsburg, and she runs the ethnographic film program at NYU, and, you know – it wasn't through cinema studies that I was asking questions about cross-cultural difference and representation, it was really through ethnographic film. You know, as a feminist, that's sort of how I began to think about it, but most feminist scholarship isn't about documentary, actually – most feminist scholarship is about narrative film. But, feminists have always been interested in non-hierarchical relations. Okay – so, how do you imagine activism – can you imagine less hierarchical relations with an activist context? Can you imagine less hierarchical relations with a representational context. That's what I was interested in, in my AIDS video, and I'm still interested in it.

**SS: So, how did you choose Brooklyn AIDS Task Force at the place to go?**

AJ: Well, you know, Yannick Durand, who was working there, was making videos, too. Everyone was making videos. I mean, everyone was making videos. It was, you know, the first movement, where everyone was making videos. It was the first movement that mobilized the mass media, and it was the first movement that mobilized

the micro-media. I mean, that's the other thing that ACT UP did. I mean, everyone was making videos. And, Brooklyn AIDS Task Force made some incredible videos.

I can specifically remember the video they made – *Mildred Pearson: When You Love Somebody*. It was a portrait of an African American middle-aged mother who lost a son. Again, this was made in '87, probably. There was a time when women – to come out of the closet as somebody connected to HIV as a woman was a big deal, and that was one of the first videos that came out. It was really grassroots, beautiful – very poignant plea to black Americans to love HIV-positive black gay men, primarily, who were dying, and not ostracize them. And Brooklyn AIDS Task Force had some relationship to these three videos that were made by the organization AIDS Films.

**SS: Donald Woods's organization?**

AJ: No. This – I can't remember the history, entirely. These were, sort of, two gay men, I think, we were – kind of made it in mainstream industry, more or less, somehow. And they got some money very early on, and they made these very slick films.

Tape III  
00:10:00

**SS: Oh – uh huh.**

AJ: Educational films. And, I think that Brooklyn AIDS Task Force may have been their advisors.

**SS: Do you remember their names?**

AJ: *Seriously Fresh*. They did three – they were outreach films.

**SS: No, the guys.**

AJ: No, but I could, I could, because I interviewed them and don't remember their names. But anyway, I think that I had contacted Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, primarily because they were doing the opposite thing that ACT UP was doing, you know,

and they kind of stood for that. There was lots of organizations like that at the time, but you couldn't imagine one more, kind of, embodying everything different than what ACT UP was in Brooklyn AIDS Task Force. Brooklyn AIDS Task Force was an under-funded social service organization – staffed entirely by black women in some tawdry building that served, you know, a large number of Haitian people in Brooklyn at the time, that did support groups and HIV education and really nitty gritty stuff – getting people housing and public – getting them attached to entitlement programs they need to be attached to. And, it's very much about serving an under – working class and under class population of people who were really needing services. It was like a band-aid – the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force was, but they had their pulse on a completely – their fingers on the pulse of another AIDS, another AIDS.

And, I was – as a feminist who was not HIV positive, and who had an analysis – who came to this with an analysis first – the analysis lead me to believe that if you wanted to think about women and AIDS, you needed to be thinking about poverty, race in urban America. And, how was I going to cross that divide. And, that was a very different thing than thinking about what it meant to be a white gay man with AIDS. It just was like two different things – two different sets of concerns, two different questions. And, at certain times they intersected, and in a lot of times, they didn't. It was really about, you know, a different set of social justice issues that are not addressed to this day.

**SS: So, you came up and proposed this video project?**

AJ: To Brooklyn AIDS Task Force? I – you know, I made these three videos – I made three videos for GMHC – the one about women and AIDS; one about prostitutes and AIDS, which was a fun video that basically just uses the work of Carol Leigh – the

Scarlot Harlot. And, you know, that was also a place from which women organized – the prostitutes' issue. You know, somebody else can talk to you about it. But, it was, again, if you had a feminist analysis, it was sort of like the Cosmo – there was a lot of very visible regulations and government stuff going on. It was really stupid about trying to curtail the spread of HIV by doing stuff to prostitutes. And, it was a place where there was a lot of organizing in the '80's, and a lot of very public, kind of showy and important organizing. And then I did another tape on women and children. And then I was just attempting to invent this thing differently. I applied for a grant from the New York State Council for the Humanities where Coco Fusco was a project administrator, and she basically held my hand, and got me a large grant.

**SS: Do you remember how much it was?**

AJ: \$25,000. And, after I had that, then I went to the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, and I said, I have this money, I would like to do this project. The project is through a support group – could you run a support group? I'll finance it – you know, I want to make, I want to think of another model to make – AIDS educational video. And, that's what I did. And, I had, you know, learned enough along the way to not ask to do that before I had the money. So, yeah, I had the money, in hand. It was a lot of money.

**SS: So, how many cameras did you have?**

AJ: I had one VHS camcorder – it cost twelve hundred dollars. It was not very fancy.

**SS: Were people paid to be in the ...**

AJ: I don't know? It was, like, maybe \$20 dollars or \$25 dollars a session – something like that. And, they got bus tokens and food. We had food at all the meetings.

I mean, all of the money when to the process of, kind of, supporting how you would imagine facilitating people who are economically marginal to participate in things I learned in ACT UP – but, it's completely distinct from what I did in ACT UP, and what ACT UP was to me?

**SS: Can we film this conversation?**

AJ: Yes.

**SS: Okay, say that again.**

AJ: Well, I just feel odd being interviewed about this, in relationship to the ACT UP Project, because this is work I did – this was a set of ideas and practices that I learned by being in ACT UP, but it was really in contra-distinction to what I did there and what it was for me. I mean – so, it's only of ACT UP because it's sort of oppositional to ACT UP.

**SS: Well, it tells us a couple of things. It tells us who you are, what kind of person you are, and what you've done, subsequently. And, it also shows us, by example – it helps illustrate, some of your criticisms.**

AJ: Okay. I just need to say that because it's –

**SS: Yeah.**

AJ: You know, I think that this tension for me that was represented in ACT UP's profoundly successful mobilization of large things, you know, lead me to make this very small scale work – like, as small as it can possibly be, as sort of under the radar.

Now, I think there's a lesson about that, too. I mean, *We Care* – the video that that group made, isn't under the radar. You know, it plays in museums and film festivals, and that has to do with the kind of capital connected to AIDS – you know, which,

probably ACT UP produced for us. So, I mean, I guess the relationships are more complicated than I'm saying. You know, it probably got funded by the New York State Council for the Humanities, because of an awareness about AIDS and AIDS culture that ACT UP produced. And, although it was – you know, it happened, sort of, I say, under the radar, in the sense that it was really small – it was more like social service than it was like media. It didn't stay there, in a way that, again, anything I would make now, would. If I made it in that way, it would stay there. It would stay in that place of the local, the poor, the marginal and that particular piece didn't.

**SS: So, would you say that there was as counter-cultural dynamic that was created by ACT UP that –?**

AJ: See, here's the complicated thing about ACT UP.

**SS: Okay.**

AJ: The space itself of AIDS activism felt counter-cultural to me in a sense. I mean, the idea of a counter-culture is something I think about a lot. And, I write about it and I talk about it. You know, it's something I yearn for. I missed the '60's – I don't even know what it feels like – it's something I imagine. It's a nostalgia for something I didn't experience, except for in AIDS activism. The idea of a counter-culture of that sort is an entire social world that is outside of the dominant world – the dominant world, which is corrupt. The dominant world, which is organized around this set of values, that would have to do with money and things – as opposed to ideas and beliefs and counter-culture exists outside of dominant American society, which is corrupt, and not very feeding to human beings.

Tape III  
00:25:00

A counter-culture self-sustains and is organized around ideas about things that are beautiful – that can be better, about making things better, as opposed to the status quo, about fighting. You know, all these things. AIDS activism felt like a counter-culture to me. On the other hand, it was deeply connected to mainstream society, in all kinds of ways. I mean, I think I keep circling around the same answer for you. You said something about that the video exists in a counter-culture. Well, in some ways, it did. And, in a lot of ways, it popped up out of that counter – or, it didn't pop up, there were roads that were paved by AIDS activism to the mainstream culture.

You know, the New York State Council for the Humanities – I don't know? Is that counter-culture, no? I mean, it's not. It's weird that that got – the Ford Foundation isn't, and the Guggenheim Museum isn't and the Whitney Museum isn't, and lots of things, lots of places where AIDS activists live and AIDS activists' work thrives and from which it grows are really not counter-cultural spaces – they're dominant spaces. And, there were these roads. And, I think there are – you know, American society is complicated. There are political progressive people in these institutions, and you know, you can't sort of swipe an institution – you know, it's like, just make a kind of broad statement about what an institution is and the people inside of it. But, nevertheless, AIDS activism did not occur in a kind of separated enclave. It had these –

**SS: Homosexuality and class have a very dynamic relationship, and sometimes homosexuality can mitigate class, because many of the people that you're talking about who had enormous money and access had not a single person in their family who cared whether they lived or died.**

**So, there's an emotional currency that isn't the same as money – which, it may be, in some places where oppression exists – African women – it's different, because there's a deeper – and you brought this up before, when you talked about ACT UP as being sad – there's a deep, emotional deprivation and wound of experiencing the AIDS experience, and that's not – and maybe that's not separate, but it's not fixed.**

AJ: No, it's not. It's a currency of – there's a currency, which I haven't talked about so much, of bodies, of desire, of love, of loss, feelings, that connected people in this counterculture, across class and race – and, certainly connected me to the women I was working with in the WAVE Project, for instance. I mean, you know someone who's dying, you know someone who's dying; you're taking care of someone who's dying, you're taking care of someone who's dying. You want somebody to live, you want somebody to live. It doesn't matter if you're black or poor.

**SS: So, were you involved in care groups? As a civilian – not as a videographer?**

AJ: No.

**SS: No. And did you have personal ... who are the people in your life who died of AIDS over the course of your work?**

AJ: Well, most of the people that I – a lot of the people that I met at ACT UP died.

**SS: Are there certain people that stand out for you?**

AJ: No, I've blocked that. Most of the people – I mean, I can think about it, but I don't know if I want to. Most of the people that I tape-recorded, who were HIV-

positive, died – and that I had relationships with, and my best friend died during the same time.

**SS: Who was that?**

AJ: My friend Jim, who I was talking about that I met in college.

**SS: In what year did he die?**

AJ: He died in 1993.

**SS: This is the guy who came to ACT UP sometimes?**

AJ: Yeah, just to cruise.

**SS: Now, would you say that ACT UP had any kind of impact on his life?**

AJ: Absolutely. He went to every demonstration. You know, Jim, like any young gay man who grew up before AIDS activism, came into being a gay man when it was a sickness and a – something to hide and when the cause was operational and lived to see that change, and then died.

I can't imagine living in New York City, certainly, as a gay man, and not feeling ACT UP – not knowing what AIDS activism did, just to the experience of being a gay man – to the notion of – you know, I guess really the closet – just about visibility and – but, you know.

**SS: Do you think that he had any concrete benefit? Was he able to get insurance, or was he able to get certain medications as a consequence of ACT UP's work?**

AJ: All of that. The thing is – I had a very close group of friends – gay men – who worked – I mentioned them, who worked at Amfar. And, they all went to ACT UP,

Tape III  
00:25:00

too. I mean, at that time, those were really connected. So, Jim, who was poor and indigent, probably – you know, went to –

**SS: What was his last name?**

AJ: Jim Lamb. He went to one of the best AIDS doctors in New York – that was because, you know, of my friends who worked at Amfar who were his lovers – you know, boyfriends, whatever. He was taking experimental drugs. And, just at that time, those experimental drugs didn't do anything, but, you know, he was taking the most – he blazed a very common, early arc. You know, he died a horrible death very quickly, as was common at that time. But, he was taking experimental drugs and all of that and, you know, was going –

**SS: Do you remember which ones?**

AJ: Yeah, I think he took protease inhibitors early on, and – at the very beginning, he was taking AZT very early. You know, people like that. You know, '93, that's a weird kind of cutting. It's like, if he had made it a little longer, things would have been different for him. But, he didn't. But, I know a lot of people who are – you know, well, most of the people who are HIV-positive at the same time as him did die, but, there's, like another group that came in slightly behind him who are all alive – sort of the same group of friends. I don't know. I don't know how you could be a gay man or a friend of a gay man in New York and not know about ACT UP – even if the gay men you knew weren't HIV-positive. I mean –

**SS: You know, I see you in a very unique historical position, because on one hand, you were working with a group of primarily gay people who were – some of who were your race and class and had your cultural framework. And, on the**

**other hand, you're working with a group of also woman, also mostly heterosexual, who are not your race and class. So, you're working with two different constituencies, each of whom reflects a different part of you.**

AJ: True.

**SS: And, there are not of people who are in that position. Were you able to help each other understand each other in any way?**

AJ: I don't think I could bring what I knew from my work with HIV-positive women to ACT UP. I think that's part of why I left ACT UP, eventually. But, I definitely could bring ACT UP to them, and they really appreciated that. You know, ACT UP is rooted in a sense of – I don't even want to use the word privilege – I want to use a different word, which is entitlement, that most women – certainly women of color, and certainly poor women of color – don't have an entitlement to – look, AIDS activism happened because people who were entitled suddenly were getting what they entitled to, which was to be taken care of, you know? Most of the people in the world who have HIV and have AIDS don't feel entitled to anything, you know? They've been taught to not be entitled. You know, it's like, poor people in Africa? Poor people in America? You know what I mean?

**SS: So, how did this confrontation with entitlement, lack of entitlement – and having these two different areas of identification – how did that change your sense of your own entitlement?**

AJ: It's a good question. It's a hard question. I mean, I think – it's something that I think about a lot as a progressive intellectual. It's something I actually write about. You know, this is the dilemma of being – in a certain sense of being a progressive

intellectual, a progressive or cultural worker – someone who has more entitlement than the people with which one is organizing – in many cases. Not always. I mean, certainly around feminism, around lesbian politics, you know – but I think as people interested in social justice in America, you know, race and class – they're big. And I have both racial and class privilege. So, for me, that has made me want to imagine and think about and practice what I said before – less hierarchical forms of collaborative activism. And, it has also asked me to think about how power is always alive in any social situation and power can't be erased. But, that being aware of the power entitlement is an important part of creating community – progressive community. So, I mean – I don't know – that's become a certain – a kind of life work struggle for me. And, I don't mean a struggle to be better, I mean a struggle to think about; a struggle to kind of engage in processes that allows that to stay open, as a question. You know, because – remember I said WHAM and ACT UP come together – I mean, when only when, you know, people – there's lots of people in our society who care deeply about things that matter to me – who want to imagine this society to be more just, to be more fair, to be more – to be based on – I'm repeating myself now – to be based on, you know, ideas and beliefs rather than things and objects. Okay, lots of people believe that. Well, when we can figure out ways to talk to each other and join each other in dialogue – dialogue laced with power, dialogue organized around difference, and yet imagine methods that allow us to speak to each other – that's when things will actually change, and I saw that in my lifetime. I think it can happen again. I don't know why it shouldn't.

**SS: Thank you, Alex.**