

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

A PROGRAM OF
**MIX – THE NEW YORK LESBIAN &
GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Interviewee: **Zoe Leonard**

Interview Number: **106**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **January 13, 2010**

ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Zoe Leonard
January 13, 2010

SARAH SCHULMAN: Hello, Zoe.

ZOE LEONARD: Hello, Sarah.

SS: I never knew you had such beautiful eyes. I have never really looked at you before.

ZL: Really?

SS: Yes.

ZL: Well, maybe, thank you. That's a nice way to start it.

SS: Can you start by telling us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

ZL: Okay. My name is Zoe Leonard. My age is forty-eight. It's January 13, 2010, and we're in my studio on Power Street in Brooklyn.

SS: Okay, perfect. So let's start at the beginning. You are a New Yorker, I believe, is that correct? You were born here?

ZL: Born upstate, but since I was two years old I've lived here, yeah.

SS: Where did your parents come from?

ZL: Well, my mom was a refugee from the Second World War from Poland, and my dad was American, but I don't know a whole lot about him. He disappeared and died when I was really young, so I don't have a lot of information about him.

SS: So let's start with your mother, then. How old was she when she came here?

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ZL: She was eighteen when we got here, but it was the result of a long journey. They left Poland when she was nine, and so she lived as a refugee in kind of piecemeal way until she was eighteen and arrived here.

SS: Do you know the name of the place she was born?

ZL: Yeah, Warsaw.

SS: Oh, so she's from a big city.

ZL: Yeah.

SS: What did her parents do?

ZL: They were like aristocracy, Polish aristocracy, and they were very involved in the movement for Polish independence and were very – I'm not sure. I actually don't know what they did in terms of a profession. The things that I was made aware of was their commitment to Poland as an independent state. So pretty much they were all just killed really early in the war, and my grandmother and great-aunt stayed and fought in the Resistance. So my mother was there pretty much until Warsaw fell and it became clear that instead of Poland being independent, Poland was going to be handed over to the Soviet Union or the beginning of the making of the Soviet Union. So then they fled at the end of the war.

SS: So when you say Warsaw fell, you mean to the Russians, not to the Nazis.

LZ: Right. Well, Warsaw fell. Warsaw was completely razed. The Allies won the war ostensibly, but instead of allowing Poland to enter back into itself as a sovereign state, it gave it to Russia.

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SS: So what happened to Polish aristocracy during the Nazi occupation?

LZ: Well, they mostly were killed, I suppose. I'm not a historian.

SS: Not your own family? You don't know exactly?

LZ: They were killed.

SS: They were killed by the Nazis.

LZ: Yes.

SS: Okay, I wasn't clear.

LZ: They all fought in the Resistance. They were really committed to the idea of Polish nationalism and were heavily invested in that idea, and so a couple of them were assassinated, actually, very, very early on. I had three great-aunts, and two of them fought in the Resistance, and my mom was brought to some people that they knew out of the city so that she could have some food and be out of the direct war zone. One great-aunt, who I was later in her life very close to, was captured during the war and did time as a prisoner of war. That's a whole – We could talk about that for a really long time, but, basically, yes, they were non-Jews who experienced what it's like to not buy in, not be on the Nazi side.

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SS: So was your mother religious?

ZL: No.

SS: Not at all?

ZL: No.

SS: So she came to America. She went through displaced persons' camp, something like that?

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ZL: Not really, not really. No, not exactly, but she lived in a bunch of different places before she came here.

SS: Then how long after were you born, when she came to America?

ZL: She was in her mid twenties, I guess. She was twenty-six when she had me.

SS: And she came here when she was eighteen.

ZL: Yes.

SS: So when you were growing up, did they speak Polish in your home?

ZL: No.

SS: Do you speak Polish?

ZL: No. I understand a few words. My grandmother spoke Polish. My grandmother was really invested in having a relationship to Poland, and my mother was really invested in not having a relationship to Poland.

I guess I'm just sort of taken aback. I didn't know that we were going to talk about this stuff. My mom died a year ago.

SS: Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize that.

ZL: Yes.

SS: Okay. Excuse me.

ZL: It's okay. I just had no idea that we were going to go back that far.

SS: Let me say what I'm trying to get at, is what kind of ideas you were raised with about responsibility to other people, about resistance, about community, and those kinds of things.

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ZL: It's interesting in relating my family history, I basically grew up as the first generation of family that had survived a huge trauma and who had, in fact, fought and resisted oppression. So it wasn't something that – there were odd — My grandmother, she was really invested in this idea that we were still aristocracy, which was absurd because we had absolutely no money and we lived in Harlem and we were not even working-class; we just really poor. So she was really invested in this idea of class and what we had lost, but she was also really a kind of tough broad. I think there was something not explicit but implicit in this idea that you fought for what was right.

SS: How was that conveyed? Were they still involved in community when they were living here, or was it a result of past experiences?

ZL: No, I think it was more of a kind of — they weren't really involved in the Polish community. My mom — there's all the internal personal dynamics of family, and my mom and my grandmother didn't get along very well, and my mom and dad separated when I was really young, and so there's a lot of other pieces to that story. My mom didn't really want to be involved in like a Polish Diaspora. She wanted to be like a really cool bohemian and leave all that behind. She was interested in the theater, and she didn't want the weight of all that.

My grandmother was very religious. She was very Catholic, Christian, and she was very bitter and not a very nice person in a lot of ways, actually. So they had their own conflicts in the house at the times when my grandmother lived with us, which was off and on. So they sort of had different agendas in terms of what they wanted to move forward with.

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We weren't really part of a Polish expat community. My grandmother had some friends that I met or that we stayed with at different times, but I think it was more implicit in hearing their stories. I was aware of their decisions, that my grandmother could have fled at the beginning of the war, and she chose to stay and fight, and my great-aunt also chose to stay and fight. There were three sisters, my three great-aunts, and one of them was killed in the very, very beginning. She was actually shot in her bed, her and her husband, because they were well-known advocates for Polish nationalism. My family was very close to the person who had been the prime minister, Ignacy Jan Paderewski, and so they were targeted in a way. And they also hid people. So I grew up hearing these stories that they offered, because they were Christian, they had a certain level of safety and security, and they hid people in the cellar and they hid people in the attic. The family slowly got torn asunder. The house was bombed. I remember as a kid seeing this little envelope with what was left of the house.

Tape I
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So, yes, it's in many ways not all that different from – There was a legacy that's not all that different than we went through in ACT UP in a way. So, again, it wasn't an explicit education, but I was aware of the choices that they had made, and I was proud of them. I understood them as good choices and also really confusing because in this country the part of the Second World War that people know a lot about is the Holocaust and the specificity of the targeting of Jews. My family was Christian, so people would always, if I'd said, "Oh, my family in the war," they assumed that my family either hadn't had any problems or were Nazi sympathizers or had been on the other side. So there wasn't quite a story that fit. I think I felt like a lot of children of Holocaust survivors, but I wasn't Jewish and so we didn't belong to that story. So there

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was a kind of displacement. But I did understand like this — I think it was translated to me really early that you stand up for what's right and you do what you believe in at whatever the cost might be. That's just what you do.

SS: You said your mother was interested in the arts. So were you exposed to artists at a young age?

ZL: A little bit. My dad and my mom split up when I was young, so my mom basically raised us. She was a working mother, so she didn't have a whole lot of time, so she didn't have that much time to spend with us. But she had friends that were poets and she had friends that were filmmakers, so I was around a little bit of that when I was a kid.

SS: Where did you go to school?

ZL: I went to P.S. 122 when I was a kid, public school, and then I got a scholarship to go to private school, so I went to private school for a couple years, and then I dropped out my second year of high school, and that was it. That's all the formal education I have.

SS: Do you mind telling us, in retrospect, why you think you left high school?

ZL: Oh, my god, you're really like – Wow. I didn't know it was going to go this deep. Let's see. Why did I leave high school? I don't know that I can answer that. I didn't have a great home situation, and so I left home. I ran away from home when I was fifteen, and then I came back to the city about six months later and went to City High School. It's a public school, but it's a public alternative school, and it's for wayward kids who can't deal with structure.

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So I went there for a couple of years, and I met, actually, a lot of artists there. I was already writing and painting and drawing. Jean-Michel Basquiat was a classmate, and we were super tight. In fact, we moved in together. He was doing SAMO at the time, and there was a little crew, him and Al and Matt and Shannon and me. I just met this crew of people. I actually got my own apartment, so Jean and I lived together, but basically it was four or five other people that sort of all lived with us. It just became really clear to me that I was an artist, and that's what felt right.

Tape I
00:15:00

I was also supporting myself, and there was like no way to finish school. So it was partly pragmatic and then it was partly just wildness and understanding that the sense of community I felt within this small group of artists and what we were doing. We were just going to the Mudd Club every night and dancing every night and going to see bands every night and sneaking into nightclubs and going to art openings, and that that just felt like my life. It felt like that's what I should be doing, and some part of me just trusted that.

I got a camera, I think when I was seventeen, and that was it. Within a week, I was like, "This is what I'm doing. This is me right here. Got the notebook, the camera. This is what I want to do." So it was very clear, and then it was just like, "What am I going to go to school for? I'm already doing what I'm supposed to do."

SS: So where did the art politics connection come in for you?

ZL: After ACT UP.

SS: After ACT UP?

ZL: Through ACT UP.

SS: Through ACT UP.

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ZL: Through and with and after, yes.

SS: Were you politically active in any way before ACT UP?

ZL: No. No. No, because I didn't go to – I had this idea about social justice. I had a sort of idea of personal ethics, as we talked about with my family, and that was really clear. But I didn't go to college, and so I didn't have any idea of organized political resistance. I'd heard about the Civil Rights Movement, of course, and I'd grown up in New York in the sixties and seventies, so I understood what Malcolm X was and all that. But I'd never been to a protest. I'd never been to a march. I'd never been to a meeting. I didn't know what any of that was. I'd never read any political — I didn't know Robert's Rules of Order and I didn't know words like “hegemony.” I was totally – That was all new to me, and ACT UP politicized me.

SS: But you were in this world of innovative artists, which was also a mixed queer world, and at a time when both of those things were highly politicized, even though not in an organized way.

ZL: Right.

SS: Were you having those conversations, the “art and queer” conversation, and the “queer and political” conversation with your friends?

ZL: In my teens and really early twenties, I was just kind of a punk rocker. We were just nuts, and that is deeply a political movement. Punk and New Wave and No Wave all came out of a certain kind of political stance, but it wasn't about organizing, it was about being mad, and really good music. So I think I was antiestablishment in a really deep and comfortable way, like that's what felt right to me, but I didn't have an organized sort of political mind. I didn't understand about organizing.

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In terms of having those conversations around queer, I wasn't having those conversations about being a maker. I was making my work and I wasn't really thinking about the politics in my work and the queer political potential in my work. I think some of it was there just because it was part of my gaze, but it wasn't something that I was consciously nurturing or bringing out. I think it was imbedded rather than being consciously worked out.

When I first went to ACT UP, it was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before. It was completely — I didn't know that language, I didn't know that way of thinking. I wasn't at home as an activist looking for a cause. I was at home and my friends started dying, and I became political, and then I understood there was this whole form that people used to resist, but I hadn't really understood that. I'd been attracted to counterculture images of the sixties, but in my own experience, no, I had a different relationship to being an artist.

Tape I
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Also, there are things that came up for me through ACT UP. I just finished this retrospective show and it was really interesting to look back over the thirty years of my work so far and to remember that there was this moment while I was in ACT UP where I realized there was this incredible chasm between the work that I was making in my studio and the work that I was doing in ACT UP, and that there was some sort of trajectory that I was on got really interrupted in a way and felt really inappropriate. I was taking aerial photographs. I was really interested in it a very different set of issues.

Being in ACT UP and having the experience, not just being in ACT UP, I mean the more base thing of having so many friends with AIDS and so many friends dying and then being in ACT UP and understanding the politics of that made me want to

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understand how to apply my voice in a different way as an artist, and it took me a while to figure out how to do that. There were so many artists, like Adam Rollston and Don Moffett and Gran Fury, of course, and all the individuals in Gran Fury, whose work was inherently connected. I can see his face, and I'm skipping his name right now. Vince Gagliostro. And my voice felt really different, like the work that I made wasn't graphic in that way. I didn't use tacks, I didn't use silkscreen, I didn't use acid colors. My work was much, much quieter. It took me a few years to understand how to develop my individual voice into a politicized queer voice, and that happened through ACT UP.

SS: Had you ever collaborated as an artist before ACT UP?

ZL: Not really. Not formally, no.

SS: I just want to ask you one more question about the pre-AIDS era and yourself. Because, first of all, in ACT UP you were involved in so many different things, and you come from urbanity, from being an artist, you come from a lot of things that fed into ACT UP. So you were on your own artistic trajectory and you had your own sense of politics that was not organizational. What about queer identity or the condition of the American queer pre-AIDS? Do you know where you were in that regard?

ZL: Yes, yes. That's a good question. I considered myself bisexual pretty much instantly in my teens. I had boyfriends and slept with men or boys and also slept with girls really early on, and that just kind of felt like my identity. Then I fell in love, when I was twenty-three, with a woman, and I was like, "Oh, I get it. I'm gay. I'm queer."

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Sort of throughout – It’s so hard to create language around that, because in my life I’ve had relationships, as you know, with Gregg. During the ACT UP years I had relationships with both men and women. So at the time, I think really shortly before ACT UP, I think I was twenty-six when I first went to ACT UP, and I was with Simone for two years, and then we split up. So although I’d been identified as bisexual and I’d been active with women for a while, I hadn’t really come out until I was twenty-three and really been like, “Oh, there’s all these lesbian books to read and there’s all this lesbian culture.” The culture that I’d been a part of was a kind of queer culture, because it was just a radical culture, like the Mudd Club and punk rock and art. There were the Bush Tetrads and there were queer bands, but I hadn’t really been a part of a separate gay culture. I hadn’t really known about it. I hadn’t been particularly attracted to it. It was a much more heterogeneous kind of situation, and I think in my early twenties, maybe like twenty-one, I started going to the Cubby Hole and investigating more of an explicitly gay or queer identity.

Tape I
00:25:00

So when I walked into ACT UP, I identified as – I don’t think anybody identified as queer then. I identified as gay, so as a dyke, as a lesbian. So, yes, just the whole language and perception, I think, of identities was so different then. And it’s so interesting now, the term “queer” and that whole terminology that came out of ACT UP and came out of the work that we did and is being reconfigured by a new generation now. Actually, that definition and the multiplicity that it allows for feels like the definition that would have worked for me all along. It’s really interesting, and I love what has come out of the work that we did and the issues that we kind of hammered out.

SS: So you created the context that you needed.

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ZL: Yes, I think we did, yes.

SS: That's a great thing.

ZL: Yes. I think we all did together, in a way, yes.

SS: So thanks for going through all that. That's a really good foundation.

ZL: I'm sorry. I'm really discursive when I talk, like I hope this is okay.

SS: Hey, that's what we want. The more the better. So now's the big question, is when did you first hear about AIDS?

ZL: When did I first hear about AIDS?

SS: Or whatever you understood it to be at the time.

ZL: Really early. I had a couple of friends, one friend, Iolo Carew, who was –

SS: I knew Iolo.

ZL: Yes. I could probably dig up some pictures of him for you from back then. You knew him? So I knew him through Cathy Underhill and Haoui Montaug. So Iolo, as you know, was sick for a really long time, and no one knew what it was, and then we started hearing about GRID, and it was like, "Oh, he has GRID," and then he died. Then I also had –

SS: Can I just ask about that?

ZL: Yes.

SS: So he has GRID. What did that mean? Do you remember what that meant to you?

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ZL: It was so confusing. Let me think for a second, because I was young then. I was like nineteen. I think he died when I was twenty or twenty-one. Do you know what year Iolo died?

SS: Very early, like '82 or '83, something like that.

ZL: That sounds right, because I was born in '61, so I would have been twenty or twenty-one when he died. No, it was just confusing, because he'd been sick for a long time off and on. There was always this sort of mysterious thing of Iolo's health, and when you're nineteen, you're like, "Health? What's that?" And then hearing that he had this thing called GRID. I think I might have been away. Somewhere in there when I was like nineteen, I left the country for a couple — I went and I lived in Japan for a while, I lived in Australia for a while, and I came back. I think he died shortly after I came back, but it was very abstract for me in a way. I didn't understand how to take it in.

SS: But you never saw him sick? You just heard?

ZL: I didn't see him when he was really sick. I saw him at times when he was unwell, but I didn't visit him in the hospital, and I'm not sure why that was. I don't know if it was that I was away or that I just didn't understand that that was what to do.

Tape I
00:30:00

I'm not sure. But I remember hearing that he died and just not understanding that at all and not understanding. There was this really murky idea of what he'd died of, and it was called Gay Related –

SS: Immune Deficiency.

ZL: Immune Deficiency. There was some other word before GRID or after GRID. There was some other weird designation. I can't remember what it was called, but it was around that time.

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Iolo also seemed a lot older and really sophisticated. He felt like a real adult to me, like I was the kid. And Iolo subletted my apartment while I went to Japan, and I hadn't paid any of my bills and I was a pain in the ass. I was like a teenager. So, Iolo.

Then I had a friend named Martin who was young, probably younger than me, who danced with Madonna, and he got really sick and died in the early years too. I don't know the exact year. I think I was just hearing more and more like friends of friends. It's hard to remember the order in which things happened. I remember seeing – Oh, well, I used to do drugs, I used to shoot drugs, and I quit when I was like twenty-one, so it was sort of right under the – [knocks on table] Thank God. But there was a thing of like, “Oh, there are these weird blood borne things. It's not just about hepatitis. You have to be more careful,” and this stuff about sharing needles. So I was kind of aware of it that way as well, but, again, it was really murky. People didn't really understand what it was or what was going on.

Then I guess in '84 the virus was identified, the retrovirus was identified, and I remember seeing in a Gay Pride parade, seeing this little contingent of these really intense people in black t-shirts with the “Silence Equals Death” and the posters. I was a little like, “Whoa, who are they?” It was sort of shocking. It was small cadre of people and posters and signs, and it was registering, but I still didn't totally get it. I didn't totally get how intense it was.

I was friends with David Wojnarowicz, and I called him one day just to say hi, and he was really upset and started crying on the phone and said that he'd just tested positive. He said he'd been going to these meetings, and he was on his way to one,

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did I want to go with him? So I went and met him at the Center and walked into my first ACT UP meeting.

SS: Had you ever been to the Center before?

ZL: I don't know if that's true or not. I don't think so. I don't think so.

SS: So as you guys were walking over to the Center, I assume you were talking about his dying, him getting a positive. What did that mean at that time? Can you just contextualize that for us?

ZL: It meant that he was going to die.

SS: So that was totally on the table between the two of you?

ZL: Yes. At that point, that was probably — '61 plus twenty-six is '87. Is that when the FDA action was?

SS: ACT UP starts in February.

ZL: Of '87?

SS: Yes.

ZL: So this must have been '88.

SS: What year was it, Jim?

JH: The FDA is October '88.

ZL: Okay, so it was then. It was right before. It was right before the FDA. Yes, it must have been that summer, because I was twenty-six, but then I would have turned twenty-seven in September. So I think at that point we'd each known people who were positive, people who had died. AIDS was definitely at that point part of my consciousness.

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SS: That's what I'm asking you about in that case is how people talked to each other about being infected, about feeling that they were going to die. I mean, was it very stark? Did people dance around it or was it right on the table between people? Just at that early time.

ZL: I think it was right on the table. That was my experience. Yes. I mean, if you heard someone was positive, that was –

SS: So you were talking to your positive friends about the fact that they were going to die?

ZL: I'm trying to remember and answer sincerely rather than from the space I occupy now, and it's actually really hard to remember. I'm trying to remember if Haoui was positive yet or if that came later. Peter Hujar was definitely already sick, but I don't – What year did Peter die?

SS: I don't know.

ZL: God, it's –

JAMES WENTZY: Ninety.

ZL: So, later. Yes, I think people were really frank about it, and I think there was a lot of hope for a cure. There was a lot of confusion about what AIDS really was, and people had lived different lengths of time. At that point, people understood, oh, what Iolo died of must have been this thing. I remember the eleven years. I remember this thing of like Iolo had it for eleven years. Iolo lived for eleven years, and that was a positive thing. Oh, you could live eleven years with this thing.

But, yes, I think you would just hope that you were negative and that everyone that you loved was negative. If you heard somebody was positive, it was like,

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“Oh, fuck, they’re going to get really sick and they’re going to die somewhere in the next two to five years, if not sooner.” I’d known a lot of people, had had lot of acquaintances or friends. David was my first like really heart friend, like really someone who I’d known. I’d known him since I was a teenager, and our friendship had ups and downs, but he just really meant a lot to me. I’d called him from a phone booth. I was uptown. Remember phone booths? He told me over the phone, and then I think I just met him in the Center in the big downstairs room, and he was like, “This place, these people are really great. This thing is really great.” We just sort of stood together in the back. I think Robert Vazquez was – What did you call it, the people who –

SS: Facilitator.

ZL: Facilitator. Thank you. So it was Robert and Maria Maggenti. David was so awesome. He was clearly really freaked out and he’d been crying on the phone, but he was like, “These people are great,” and he just thought everybody was really sexy and smart. He had this expression of this being like, “Wow, they’re pretty great, huh?” He was excited about it. And I was just floored to see this group of people that had a language for what was going on and that had a plan and that seemed to have some kind of understanding of why this was happening, why we’re not getting a cure, that understood it in this context that I did not understand it in or had not understood it in. I mean, a little bit, like “Oh, gay people are getting it and nobody cares.” But this was something completely different. This was so amazing, a place to bring your rage and a place to bring your anger and your fear and your sadness, and actually try to understand how the virus, how the disease had been made into a crisis.

Tape I
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SS: Okay. We’re going to change tapes.

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ZL: Jesus Christ, I talk —

Tape II
00:00:00

SS: So now we're in ACT UP. So you walk in the door and there's Maria and Robert. That's a good first meeting. How did you enter into the organization?

ZL: ACT UP was preparing for the FDA action, and it wasn't that far away. It was, I don't know exactly, a month or two months before. So I went to that first meeting, and then I went back and I just decided I wanted to be part — I wanted to do the action. So a bunch of us that didn't have an affinity group formed an affinity group.

SS: What was it called?

ZL: It was called the Candelabras.

SS: Who were in the Candelabras?

ZL: God, I'm going to be really bad with names here. But it was David and I and, oh, god, John Davis and Louis. I don't remember his last name. Somewhere I have a list of everyone who was in it, and I can see their faces, but I'm really, really bad with names. Oh, my god. I wish I could remember all their names.

SS: So where did you guys meet, the Candelabras?

ZL: I actually could later, I could go upstairs, because I saved a lot of my ACT UP stuff and I probably have a list of everyone who was in the Candelabras. We met in my apartment a couple of times. We were coming up with all these ideas of what to do, and we eventually decided on making fake tombstones and doing die-ins, and that was actually my idea. We were going to use acid and write something in the lawn. We were coming up with all these mad ideas.

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Then I was like, “Oh, what if we made these tombstones?” So then we just got a bunch of foam core and made the tombstones that said all the different things that people were dying of, like “Rest in Peace” and “I Died of AIDS Because the Government Didn’t Care” or “I Died of—.” So we made all these different tombstones and decided that we would just do die-ins throughout the day. But we weren’t even calling them die-ins, actually. What did we first say? I was like, “Oh, what if we made a fake graveyard like we were a graveyard.” So that was our concept.

A lot of people in the Candelabras hadn’t ever done civil disobedience before. We were all people that weren’t in affinity groups yet, so we were mostly pretty new to ACT UP. I was actually really scared to get arrested, and because I’d been such a wild teenager and had got into trouble so much already and I had been arrested once for working in an after-hours club, and I was trying to get my life together. I was like, “Okay, this ACT UP thing seems really great, but should I get arrested?”

So I decided to do support, and part of that was also wanting to – David really wanted to get arrested. There was no question. I wanted to support him, and the whole impetus for me to walk into that room and to become a part of ACT UP and to go to this action was about my feelings for David. So that’s what I decided to do. I decided to be a support person.

SS: Did you go to a training for that?

ZL: Oh, yes, yes.

SS: What was that like?

ZL: It was great. It was great. I think Gregg [Bordowitz] did it, civil disobedience training. I didn’t know about civil disobedience, and it was amazing to

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understand that there was an M.O., that it was a conscious thing, and that all the ways in which you could protect yourself and be protected and stay unified, and the levels of support that you had to have and, as a support person, had to provide so that people could get into the system and back out of the system as safely as possible.

I also went to all the teach-ins, which were incredible, for the FDA, and that blew my mind, I think, almost more than anything. Again, I remember Maria. There were a few other people. I think they did them at P.S. 122 or something like that. I remember these big fat handbooks and all this research. I'd never heard of the NIH or the CDC or how drug trials were done or the investment of the pharmaceutical companies, and all that research. So it was this crash course. I basically walked in and then within like two weeks or three weeks was actually understanding the landscape of AIDS in a way that I'd never understood it before. Back then, people were still doing pentamidine inhalers, the whole drug technology. This was – I'm trying to think. AZT was part of the picture then? Yes. But it was pre the whole cocktails, so everything was patching, patching everything together. So that was amazing.

I remember just going to all the teach-ins and taking notes and understanding – How to say this? Up to that time, AIDS was just this horrible thing that was happening, and then I understood why. [cries] All of a sudden I understood, it doesn't fucking have to be this way? This is actually a crime, the virus is a virus, it's a retrovirus. I don't really care where it came from or whether somebody cooked it up or any of those. I don't care about that. There was a virus and that's a problem. But it could have been over and done in two years. The first dozen people that got it or the first hundred people that got it could have been taken in and treated, and they would have

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died, but nobody else needed to get it and nobody else needed to die. The reason why everybody else got sick and the reason why everybody died and the reason why we have so many fucking millions of people around the world dying now is because the U.S. Government didn't want to step up and do any research, and they didn't want to do any education, and they didn't give a shit that a bunch of faggots and junkies were dying, and that it was actually a systematic genocide. It was a passive genocide. They did nothing to intervene.

The thing we would always compare it to was Legionnaire's Disease. Something small pops up. It's manageable. You're like, okay, we don't know what this is, and if you address it right then and there, you deal with it and you move on. And nobody wanted to talk about sex. Nobody wanted to talk about needles. Nobody wanted to say, "Use condoms." There was no education.

Through the work that the people who were already in ACT UP, the people who were there the first couple of years, they kind of drew a map of the structure of the government and the structure of how this systematic negligence was taking place through lack of education, through lack of treatment, through lack of funding, through silence and hence "Silence Equals Death."

It was really interesting being up in Boston recently and seeing the show that Helen Molesworth and Claire Grace curated, and looking back to that time.

Wait. I'm sorry. Can we stop for a second. I lost my train of thought.

SS: It's okay.

ZL: Oh, my goodness. Oh, man. [blows nose, sighs]

Tape II
00:10:00

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James Wentzy: If it didn't affect you this way, you might as well have been a bureaucrat.

SS: We're all in it together.

ZL: I know. I know. You guys must see everybody.

SS: Well, we're in the same emotional place you're in. Why do you think we spend eight years doing this? {LAUGHS}

ZL: I know.

SS: That's why we want to be sure that people know what happened.

ZL: Yes. Yes.

SS: Yes, that's what it's all about. Yes.

ZL: Yes. Oh, man. Oh, my god.

I know when I walked into the show up in Harvard, I'd been up there all week with fierce pussy, and we'd been having this great experience of installing the bathrooms and the mural there and were working with students. The four core members of fierce pussy are all alive and well and fine, and we're making new work together and we're making work about desire and sexuality. We were invited up there because of our roots in ACT UP, but we hadn't gone in to see the show yet. So we're there all week, and we're working with these young queer students, and we're just on this really tired but really positive roll. Then the day of the opening, I walked in and I'd seen your project, I'd seen the ACT UP Oral History Project, and everyone in all those interviews looked so great and like, "Wow, everybody's aging really well." And like, "Oh, my god, wow." But these are all the people that are alive, because they're alive to tell their story. So I had this kind of strange displacement where I was like, "Oh, yeah, look. Robert

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[Vazquez]. Oh, look. Catherine [Gund]. Douglas [Crimp].” And I didn’t really put it together.

Then I went upstairs and walked into the show, and one of the videos was playing, Joy being a pallbearer. I’m not sure which political funeral it was at. But I just immediately just started bawling, just crying. At first I felt like an idiot. I felt, “God, I’m such a softy. Everybody’s so tough.” I just sat there and I watched all these videos of all of us getting arrested and all this footage that you guys have seen.

Then, slowly, over the course of that three-day conference, basically every single one of us fell apart publicly. When I first had that experience of walking in the room and seeing those videos, it made me just want to leave. I was like, “I want to go home. I don’t want to think about this. I don’t really want to go there.” And I’m really glad I stayed because we do have this shared emotional experience, and we are here to talk about it and we did. We are the survivors of that experience, and that’s both incredibly important for me in my life now to know that I have comrades and colleagues who remember. We also have something really valuable to share.

Tape II
00:15:00

SS: Also what you just said before is so crucial, that if the government had responded, we would not have the global AIDS crisis today.

ZL: Oh, not at all.

SS: But no one knows that but us.

ZL: Yes.

SS: And they just naturalize it like, “Oh, nobody could stop it.”

ZL: Yes, it was this unstoppable — And that’s such bullshit. At the time, it was so fucking stoppable. In the early days, the count of how many people had died,

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how many had had it. If there had been a concerted official response right in the beginning, if the President of the United States had said, “Okay, this is terrible. Everybody needs to get tested. Everybody needs to start using condoms. We need to have needle exchange,” if there’d been a concerted effort right at the beginning and if there’d been a concerted effort towards treatment and there’d been a concerted effort towards prevention, it would have been over and done inside a generation.

We still would have lost a handful of our friends. That first generation of people probably would have died of AIDS way before they would have died of natural causes. So a lot of the people that we mourn might still have died, but it wouldn’t be what it was today. There’s no way it would be what it is today. What we have today, this AIDS crisis, this global AIDS crisis, is absolutely a result of a concerted government negligence. It’s a crime. It’s absolutely a crime.

It’s only when you look back at those really early days, by 1984, after 1984, once the virus had been located and named, and we’re like, “Okay, this is what causes it,” every single person who has seroconverted since 1984 is a crime. There should not have been one seroconversion after 1984. Once we’d located it, okay, that’s when it should have stopped. The first few years, yeah, people didn’t know. But once we knew, no one else should have gotten AIDS after that.

SS: On that note, you were involved in one of the most important prevention efforts in the whole spectrum of AIDS prevention, which is needle exchange. So I’m wondering if we can talk and focus on that a little bit. Can you tell me where the idea came from for ACT UP to take this on?

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ZL: I think it was Richard Elovich brought it to the floor, I think. I came into it a little bit later, but ACT UP had been largely focused on gay men having AIDS and on transmission through sex. This was a broadening of agenda, I think, for ACT UP, and Richard made a lot of connections about why — I think he had to fight pretty hard, actually, to get this understood as what should be part of our agenda.

For me, it made a lot of sense because I'd done drugs when I was a lot younger and I'd shot drugs, and it seemed really clear to me that not only was this another population that the government wasn't interested in protecting, but that there's a lot of correlation of negotiating safe sex and getting high and the issues around self-esteem and people coming of age, and a lot of queer teens are more likely to use drugs and in a lot of those situations are not as able to negotiate safe sex. It seemed to me that both on a personal level because of my own history and that there was a certain political connection there that we needed to make, that we needed to be more inclusive.

So a smaller group of people did the first sort of charge in New York to do needle exchange on the street, with the knowledge that they would get arrested and hopefully take it to trial, and there was a larger group of us that continued in a multi-pronged effort. One was to actually set up needle exchange sites on the street, and so a number of us had our corners. We had a picnic table we would go to every weekend.

Tape II
00:20:00

SS: I just want to back up a minute. Why was there an obstacle to getting needle exchange in New York? Who opposed it?

ZL: [Mayor Ed] Koch. Because under [Mayor David] Dinkins we had it for a while. So it was Koch. It's illegal. The possession or sale of any kind of drug paraphernalia is illegal. Needle exchange wasn't recognized as a preventive health issue;

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it was seen as a criminal drug problem, as opposed to part of a public health issue. At the time, I think, already in Holland there'd been – A lot of this is really rusty for me. I haven't thought about needle exchange in a long, long, long, long time. But, there had been successful needle exchange programs in Holland, and it seemed that model was really interesting, to stop looking at it in terms of a moral issue or a criminal issue or even a drug issue, really. "Let's look at it as a public health issue. Let's try to stop transmission as much as possible and then worry about everything else later."

Also, the potential for needle exchange to be kind of a gateway into helping people who were currently using to see what other services they might want to have access to. So, through the exchanging of the needles, you're also having conversations with people. You're there to answer their questions about sex and sex practices. Along with needles, you also provide condoms and answer questions that they might not be able to ask anywhere else because there was no public sex education and anything about public sex health.

Also to find out, what else are you looking for? Are you homeless? Do you need therapy? Where can we send you? So it was kind of taking on — it was a gateway for social work, in a way, for helping people access things. So it made complete sense.

Also back then, which is really hard to remember, in the post-Giuliani gentrified New York, but the Lower East Side was all about drugs. I mean, that's what it was. A lot of us lived in the East Village. I think you still live there. And Lower Manhattan, it was a drug economy. It was *The Wire*. Friends of mine have seen *The Wire* and they think it's so amazing. Part of why I that show is it reminds me of my

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childhood. That's what my whole fucking neighborhood was like, and it doesn't feel strange and overly dramatic. That *is* what the Lower East Side was like. So you couldn't get around drugs. There was really no way to talk about anything without talking about people buying and selling drugs on the street and people getting sick because they didn't have clean needles and didn't have access to any kind of health education or health care.

So the idea, I think, was genius. It was just right to make this part of ACT UP's agenda. I think it's also about this idea of coalition-building and getting – What happened in terms of queer politics, what came out of ACT UP and the focus on fighting homophobia and trying to work towards a queer rights remains one of the most profound legacies of ACT UP. But I think at the time we were also really interested in building coalition and understanding that this wasn't just happening to us, it wasn't just happening to gay people; this kind of systematic negligence was happening to numerous other communities around the country. So needle exchange was a really smart way to get out a lot of those things all at the same time.

SS: So what corner was your table on?

Tape II
00:25:00

ZL: I mostly worked on Rivington between Clinton and Attorney, just outside — there's a little playground. Actually, I had numerous friends who lived in the building right next to that playground, so I'd set up at that picnic table there. We also worked the little park on East Broadway and Essex, was another place. So I did that, I don't know, for a year or two years. We'd get together — I can't remember what day we went. Maybe we went out on Saturday and so we would be making packets on Friday. We would go to Rod's apartment.

SS: Rod Sarge?

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ZL: Rod Sorge and Heidi [Dorow] had this apartment on — I think it was Rivington and Allen, and we would have a bleach party, basically, and make hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of packets.

SS: What was in the packet?

ZL: God, I wish I had one, but a little vial of bleach, cotton, I think there was a little vial of water also, because we were like, “Oh, how would they get water?” There was an information packet, something we’d written about how to clean your needles and information about safe sex. There were also condoms. We tried to get people to use clean needles, but it was also about harm reduction. It was just, “Okay, if you’re not going to use a clean needle, if you’re not going to use a brand-new needle, at least clean. At least clean your needle.”

SS: Harm reduction was a new concept at that time.

ZL: Yes.

SS: Did ACT UP just go with harm reduction, or was there a discussion on the floor about taking that up as a position?

ZL: I don’t remember, actually. Richard would be a really good person to talk to about that. There’s, I think, other people who might remember that more.

SS: So when did you get arrested?

ZL: I don’t remember what year it was, but the two-pronged effort was to do the needle exchange on the street and then also to try to go state by state and try to bring this case to the courts in the hopes of setting a precedent in all the states where needle exchange was illegal. So New York was done really early with that large group of

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whatever it was, twelve people, and then different people took on different states. I believe our state was Maryland. I believe it was actually Baltimore. That's funny.

It was maybe a year into us doing needle exchange. I don't remember the date. I could probably find that somewhere. But it was me and Gay – what's her last name? Wachman?

SS: Yes, I remember her.

ZL: Gay Wachman. We wanted there to be at least two women and two men to get arrested, there were just four of us, so that hopefully no one would have to go through the system completely alone. But we were short on people who really wanted to take it on, so it was just the four of us. The two guys were – Oh, god, I can see his face. One kid, a bald head and maybe a French name, and I think it was him and his boyfriend who's the writer. I don't remember their names. God, that sucks. They'll come to me. They'll come to me. So, the four of us.

In Baltimore, in Maryland, I think it was a pretty big minimum sentence. I think the maximum sentence was maybe twenty years, something twelve to twenty or eight to twenty or something. I was a little like, "Oh, god, do I really want to do this? Do I really want to do this?" I'd been arrested at a lot of – Not a lot, but at a few demos where I understood that most likely I was going to get a desk appearance ticket and be arrested with thirty or forty or fifty or a hundred other people, and that the legal support would be really good and that I wouldn't be charged with anything really serious, although often the cops would single out one or two people and either hurt them or charge them with something much more serious in an attempt to scare all of us.

Tape II
00:30:00

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But this felt different because we hadn't really tried this, and this wasn't just about blocking a street in civil disobedience. It was sort of taking on something that was considered a serious crime and it didn't completely have the same kind of support that some of ACT UP's other work did. Needle exchange was still controversial. But I felt it was really important, and I'd been in ACT UP a few years already and I really trusted what we were doing. I really trusted that we had to do it. No one else was going to do it, and I really trusted all our legal support. So I thought, "All right. I really hope they don't make an example of me, but let's do it."

So we drove down. I guess there was the four of us and then there was a small support team. I don't remember everyone who was on it. I remember Donna Binder was there taking pictures. I have a couple of pictures somewhere.

SS: Did you call the Baltimore police in advance and tell them you were going to do it?

ZL: I don't know that we called the police. There was some small local organization. I don't know if it was an ACT UP, but maybe it was a local ACT UP, really tiny. We went and met a few other activists, and we'd made a press release. I know that we'd called the press. I don't know that we'd called the cops.

SS: That's so ACT UP.

ZL: Yes, but I also don't remember all the decisions. But yeah. We knew we had to get press there for sure. So it was a very small – we literally just set up a table this and we had needles and we had our sharps. You'd have clean needles, you would have a sharps container, and then you'd have the harm reduction packets. Whether we'd called them or not, the cops knew. We weren't there for but fifteen minutes and then –

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SS: Where in Baltimore?

ZL: Oh, god, again, I could — We're in a van, we're on a corner, what did I know? I was just basically seeing white. It was all just a blur for me. I was just like, "Oh, please, don't let me go to prison over this. I really, really, really don't want to go to prison." So, yeah, I was just like, "Okay." I don't remember the corner. But in Baltimore there probably would have been a lot of corners that would have worked.

SS: Right. So you got arrested.

ZL: Got arrested. They kept get Gay and I together, which was great, so we were sharing a cell for at least a good part of it. I remember really having some doubts. It was really scary, actually. I was always scared when I would get arrested. I think everybody was. It was this interesting phenomenon of going from being part of the group collective and the power of a bunch of people all doing something together, to being siphoned into your one body and your one identity and you could be singled out and maybe you're not safe, maybe you're not okay, maybe you will be made an example of. Then when you would get back out, you'd be back in the group again. But being pushed through the system where you got in many different arrests either strip-searched or fingerprinted or whatever the process was, you were made really aware of your existence as a single subject of the state, in a way, and that was really frightening.

In this case because I think a lot of our legal team, we'd been doing things in New York a lot and we'd been doing things in D.C. a lot, and our lawyers, the lawyers that worked in ACT UP, like Jill Harris and all the lawyers who worked with ACT UP, they kind of knew. They'd be like, "Well, we think it's going to go this way. It might go

Tape II
00:35:00

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this way.” This was a little bit more of an unknown. It was a different state. We’d prepared as deeply as we could, but there was the wild-card factor.

SS: What were you charged with exactly?

ZL: I think it was distribution of — there was the dis con, disorderly conduct and those more minor charges, and then there was distribution of drug paraphernalia or something like that. Somehow twelve years rings a bell to me. Maybe that was the max. It was, I don’t know, two to twelve. It was something. I just remember it being twelve years. Oh, no. And they did charge us with that and they kept us in for a while. I just remember lying in that bunk, metal bunks, and the room was painted yellow, and looking at what people had scratched into the paint on the wall, and just being like, “Fuck, I hope I didn’t make a mistake doing this.” And having to breathe deep and try to remember, “Why am I doing this?” And like, if that happens, is that okay, and let it be okay, to just, I don’t know, remember that you’re doing the right thing, that whatever happens, we were doing the right thing.

SS: So did you have a jury trial?

ZL: No, thank god, we didn’t. They did in New York. They brought us out that first day. Then we had to go back a few weeks later and it was a really simple day in court. It basically was dismissed.

SS: It was dismissed. So you won. So is there needle exchange in Maryland today?

ZL: I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know where it stands now. But, yeah, we did what we set out to do. We got a precedent set. We got it dismissed, and it

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was super easy. We were shocked. We just didn't know which way it would go, and we came back down a few weeks later and it was dismissed.

SS: We have this footage that you shot of the needle exchange trial in New York.

ZL: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

SS: And then you testify in the middle of it.

ZL: Yeah, oh, my god, yeah.

SS: What happened there?

ZL: Oh, my god, it's so funny. Yeah. It needed to be recorded, and so different people were taking turns manning a camera, just like James is doing now. You know ACT UP. We recorded everything. Everything had to be recorded, which is great. So I had volunteered to film the trial, so I'd just been setting up every day with a camera. Then I think there was some question that — Jill was the lawyer, the legal counsel, and I think there was some kind of question about what corner or something. And because I had been present at the demonstration, she wanted a witness to testify about how the arrest had gone down and somebody who had seen it. She was like, "Oh, you were there. You've seen it." So she called me as a witness.

Then the judge freaked out and was like, "No, you can't do that. You can't be the recorder and the witness. That's not going to fly."

So that was another classic ACT UP moment of just like — She probably just looked around the room and was like, "Who was here?" And then she was like, "Right, you were there that day. You know what corner they were standing on." I think

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she was probably trying to make a point about how the arrest went down in some way.

So, yeah, so that really didn't work so well.

SS: It's a good Groucho Marx moment.

ZL: Totally, totally, totally. So then I wasn't allowed to film anymore. I think somebody else stood in.

JH: John Schaible.

ZL: Was it John? That makes sense, totally. Yes, that makes sense. Oh, right, because John and I were actually – I think we were taking turns or something, because it was a long day and the trial went on for a while. It was an amazing thing, that trial. It was so good.

SS: What did it feel like when they won?

JW: We should change tapes.

SS: Change tapes. Okay.

Tape III
00:00:00

ZL: I had some friends over to dinner the other night, and they were all like, "Oh, yeah, show me pictures of your bad hair in the eighties," and I was like, "Oh, okay," and dug through a bunch of old pictures, and one of the things I found was this, which is us getting arrested in Baltimore.

SS: Oh, there you are.

ZL: And there's Gay.

SS: Gay. That's right.

ZL: And I can see here that it was taken by Donna Binder, and probably everyone has said these in the interviews, but a big part of having people photograph, it

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was about creating record, but it was also about safety. You always wanted cameras. So Donna was one of the people who photographed really consistently.

SS: Great picture.

ZL: Oh, wait a minute. It's not even Cod. It wasn't even Baltimore. It was Wilmington. So that's Delaware. So, close. Wilmington, Delaware.

SS: Okay, wow. That's nice.

ZL: It says "Zoe Leonard of ACT UP New York and Gay Wachman. Place, Wilmington, Delaware." Go, Donna Binder. I'm all like, "Oh, Baltimore. Baltimore, Maryland."

SS: You've been watching too much of *The Wire*.

ZL: I know. I love *The Wire*. So, on June 7, 1990.

SS: Okay, great. Thank you.

ZL: That was – I was trying to remember his name. I feel like his name was Jean or Jean something. He was great. He was so great. And that's Alan.

JW: Klein?

ZL: What is it? He's a photographer.

SS: No, it's Al-. It's the guy who went out with – You know who it is.

JW: He's straight.

ZL: Yes, a straight guy.

SS: He went out with the woman who does the Hammer. What's her name? Who's the creator of the Hammer Museum?

ZL: Oh, yeah, they went out.

SS: Annie Philbin.

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JH: Brian.

ZL: Oh, was it Brian?

JH: The photographer.

ZL: Yeah.

JH: Brian. Brian Weiss?

ZL: I thought it was Alan.

SS: You think it's Alan Clear?

ZL: Yes, Alan Clear, thank you. And here was Rod.

SS: Okay, oh, right. There's Rod. That's right.

JH: Did Alan Clear go out with Annie?

ZL: No, different guy.

SS: Scratch. Scratch.

ZL: Yes, scratch that. But I know who you mean.

JH: Weil.

SS: Brian Weil. That's different.

ZL: Yes, different, different but similar. You know straight guys, they all look alike. This guy's name, I wish I could remember him. He was a young kid, but he was so great. He was really fun to work with and such a good sport, really brave. Here's Rod. Donna would have, because she took a lot of pictures. I'm useless. I had the wrong state.

SS: This is just a lesson to historians who are reading this transcript.

Do not trust.

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ZL: Do not trust what she said at first. Wait till you get Donna Binder's picture.

And here's one of our little bleach kits.

SS: Right. Great. Thank you.

ZL: Sure.

SS: Okay, next topic. {LAUGHTER} We're asking everyone about the culture of ACT UP, you know, sex, romance, dating in ACT UP. When you got into ACT UP, did you maintain relationships with people outside of ACT UP?

ZL: My other friends?

SS: Yes.

ZL: I did, yeah, but I think they receded to a certain degree. It was kind of hard to integrate in a certain sense. ACT UP was so intense and overwhelming, and in my early days I really kind of resisted that. I didn't want it to take over my life. But it was also really appealing and great and fun, aside from – And this is something that's so hard to explain to people who weren't there. It was tragic. You were in the face of this incredibly overwhelming sad experience of loss and anger and intense frustration at the way the world was not responding to this clear loss, and yet we had a really good time. It was a very – I don't have to tell you. It was really hot and fun. People were hilarious, and there were really good parties, and it was a great place to cruise. It was a really sexy atmosphere in a certain way. People's emotions were so on the table. Perhaps because there was so much death, there was a drive to pleasure as well, a drive to live and to enjoy, so it was a really sex-positive atmosphere. It was a lot of really vivacious people being brave and sexy, so it was great.

Tape III
00:05:00

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At first I was committed to my friends, and it was hard to have balance or something, and I kept resisting ACT UP. This part of me was like, “No, I don’t know that I want to go every Monday. I don’t want to get arrested all the time.” At some point, I just caved, and I was like, “This is the best game in town right now, and this is where I have to be right now, and other things will happen later.”

Also over time, more of my friends joined. A lot of my other queer friends at first really resisted. They didn’t want to face it. They didn’t want to take it on. They didn’t want to have to become political. They wanted to stay in their studios and make their work and not think about it. They didn’t want to think about AIDS. They didn’t want to have to get arrested. They didn’t want to stand in the street and yell and scream. My friend Tony Feher eventually joined. Bob Gober joined, I think a little bit before Tony or right around then and did a lot of fundraising. My friend David Nelson joined, I think. Was it after his lover died? I can’t remember. And Joy and Carrie . Joy Episalla and Cary Yamaoka, were friends of mine from before ACT UP. I knew them through my friend David Nelson.

I remember actually talking to David Nelson and his lover David Knutsvig, who’s also a very good friend of mine. In the early days when I was in ACT UP, them specifically saying they didn’t want to be part of it. They didn’t want to get involved. They didn’t want to do politics. They just really didn’t want to do it. Then as David K. got sick. David K. got pneumocystis pneumonia and got into the hospital, and all of a sudden it was like, “We don’t have a fucking choice here.”

Joy and Cary, who I’d been friends with through David and David, I remember this one day we’d been at a party, and Joy was asking me all these questions

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about ACT UP. I'd maybe been going for a year or maybe longer. I'm not sure exactly when it was. Then they turned up at a meeting and then got really active. Especially Joy got incredibly active with eventually the political funerals but with a lot of different things, as you know, because you've spoken to her.

So I think a number of different things happened. I kind of got more involved and let ACT UP take a bigger part of my life. I developed relationships inside ACT UP. I had a long relationship with Gregg Bordowitz. I had a few other love relationships there. I was lovers with Suzanne Wright for a year. I had an affair with Catherine Saalfield [Gund]. So I had lovers and friends, and I got close to all these different people in ACT UP, so it became more and more my social circle because we were working together and got to know each other and these friendships developed. I became friends with Anna Blume there. A lot of different people, some of whom I'm still in touch with.

Then this other thing happened, which is that more and more of my community that hadn't been in ACT UP before slowly joined. Nancy [Brooks] Brody joined, as well as the other people I've mentioned. And then I had a relationship with Barb Annoyan, who was a member of ACT UP for a long time. So, yeah, for a few years it became my social life as well as my political life.

Tape III
00:10:00

SS: I have this incredible memory of you at a meeting after Gregg tested positive. I remember you standing up. Or I think he had filled an AZT prescription or something that, and you were talking about that in the meeting. I remember you saying, "And there were these blue pills and they were real." Do you remember this?

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ZL: No.

SS: And it just seared on my memory. One of the things about that is that that was so appropriate in ACT UP for people to talk about what they actually really were experiencing. It wasn't this hiding.

ZL: Right.

SS: Things that in the fake world or the real world, however you want to look at it, people hide, in ACT UP were incredibly normal to exchange and to talk about publicly. We were almost in private space when we were in those meetings. Does that sound –

ZL: Yeah, that totally sounds right. I don't remember that particular exchange. Maybe what that was about –

SS: You got stuck with a needle. That's what it was.

ZL: That's what it was. I accidentally got stuck with a really dirty, like a really filthy, crusty needle, and the wisdom at the time was if there was a potential that you'd been exposed, which I probably wouldn't have been because any virus on that needle probably would have been dead a long time ago and whatever, whatever, but just as a precaution, the thing to do was to mega dose on AZT for twenty-four hours or forty-eight hours or something. It's kind of like a morning-after pill or something. If there was any live virus, that would potentially prevent transmission. Other people had gotten stuck and some people would do that and some people were just like, "Oh, whatever. I'm not worried about it."

But I think that was probably what that exchange was, is that I just got a bunch of AZT from Gregg, and I did it for a few days, and I was like, "Fuck, this is really

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not fun.” Everyone talks, “Oh, this is the solution,” and, “Oh, yeah, you’ve got your drugs.” And I was like, “I feel crazy. I feel nauseous and lightheaded and speedy and disgusting, and I can’t believe people have to take these drugs every day, and that’s the best thing we have to offer, and that’s our solution.” So even the solutions to the problem weren’t acceptable solutions. But it was like, “Oh, we’ve got the drug. Don’t worry about it.” And that remains true today. The cocktail. Hell, yeah, so many people are alive. Hell, yeah, Gregg is still alive. That is fantastic. But look at it. People are taking these wildly expensive drugs every single day. They have stomach problems and diarrhea and diabetes and all kinds of fat lipid disorders and kidney problems. So we don’t have the answers yet at all, and we’re sort of all pretending that we do, but we don’t. And it’s not just that we don’t have answers internationally in terms of how the crisis is in Africa or in Asia or in Eastern Europe. It’s right here. The cocktail’s not a solution.

SS: Another thing that you did in ACT UP, and we have footage of you at so many demonstrations, we have you at the NIH, we have you at things about the CDC definition, you did so many things in ACT UP, but I really wanted to ask you about the art collectives that you were part of and moved in and out of. Can you say some of the projects that you worked on with other people?

ZL: Sure, absolutely. Yeah. I’d also to talk about women’s issues, actually, because that’s the thing I feel I did the most, actually.

SS: Well, start with that then.

ZL: But we can start with art.

SS: No, no, start with that.

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ZL: Okay. Needle exchange was really important, but the thing that I feel I really got and found my place was with women's issues. I talked to you earlier about – do you want to do the collectives first? I'm fine with that.

SS: No, no, no, go ahead.

ZL: I told you about how moved and impressed I was when I went to the teach-ins for the NIH and understood this whole idea of guerilla scholarship, this idea of going out and getting all the facts, that it's not just about going and getting arrested or doing civil disobedience; it's about understanding the structure of something.

Tape III
00:15:00

After I'd been in ACT UP, probably pretty much right after the FDA action, there was a meeting called to do a teach-in on women's issues. I think at that time it was called the Women's Caucus or something. I went to a Women's Caucus meeting, and there was this idea of doing a teach-in, and I knew I really wanted to be involved in that. I hadn't been in ACT UP long enough to understand how frustrating it had been that women's issues were so frequently put to the side, but it seemed really important to me that women's issues were taken seriously. It seemed like the main focus of ACT UP was really about getting drugs into the bodies of the men who were positive, and that's an incredibly necessary important goal, but there were also all these women in ACT UP who were doing a lot of the work, and I think there was a real frustration that people weren't talking about women having AIDS, about women dying of AIDS, and we hadn't really done the work yet.

So I went to this meeting and we decided to go ahead and do the teach-in. A bunch of different women were part of it: Alexis Danzig, Catherine Saalfield [Gund], Kim Christensen, Maria Maggenti, Marion Banzhaf. I'm trying to remember her name.

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Dark hair. We met at her apartment all the time. Shit, what's her name? Damn, I can see her face. Anyways, a lot of them –

SS: Monica Pearl?

ZL: There you go. Thank you. Monica Pearl. She was really awesome. So a bunch of us were – So we decided to do this teach-in and it was really interesting. That was where I really started to learn. Again, because I hadn't gone to school, I'd never written a college-level paper before. I'd written poetry, but I didn't know how to type, for starters. So we got together and we sort of divvied up “These are the categories that needs to be what's covered,” the science, the ideology, how might the disease present differently in women, how does it present differently in women, then all the transmission issues, and then all the different sort of specific populations of women that weren't receiving either education or treatment, women in prisons, sex workers, women IV-drug users, bisexual women, or, quote, unquote “straight” women, women who identified as heterosexual but might be having queer sex. So we sort of figured out what the landscape needed to be, and then each person went, took a chapter or two, and worked on it. Maxine Wolfe was a really big part of it as well. Were you ever part of that, in the beginning?

SS: Just a little bit, yes.

ZL: The first few meetings, that makes sense to me. Yeah, it was sort of bigger and then it got smaller, and then it got smaller for the book. It ended up being a project that happened over, would you say, two or three years, because first we did the teach-in and then we did –

SS: The CDC definition was a four-year campaign.

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ZL: Right, and that came out of that original teach-in. So I think it was similar perhaps what had happened before, in that we knew there was something wrong, but we didn't know what it was. So it was about figuring out how were women dying of this and we don't understand how that's happening, because nobody's looking at it, and finding the few people who were working with women in any kind of meaningful way.

A lot of us were also very interested in finding out more about lesbian transmission. We wanted to know about female-to-female transmission because nobody was writing about it, nobody was talking about it, and we didn't know if we were at risk or not. I mean, you could call up a doctor and be like, "Is there HIV in vaginal secretions? What are my risks for transmission?" and no one would know. So we were very self-interested as well as being politically interested.

Tape III
00:20:00

A lot of the women who were involved in ACT UP and in the Women's Caucus in particular had histories of being feminists, being part of the Women's Movement. That was also a real revelation to me, because I'd just kind of missed all that while I was at the Mud Club. I just hadn't really notice the Women's Movement. Do you know what I mean? So women like Marian and Maxine, I think a lot of their argument for doing this in the first place was like, "Look, ACT UP is actually a feminist model, and if the feminist health movement undergirds everything that we're doing today, and we need to actually have feminism within ACT UP." So I think they could see a bigger picture that I couldn't see at all. I was just like, "Yeah, let's go do it."

So we spent probably about, I don't know, six months or three or four months or something, I'm not sure how long, preparing the handbook for what was going to be the teach-in, and it just kept getting bigger and bigger. I think I worked on – I did a

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lot of things that I was interested in from my own history. I had done sex work as a teenager, so I took on that chapter. And there was really interesting work being done within sex workers' communities about HIV and about sexual health in general and about the rights, sex workers' rights and sex workers' health. So that was a really interesting arena, and it was great to kind of get in touch with a lot of those women.

SS: Iris de la Cruz.

ZL: Yes.

SS: Iris with the virus.

ZL: Yes. Iris was amazing, totally amazing.

And there was a few publications, like out of COYOTE. The first few things that were written that actually sort of took on – of course, what little the CDC and the NIH and the FDA were doing around women was women as vectors of transmission. Were women giving HIV to their babies? Were women giving HIV to their husbands or their clients? Not were women getting sick. Not how were women getting sick. So that was the only way that women were showing up on the map at all. So, talking to sex workers and kind of getting – It was both sort of really vital politically to understand that, but pragmatically that had to be flipped on its head because the CDC was never going to get anywhere if they just kept talking about how women were vectors of transmission. They were missing a whole part of the picture. So I did that chapter.

Polly Thistlethwaite, I think she and I worked on that chapter together. We did. And there was this woman, this crazy doctor. What the fuck was her name? She had this van. She had this bus, and she was going around and giving condoms and dispensing advice, but also doing blood sampling, getting blood samples.

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SS: Denise. Denise Ribble?

ZL: Yeah. So Polly and I talked to her. She was a kind of problematic figure, to put it mildly. We talked to her as well. So Polly and I worked on that chapter together. Then there was a chapter on woman-to-woman transmission. Again, I'm going to forget names here, but there was one nurse who'd been taking a lot of anecdotal recordings.

SS: Do you believe in female-to-female transmission now?

ZL: I think it's possible with blood. I think any blood product.

SS: You know, you and I butted heads about this in ACT UP. I don't know if you remember.

ZL: I don't. I don't.

SS: That's okay. {LAUGHS}

ZL: Do you believe in it?

SS: I never have.

ZL: You never have.

SS: Never.

ZL: You don't think it's possible?

SS: At the time there were seven reported cases that were self-reported, and in each of those cases there were needles lurking in the picture. I always felt that we would have seen it somewhere. But it was a huge debate in ACT UP. I remember Maxine standing up saying, "Women will die because of you," and things that.

Tape III
00:25:00

ZL: Oh, my god. To you?

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SS: Yes. But, anyway, I was just wondering so many years later.

ZL: Yes. In truth, it's not something I think about a lot, but yeah, I do think it's possible. I don't think it's ever been ruled out, and I think if there's HIV in blood, then it's possible to give that to somebody else through whatever, open cuts or sores. Clearly it's not the soaring instance of transmission or mode of transmission, but, yeah, yeah, I totally think it's possible. I think, for me, the issue was then, and remains, that in order to get the information the scientists needed and we needed, that we just had to stop worrying and arguing about identities and identification. We just had to talk about what are doing? What are the fluids involved? Where are the fluids going? What is coming into contact with what?

In those early days, as you remember, it was a miasma. It was gay men, heterosexual men, and women as vectors. So the way that the CDC was keeping records was it wasn't actually about are you having receptive anal sex? What are you doing? What is putting you into contact with what fluids?

SS: I want to interrupt you for a second, because I'm having a light bulb. Do you think that this insistence by ACT UP, shifting from a categorical identity to human behavior, was a kind of foundational paving of the way towards the idea of queer? Because Queer Nation does come out of ACT UP.

ZL: Possibly. Possibly. Because I think it was a breaking down of the way that – Yeah, it allowed for a fundamental restructuring and I think it also uncovered a lot of what people were hiding. You talked before about how honest people were and that people would speak about things that were very private, they would speak about it in a public way, the political notion of the private being political, the personal being

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political. I think what we all found, yeah, a lot of us were in the room and we were identified as gay, but what that meant to all these different people was a huge – what we learned was this spectrum of different behaviors, different desires, conflicting desires, multiple desires, some of which were being acted out, some of which weren't, and understanding and allowing space for the richness of human experience and human sexuality.

Following, I think what we needed to do was to let go of certain kind of categories so that we could get the science we needed to understand what behaviors were safe and what weren't. We needed it for health reasons, for transmission and for treatment. Then out of that, I think the idea of a queer identity, having an identity that's gay-positive is incredibly important to me, to so many people in ACT UP, but maybe what we found along the way was that the word "gay" didn't quite cover it, that there were all other — There were people who were bisexual. There were people who had different experiences in their past or their present. There were things that were contradictory. "Queer" was more expansive, more inclusive. I think what's come out of that is really amazing. The conversations that are happening today around identity are so evolved, I think, in comparison.

SS: Great. Can we move into the collective thing?

ZL: Yeah, let's do it.

SS: Okay. So you were in, god, so many things. You were part of DIVA TV, weren't you at one point?

ZL: Little bit, yeah.

SS: fierce pussy.

Tape III
00:30:00

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ZL: Yes.

SS: You worked collectively with Catherine. You did that film together, right?

ZL: Yes.

SS: What was it called?

ZL: *Keep Your Laws Off My Body*.

SS: Who were some of the other people that you collaborated with?

ZL: Gang.

SS: Gang. That's right. Who was in Gang?

ZL: Suzanne Wright, Adam Rolston, Martin McElheny, Loring McAlpin.

What's his name? He worked for EAI, African American guy, videomaker [Wellington Love]. He worked for EAI for a long time. Do you know him, Jim?

JH: I'm trying to remember.

SS: What's EAI?

ZL: Electronic Arts Intermix.

JW: Yes, I can picture the face.

ZL: You know who I mean, right?

JW: How many black people were there?

ZL: Very few. Very few.

SS: Okay, we'll come back.

ZL: And who else?

SS: Why did Gang get started?

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ZL: I didn't start Gang. I joined a little bit later, so I don't know about the founding of it, actually.

SS: Was it like the rough-and-tumble response to Gran Fury?

ZL: Maybe, yeah. I think all of us thought Gran Fury was great and just wanted to do more and make more because we weren't in Gran Fury. So we just wanted to make stuff, too, and there was room for it. I joined because I think in the beginning Suzanne might have been the only woman in Gang, and she and I dated for a while. She invited me in, I think, because she really, really wanted Gang to take on more women's issues, and I think the idea was that Gran Fury was, from inception, conspicuously feminist. So Suzanne and I actually started that project "Read My Lips Before They're Sealed," that pussy shot and the gag order, and we were really interested in making connections to—

SS: Who was the model for that? I'm joking. Actually, we ask that question on – What was that poster? "Men Use Condoms or Beat It."

ZL: Yes. Oh, that's right. You asked who was the model for that.

SS: Who was the model for that?

ZL: I'm not supposed to say.

SS: Okay, but there was a model.

ZL: Yes, there was a model.

SS: There was, okay.

ZL: Yes. We took the photograph. It wasn't an image we found on the web or anything. Well, there wasn't a web then. I think the "Men Use Condoms or Beat It" was from porn or something, and ours wasn't. We took it.

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But we really wanted to make connections to the reproductive rights movement and abortion, and I think Suzanne and I in particular, but a lot of the conversations that were happening within Gang were about connecting the work that ACT UP was doing to feminist work and to work around women's bodies. So, yeah, that was really why I was interested in joining.

SS: Did you do collaborative projects where everybody in Gang worked on them together?

ZL: Yes. That piece, Suzanne and I brought it to the table. We had the idea, but we made it all altogether. Everything was done collectively. We used to meet at Loring McAlpin's apartment and hammer it all out there.

SS: Did you do the posters that were takeoffs on the Absolut ads?

ZL: I don't think so. It might have been later after I'd left.

SS: Maybe fierce pussy did it. Did fierce pussy do things —

ZL: No, we didn't ever really do — Maybe it was DAM; it was Dyke Action Machine.

SS: No.

ZL: No?

SS: Okay. Sorry about that.

ZL: No, it's okay. But I know fierce pussy, we never did really did takeoffs that way, that whole way of working that Gran Fury excelled at and that Gang adopted. fierce pussy just — We have a whole other way of working, but we don't usually mimic commercial graphics.

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SS: I wanted to ask you about professionalizing as an artist in the context of ACT UP. So many people came out of ACT UP who are now America's artists. Did people help each other? Did people discuss it with each other? It's certainly true for writers as well.

Tape III
00:35:00

ZL: There were a couple of people that I talked to about my work, but not so much. Not for me. That wasn't so much my experience. There were these instances where my –

Are you guys really hot? I'm going to open a window. Are we good still?

Like with fierce pussy, my voice as an artist was really present in that collective, so I was, and with Gang, working as an artist within ACT UP. Both of those collectives I started working with probably in my last year or two there, or year or two of really being active in ACT UP. But in terms of the rest of my work, there was actually, for me, often a real fissure sense of — because my artwork wasn't directly political. It wasn't really issue oriented. It was much perhaps more philosophical in bent and more quiet. I wasn't making work that was about AIDS. It didn't seem to have a place in that room.

There were a couple of people. I made friends with Anna Blume. We were working on some action together, I don't remember what, and she asked me what I did, and I was an artist. She came and saw my work, and we developed a conversation. And Joy and Carrie and Nancy. I had friends in ACT UP that knew about my work. But I started showing around the same time, like in '89, '90. I'd been a housepainter and then I made art, but I didn't have any professional life as an artist. In '89 and '90, I started exhibiting and selling my work and beginning to have a career as an artist.

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I remember actually being really torn, because it took a lot of time and energy, and I would think like, “Well, I want to go to the darkroom, but there’s this protest. Where do I go?” Like not having enough hours in the day to do everything. I alluded to this earlier, but the kind of more quiet, thoughtful, somewhat abstracted nature of my early work felt almost in direct competition with what I was doing in ACT UP that was so immediate. In truth, a lot of the time I thought, “This is ridiculous. Why the fuck am I an artist? I should become a nurse or something. I should do something useful with my life. This is ridiculous. I’m a complete dilettante.”

Actually, I remember a conversation I had with David Wojnarowicz much about this. It was really important to me. I’d just had this show in Germany, and also I had a career in Europe way before I really had one here, and still mostly have it there. So people didn’t even know my work, a lot of people here. But I’d taken these photographs. On my way to D.C. to speak on some panel, I took all these photographs out the airplane window of these clouds, and I was printing them and I put them in the show in Germany eventually, but before I put them in the show, I remember meeting David for coffee and bringing this stack of these prints and being like, “I don’t know what to do. What do I do with these things? Why am I doing this work? It feels so stupid.” But, I don’t know, that’s what I was making. I remember telling him, just being really confused and sort of distressed about it.

Tape III
00:40:00

He looked at all of them. We’d always had this friendship very much as artists, looking at each other’s work and talking about work, and he’d always been really supportive. He looked at them, and he said, “But these are really, really beautiful, and that’s what we’re fighting for. Don’t give up on beauty. We’re fighting so that we can

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have *that*. Don't give up. That's the goal. The goal is to get through this mess so that we can make beautiful work about clouds and about life and existence." Basically, to paraphrase him, "This is the pain in the ass we have to go through. That's what we really want to do, and don't surrender that. Don't give up beauty." I don't know, something that I've remembered a lot that's really helped me as an artist because I kind of wanted to just – making art didn't make any sense in that context while literally so many people were dying and we were in –

Tape IV
00:00:00

SS: I want to ask you about that. So David is saying to you, "This is what we're fighting for. We're going to get through this mess and then we're going to have beauty," but are we through the mess? It's twenty years later.

ZL: No. No, the mess is really big. It's a lot bigger than I knew, than I understood. But I think his point is don't give up on the stuff you really want to do and the thoughts, the things you really want to think about. Don't sacrifice beauty and pleasure and contemplation and all the things that you're interested in. Don't surrender those.

SS: I understand that, but the other thing, it's like when Vito says, "Some day this will be all over." There was a thing at that time that some day this will be all over, and not this understanding that struggles and oppression are part of life, because we were in a crisis, but nonetheless, that the reach for beauty is simultaneous with that.

ZL: There you go. That's a real good way of putting it, and I didn't understand that at the time. Yes, that's incredibly well said. I think that to maintain both and to maintain that simultaneity, to both understand that things are fucked up and you

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have to keep your eye on that and fight and stand up for what's right, and you have to enjoy the here and now and be here and have meaningful connection with people and enjoy yourself. The old Emma Goldman, if you can't dance, it's not my revolution.

What I also learned through ACT UP is that what AIDS revealed was not the problem of the virus; what AIDS revealed was the problem – the problems of our society. It was this fissure through which everything, all the ways in which our society isn't working, became really clear. The sexism was clearly delineated, the racism was clearly delineated, classism. The whole healthcare debate that we're having in this country now was kickstarted by ACT UP. There are pieces of the mess that we'll get through. There are things we get right. Obama is a better president than George Bush or Ronald Reagan. There are things we can make progress, and pain and suffering and oppression is always going to be simultaneous with that. People are complicated and societies are inherently fantastic and completely fucked at the same time. I feel lucky that I'm alive and that I survived, and for all of us in this room that we're making work, that we're making art, and you're making this document, and that we're able to talk about this as we're living it is incredible.

SS: I just want to get back to the artistic collaborator thing because I have a motive for asking, which is –

ZL: Yeah, go for it.

SS: Were there things in your practice as an artist in the way that you solved problems or perhaps materials that you worked with when you were doing collaborative art that have now shown some kind of fruition in your own personal work?

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ZL: Definitely, yes.

SS: Can you say some of that?

ZL: Yes. I would say both things happen, that things that were in my practice I brought into collaboration. Certain materials. fierce pussy's a really great – fierce pussy was founded by Suzanne Wright, Joy Episalla, Carrie Yamaoka, Nancy [Brooks] Brody and myself, and there were a number of other women who were part of it at different points. I think we each brought in materials and ideas and aesthetics, and then I think brought out of that – Oh, shit, because I realized there's something else I want to say. Okay, I have to say this differently.

SS: Okay.

ZL: Because one of the examples I wanted to use is actually there's fierce pussy, which is so amazing because I'm working with them now, but one of the examples I wanted to use was actually about that Gang poster. Suzanne and I brought to Gang this idea that we wanted to do this poster that was a pussy shot that said, "Read My Lips Before They're Sealed," to address the gag order.

Tape IV
00:05:00

SS: Explain the gag order.

ZL: The gag order was there was a bill, there was some legislation that any healthcare provider that used the word "abortion" in any conversation would no longer be eligible for any federal funding. So it was shutting down not just abortions, but the ability to actually have family planning. So we were really interested in making that connection from that struggle to the struggle in ACT UP, basically the sovereignty of your own body, your body is your own.

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So we came up with this idea and we wanted to use this pun, so we took this photograph of a pussy, and then I took the photograph so I had the negative and I had the prints in my studio. Simultaneously, I had been invited to participate in this big group show in Europe called documenta, and I was making a site-specific installation for it. I had this really complicated idea. I'd been photographing in science museums and in natural history museums, and I'd been photographing a lot of early medical objects, teaching objects, that gave evidence of a certain kind of sexism in medicine.

So I'd been doing all this work and planning this big installation, and one day I was at my studio and I saw this print on the floor. I was like, "Wait a minute. It's all right there." So out of that project I had done with Gang, I saw this image and I was like, "This is what I need to actually work with at documenta." So I called up six or seven women that I felt like I knew well enough to ask them if I could take a picture of their pussy and made this piece that I showed in documenta.

I was talking to you earlier about this kind of conflict early on for me as an artist, feeling like I was making this kind of really quiet, sort of thoughtful semi-abstracted work, and then I was experiencing my friends being sick and dying. I was doing political work in ACT UP, and something about being in ACT UP pushed me to want to reconcile some of those ideas in my own voice in my own work, outside of the visual language that ACT UP, the look that ACT UP had. If you look at the show that's up at Harvard right now, there was a style that Vince [Gagliostro] and Gran Fury kind of created, and it was a style based on propaganda. It's fantastic. But that's not really my voice. But the more politicized I became, I wanted to figure out a way to get that into my work.

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So out of that experience, and then particularly out of this experience with Gang, my work started to change in the years between '90 and '95, maybe '93. First I did all this museum work where I photographed wax anatomical models and chastity belts and gynecological instruments and the head of a bearded woman. So I started looking for the roots of the sexism I was seeing in medicine through ACT UP in our contemporary life. I kind of turned my camera to look back into history, and then I did that one documenta project, and that was the first time I made a public work in my own voice that felt directly political and directly feminist, and it was one of the few times that at that moment it felt like it reconciled all the parts of me as an artist, as a maker, as a woman, as a dyke, as a political person, and I never would have made that piece if it weren't for ACT UP.

SS: I think I saw that show. Jennifer Miller was in that, right? You made a portrait of her?

ZL: I did. That was another show.

SS: But it was on a trajectory from some of these ideas?

ZL: Yeah. Then I actually did a lot of work with Jennifer Miller. I made this pin-up calendar. We made this pin-up calendar together. So the way that ACT UP politicized me ended up absolutely changing my work. And the work that I'm doing today, like fierce pussy, we're still making work now. We had a hiatus, but we each brought our aesthetics and our practices into the collective, but I think the collective has ended up informing each of our private practices, although the four members who are still active, Nancy, Joy, Carrie and myself, all of our work looks really different, but the things that we hash out together, the conversations that we have, the work we end up

Tape IV
00:10:00

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making absolutely shifts my practice as an artist and makes me ask questions I don't think I would ask on my own.

SS: I have kind of art historical question. It's a little bit of a tangent. The generation before us were the first people to insist that the public look at the labia, like Betty Dodson and Tee Corinne and those people. Then you have that work with Gang, just the name fierce pussy, this work you just described, and there were other people, Judie Bamber, other people were doing that. Then the other day I went to see Patty Cronin's show, and I walked in on the Dinner Party and with all these plates, and I thought, my god, I have not seen that in so many years. It's like the labial moment or whatever has disappeared, and the fact that you're keeping the name fierce pussy, it's so out of context now, because now it's forbidden again. Did you make that decision?

ZL: I don't know that it's forbidden. There's a whole other generation of young artists that are just really off the chain and that are great and that are doing really explicit work. One person that's closer to my age, but like — Well, a couple people my age, Nicky Eisenman, Amy [A.L.] Steiner, they're both very explicit. But then there's this whole generation of Ginger Brooks Takahashi, Ulrike Müller, Aisha [A.K. Burns], K8 [Hardy], all those girls are — there's a lot of pussy in that work. Then there are younger people coming up, so we're alive and well in a certain —

SS: So it's on a continuum.

ZL: It's really weird, like, actually fierce pussy, we're like the grandparents or something, but also the work that we're making now feels incredibly contemporary, and it's kind of interesting. We're shifting to keep up with the

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conversation. We're not having the same conversation we were having twenty years ago. We're having a really different — they're still about desire and sexuality and identity and feminism and rights and our bodies and public expression, but the terms keep changing, and that's really, really exciting. It's incredibly exciting.

Yeah, when we started working together again, you mentioned our name, fierce pussy, and I think for me, and I know for at least one other member, it was a little bit of a cringe factor, like, "Ooh, fierce pussy, that sounds so just —."

SS: So eighties. {LAUGHTER}

ZL: Yes, yes, and it's just do I really want to say that when I'm talking to Lynn Cooke? Do I want to be like, "Oh, yeah, and the collective that I work with, fierce pussy, like—." But now that we're working again and I'm starting to see the public response, I'm just like, you know, yeah. It is what it is, and it's kind of great to just say it. I don't know. And we were surprised again when we were up in Harvard, we were doing this work with the younger students, how vital the work is to them. When we did the show a couple of years ago at Printed Matter, we weren't even finished with our installation in the window. We took a break. We were wheat pasting the front window at Printed Matter when we showed a bunch of our work inside Printed Matter two years ago, and we broke for lunch. We went to a café, weren't even done, and people had already called the cops. {LAUGHTER} And part of us were kind of like, "Shit," and the other part of us, we were sort of like, "Oh, yeah, we still got it." So that's good to know. Good to know.

SS: Oh, that's good. So why did you leave ACT UP, or when did you leave ACT UP, actually?

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ZL: Oh, I got tired. I got tired and sad. Ninety-two, '93, I think after David died. It wasn't like I decided to leave ACT UP or anything, but Nancy and I, Nancy Brody and I took a trip that summer and went to India for three or four months, and I think both of us on that trip realized we didn't really want to live in New York anymore for a while. And I moved up to Cape Code, I moved up to P-town for about a year, and I learned how to sail. I worked on a sailboat. For me it had to do with some other things too. In '92 I was part of this big show in Europe, documenta, that piece I told you about, and that piece got a lot of attention and I was feeling a lot of conflict and pressure about being a young artist and what that meant and what it was going to mean to have a career as an artist. I had an incredibly kind of romantic idea that being an artist was going to mean hanging out with Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera and getting drunk and talking about politics and life and love and philosophy. Instead, I found myself at a table with a bunch of dealers and collectors wearing gray gabardine and talking about Jeff Koons' prices on the market. I was just like, "Fuck, did I sign up for this? Is this what I want?"

So I was having this other thing in my life, and I think I was in a state of deep mourning over the sheer numbers of people that had died and a few closer friends that had died. So it wasn't a consciously leaving ACT UP, but I was like, "I want to not live in New York for a while," and I think for me that was also about wanting to figure out whether I really was an artist or whether I was just doing it on autopilot because all my friends were artists. It was a real state of questioning, and some of that had to do with ACT UP, with the set of thoughts about being useful in the world, like becoming a doctor or becoming a civil rights lawyer or doing something useful, and I think on some really

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profound level for me, also, wanting to discover what my own voice would be outside of a collective. It was like I almost couldn't hear myself think because there was this collective thought process of ACT UP going on.

ACT UP had started to feel – like something terrible would happen, and we would rush to that, and something else terrible, and we'd rush to that. We were in this position of being reactive. Also WAC had started. There were all these other things, Queer Nation. We were running around putting out fires, and I think I got to some place as both an artist and a human being and a citizen where I wanted to roll it back a little bit and get a little bit of a look of the whole beast and to understand more about my relationship to that. I think I needed to find out whether I really needed to be an artist or whether I needed to go do something else and get more serious about being a political person.

So I lived out of the city for a number of years. From P-town, I ended up moving to Alaska for a few years, and then when I came back, I just found that, yeah, making art is what I do, and whether I'm good at it or not, it's just what I really like doing and that it has its own –

SS: You came back to the same revelation you had in high school.

ZL: Kind of, yeah. Yeah, that's interesting. I'd never thought about that. And that it's useful, and that was what was missing for me. I think in those ACT UP years, I was like, this isn't useful. This isn't saving anyone's life. What we need to do is take care of people that are sick, be a doctor or go do research or get some legislation passed to protect somebody. Art was so many steps removed from it, but I think what occurred to me was, first of all, you have to just follow your nature and do what you like

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doing, what you want to do, what your passion is, and also that art provides a place for a different kind of contemplation and consideration of personal experience and society, social interaction. It's not the same as changing a piece of legislation. It's not direct in that way. It's not direct action. But art, and in that I include writing and filmmaking and all the arts, it's the place where we figure out who we are and who we want to be and what's wrong and how we want to move forward. That's where I like living. That's the room I like living in, is that room of contemplating.

If, occasionally, I'm still going to go out and do some activism, that might happen again. I've showed up for some of the anti-war stuff, but not in any major way. But I've done some things here and there. But I like living in that space of kind of thinking and considering who we are.

SS: I only have one last question. So you're going to make your six o'clock dinner. So, looking back, what would you say from your point of view is ACT UP's greatest achievement and what was its biggest disappointment?

ZL: Wow. ACT UP did a lot. ACT UP did a lot. It changed the debate around healthcare irrevocably around this country and around the world for everyone. On so many levels I think that even the way people interact with their doctors, there's a whole presumption now that as a patient, you should be informed, that you have a responsibility about your own health, that you question the authority of the doctor. So that's one big piece of it.

It absolutely changed the whole conversation around gay identity, and now it's a conversation about queer identity. I think for those of us that survived, for those of us that are alive, we're a much smaller generation than we would have been

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because so many of us died, as you know all too well. But the generation that made it is so fucking awesome. There's so many great people that got politicized through that experience, that made that happen, that worked in ACT UP, that are now professors and doctors and lawyers and nurses and artists and writers and filmmakers and god knows what else.

But there's this generation of people that whether we are even talking about – I don't think about ACT UP very often. I've thought about it a lot this year because of the Harvard show and now because of this. But it's just there. A big part of who I am as a person today came out of that experience, and I'm passing that on to other people. It's how I interact in the world. It's how I learned to question authority. It's how I learned to stand up for myself. It's how I learned to never assume that anything's being done right. Question it, look at it, and then, — god, we just – The terms of engagement were so amazing and so life-changing, this idea that there are no experts, that we're the experts. You go out and read the book and you write the paper and then you write the book, that kind of – I think that's really phenomenal.

Then lots of – needle exchange. There's also a whole generation of young queers, certainly in this country and probably around the world, that are inspired by it and who are continuing the trajectory of activism.

Tape IV
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Its biggest failure? I don't even want to go there, actually. The big failure is not ACT UP's to have. The big failure is the U.S. Government and everyone who had the power to make AIDS better and didn't. That's the failure. The failure is that a lot more people died than needed to die, and a lot more people are sick today than needed to. To look at our failures is not interesting to me. Let's keep our eye on the prize. We did a

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really good thing. We did such a good thing, thousands of us did such a good thing and shame on all those people who didn't.

SS: Let's end on that. Thank you, Zoe.