

**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: **Tom Kalin**

Interview Number: **042**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **February 4, 2004**

ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview of Tom Kalin

February 4, 2004

**SARAH SCHULMAN: If you could say your name, how old you are, today's date, and where we are?**

TOM KALIN: My name is Tom Kalin. My age is 41. Today is February 4th. I will be 42 in a month from now, and we're in New York City.

**SS: 2004.**

TK: Right, 2004.

**SS: You were born in Chicago and is your family Lithuanian?**

TK: Yes. My last name is Kalinauskis – it was shortened when I was a kid. My father changed his name, like many immigrants, to fit in. And, I'm the youngest of eleven children. Interestingly, I didn't really identify with Lithuanian – although, I'm half Lithuanian. My father was born in Lithuania. My mother was Irish and Norwegian and the Irish culture was actually much stronger in the way that I was raised. My father was fluent in Lithuanian and taught none of us. We didn't learn a word of Lithuanian.

**SS: So, you didn't grow up in Marquette Park?**

TK: I didn't. I grew up on the South Side. My parents originally lived briefly in the near South Side of Chicago, but they lived in Homewood. My father did various things for a living. In the mid-sixties, he was the Director of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. He studied with Saul Alinsky, who wrote that book in the fifties, *Rules for Radicals*. I'm not quite a Red Diaper baby, but definitely like a Catholic leftist family, and my father had the choice of where to set up this thing – the National Council on Crime and Delinquency – so, he chose the suburbs of Chicago, because we had such a big family, it would be too expensive to live closer. Prior to that, we lived in

Saginaw, Michigan, and he was the Director of a thing called the St. Charles School for Boys, which was before my time but, apparently, terrifying. My mother trying to raise her daughters with these wild 16-year-old juvenile delinquents.

**SS: Isn't that unusual for a Lithuanian of that generation to be involved in a liberal program?**

TK: Probably yes. I think the interesting thing is that my father was going to be a Roman Catholic priest. He studied in the seminary and had finished seminary school. I think the big, unspoken family secret was that my mother was in love with my father's younger brother, who went off to fight in World War II, my mother married my father instead and my father had some giant break with Catholicism and became – considered himself Agnostic. And the only thing that the credits that he had from seminary school could transfer into was social work, which is how he always spun it. I think character wise, and I think, given my own character, the lefty orientation isn't so surprising. I inherited it from my father. I think whatever area he came from in Lithuania must have had some dissident blood or something, that caused him to do what he did, because he was really more than just a job choice – and, especially, though being a priest and a social worker might not seem to be that close, in a lot of ways they were. I think in the ways he saw it.

**SS: Did any of your siblings go into the Church?**

TK: No. Interestingly, some of my older siblings are fundamentalist Christians – some of them quite severe. I have an older sister who utterly disapproves of my homosexuality, was an avid supporter of Jesse Helms. So, built into my family, I have fairly explosive dynamics politically. My older brother, who lives in New York City,

actually studied film as well. As a career, he works for a thing called HCC – Housing Conservation Coordinators. They're one of the biggest agencies in the cities that coordinate the Till building programs – a lot of the buildings in the seventies that tenants took over, and that kind of thing. And, actually, he lives in a tenant-run building, on 57th Street, that he's lived in since the mid-seventies.

**SS: So you guys are sort of split down the middle.**

TK: Yeah, it's pretty severe, actually, it is. We don't necessarily all talk politics, but I think there is a pretty severe right/left split in the family. The younger half – well, the only Republicans I can think of in the family are the older siblings, which my father, I'm sure would be appalled by, because we were raised, roundly Democratic. But, yeah, we do split. I also have a sister who's involved in the Transcendental Meditation movement since 1971. She teaches Sidhi levitation, which is how to fly without an engine. She and the fundamentalist Christian don't get along at all, because each one thinks the other one is worshipping false gods. I think the thing that is in common is that we're all slightly autodidacts in some way – in terms of sociology or social activism or religious belief or whatever. We're a family of very strong opinion.

00:05:00

**SS: So, when did you first become politically aware? If that's possible to pinpoint.**

TK: Well, it was kind of around the dinner table, actually. I watched this documentary recently on Kissinger – I don't know the name of it. It's really a devastating, excellent documentary that was just about holding Kissinger to account for all the things that went on when he was in the White House and afterward. It brought back – I was aware of Kissinger as a villainous figure growing up, or Nixon as a

villainous figure, and I certainly remember the Watergate trials and the Watergate era in great detail – all of it, really. I remember the break-in being reported. I remember the incremental erosion of Nixon’s power. I remember him leaving the White House. And, I understand that as his politics. I remember the Vietnam War being on television programs, as well. And, even as a kid, in a more corny way, I always had – before I was – I think I knew that I was gay very young. I think I knew I was gay, probably in kindergarten. But early, before I really had a notion that being gay might mean identifying with others who are gay, I had intense identification with Holocaust stories, or when *Roots* was on, had a very intense connection to *Roots* at some level, which was more than just interest. I identified somehow narratively with stories of people who are on the outside, or people who are persecuted in a variety of ways.

**SS: Did you know blacks or Jews?**

TK: Yeah, oh God. I grew up in Homewood/Flossmoor, which is two adjoining suburbs. It has sort of a very funny history. Flossmoor was primarily upper middle class and Jewish, Homewood was primarily lower and middle class and Catholic. And in fact, the joke of my childhood was, the Irish Catholic Marys from Homewood wouldn’t clean the wealthy houses in Flossmoor. So, most of my friends as a kid were Jewish growing up. I’d say at least half, if not three-quarters. Frankly, I had kind of Jewish cultural envy, in terms of childhood, because I grew up in a chaotic family with eleven children. No Jewish household had eleven children that I knew of. There were things like nice books about art in those houses. You were allowed to discuss culture. I don’t know – I just identified. From a longtime – I’ve been with Craig Paull, my boyfriend, for 12 years. He’s Jewish. I celebrate the holidays with him. We celebrate

Hanukkah and have Seders and Passover. So, I don't consider myself Jewish, but I've always been very attuned.

Blacks – I had more contact than many in Chicago. Chicago is a severely segregated city. In grade school there were probably five Black kids, out of a class of maybe 100 or something like that. So very, very few. But going into high school and then, certainly, in college more and more, because I'm from the South Side of Chicago, which is considered to be the less wealthy part of Chicago, generally, and for the most part, the Black population in Chicago has been concentrated on the South Side or the near South Side. Race, I think, is more complicated than – I don't know if Jewishness could be considered solely on the basis of race, but let's call it race along with faith. That was a closer reach to me – was more next door, knowable, than race, in terms of the notion of external mark, or being a person of color didn't have much contact in a kind of political way with issues of race until – really aware I think – late high school and college. I was involved in anti-apartheid activism as an undergraduate.

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

TK: I went to the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, which is a very large state school. I thought my entire career had ended because I couldn't afford to go to a private school – it was all going to end for me.

**SS: Which career was that?**

TK: I was going to be in English literature. That's actually what I went to undergraduate for, and within a year, I switched into painting. You tell me why. I didn't even really understand it at the time. It was a kind of instinctive move that happened around 18 or 19, when I think I recognized instinctively before I recognized

intellectually, that I was compelled to be some sort of, whatever, artist or maker – so I switched into painting, because it seemed better than graphic design. And, I knew I wasn't a sculptor. And, I spent undergraduate mainly studying photography and painting and took a lot of literature and a little bit of film.

**SS: Now at that time, there was a very strong anti-apartheid movement on the campuses, because I went to U of C[hicago] and we had the same thing at the same time. How involved were you in that movement?**

00:10:00 TK: I was involved like a postering and leafleting level. I was a peon in the organization. I was never a group leader or anything. I was a member that would show up. The same thing with, during the time of the Contra scandals and stuff. I was present in a sort of general way towards left-leaning causes and would give time. I didn't have the kind of initiative at that stage. I think I was a late bloomer actually, and in some ways, was talkative, but quite shy, still, from 18 to 22. It wasn't until later – because when I moved to New York and became involved in ACT UP, which I know we'll talk about in a minute – that was a very different thing. It felt very easy and natural just to step into more leadership positions, I guess. And at that early stage – partially also because I didn't really think I understood the complexity of a lot of the issues that were involved and was really learning and was a little in awe of the people, most of whom were graduate students, at least at U of I. People who were really leading a lot of the activist movements were graduate students.

**SS: In that era, when the student movements were focused on international events, like the Nicaraguan revolution, El Salvador and the anti-apartheid movement –**

TK: Can you imagine?

**SS: Were you involved at all in any kind of gay organization on your campus?**

TK: I did. I went to the University Gay and Lesbian Caucus – something like that – circling for a month by the posting board – you know, that whole well-known narrative of, I was terrified to go. And then I went, probably, for equal parts social, sexual and political reasons. And frankly, to be honest, probably socially and sexually first, and then began to understand – I think that’s a kind of interesting thing to think about – I could immediately identify global activism with politics directly and understood what it meant to be in a protest or leaflet or circulate a petition or two or write letters. But, I didn’t immediately connect it with my sexuality at all. In part, that quickly passed – I think, a couple of things. One was, the ERA was still percolating and was alive, and another thing was that there was Anita Bryant had coalesced a kind of movement. I didn’t – I don’t know, there’s a gap. It’s interesting – something I haven’t really thought that much about – part of it had to do with the generational thing. I was born in 1962, so I’m not quite old enough to be a late ’70s clone, but I’m certainly old enough – or whatever – in the late ’70s, not that you had to be a clone. But, I didn’t have an adult experience of the late ’70s and then into the early ’80s. So, a lot of that threshold of time was seen a little bit more as a kind of teenage kid on the outside. So, I didn’t see myself in that narrative as easily, which I think is an interesting thing – where, somehow I could make the leap very easily around these other things – perhaps, actually, because there was precedent in my family, because my father saw his job to aid the people that he encountered in his job, regardless of their class or their race or whatever, in as best a way



he could. So, there was a kind of vision of that that I have a sense of. Whereas homosexuality absolutely wasn't mentioned in my household, I had no context for it.

**SS: Are you only gay child in your family?**

TK: Insanely. This is the insane part. I'm the youngest of eleven. There are seven children in my mother's family. I probably have 30-something first cousins. No one is out. We're the anti-Kinsey family. And, as I've become an adult, I'm pretty sure that no one's being closeted. I don't think someone is hiding. So, I think it's kind of odd. I'm the only one.

**SS: Even all your nephews and nieces?**

TK: Nobody, yet. It's just horrifying. I'm waiting!

**SS: It must not be biological. You very interestingly brought out the ERA, and I know that Illinois was one of those states where the ERA could never be ratified. It was a huge issue, especially at the time that you were going to college.**

TK: And there's this person – a key person – it's enjoyable to see you all, but it's also enjoyable just to think about the transition you were thinking. There was a person named Terry Cosgrove, who was very involved in left politics. I've often wondered where he is. I hope that he's still alive. He was a really influential person. At a very early age – I encountered him probably at 20, maybe even 19, and he had been extremely involved in ERA, at the highest level. He had been involved in terms of canvassing – all of that kind of stuff – work in Washington, and then was one of the leaders in Champaign, and had been a long term sort of lefty, in terms of Illinois politics, and had been involved in Champaign, specifically around trying to do work around the ERA. So, I became aware. At the time, it seemed doubly remarkable that there was a

guy working so hard for ERA, who was so prominently feminist. And also, that there was a gay man who was so prominently feminist, which then, you know – so, it's a very quick transition for me. You also have to keep in mind that in the early '80s, homosexuality, or the gay rights movement, is so largely intertwined and indebted to the feminist movement, obviously, going back to the '60s. If you look at – I think a lot of the first movements – the gay left movements – had direct personal connections with early feminist movements –

**SS: But did the student group on the U of I campus –**

TK: They didn't embrace ERA. Terry was a radical and maverick, and I guess that's why I'm pointing him out because every thing else in the early '80s – a lot of it – was stereotypical, hideous, traditional, gay male misogyny, which just terrified me and seemed repulsive beyond belief. That's one of the thresholds, I think, that made identifying with older gay men hard for me at that age, was because all of my central friendships had been women. All the most important people in my life, in high school – the closest friendships – were easily women. Very intense romantic friendships, and even a little more than friendships. So, any idea of some kind of all male culture, some hideous Boys Town that was on top of it – misogynist – I just did not connect and relate to it. Obviously, it's a simplification of what the '70s and early '80s were. But, as a young gay man, that's all that I saw. When I first went to gay bars – yikes. So not my scene.

**SS: In Champaign?**

TK: Champaign was a small town with gay bars filled with people my age. When I first went to Chicago out to gay bars – end of high school, beginning of college –

it just this scary, leather-clad male world. The image of that thing that just did not –

**SS: Clarke Street.**

TK: Totally. It just didn't appeal. It's also telling when you look at my history, later – like, I studied in the mid-'80s with a lot of the language-based feminist artists, like Yvonne Rainer and Barbara Kruger who are among the most influential artists on me. It's no mistake that they were who they were. That's not random. My own character, my personal politics have been hugely shaped by feminism. I also understand the limitations of my identification with feminism. I am a biological male and no amount of imagination is ever going to make me experience what it is to be, for one second, a woman. That moment was an interesting moment, because there were a few people like, this Terry Cosgrove that were the transitional figures, and they were out there. And, they were certainly the minority, and I just thought, God, what a free thinker he is.

**SS: Let's just take a moment to make record about the gay bars of Chicago in the late '70s. Can you tell me some of the ones you went to?**

TK: Little Jim's, Carol's Speakeasy. Carol's Speakeasy was on Wells Street. It was the popper, perfumed, shirtless, toot-toot beat-beat dance crowd with a backroom. On the Gold Coast there was this gentleman's club – little did I know, because it looked safe – little did I know, later, that it was a hustler bar. It was like, one of the first bars I ever went to. Unfortunately, I cannot remember the name of it. And there was Little Jim's – oh God, I'm going to confuse them with the New York ones – but there were the older school men's bars that were leather, western and whatever, clone-style bars. Then, there was a very severe break that happened in the late '70s, early '80s – around '80 – where there were new wave bars or, you know, the groovier bars. So, there was a bar

called Berlin, on Belmont, that was like, the new gay bar. It was just like, I suppose, Boy Bar in New York – was that kind of break in sensibility with the earlier period – that was the equivalent in Chicago. I was, actually, in that period, as much interested in punk music and the music scene. So, there was – God, what is that place called on Clarke Street – the Big Metro. There was a record store called Wax Trax, which was a kind of center of the music scene, in that it was a really odd mingling ground, really insane. There was like, the neo-Nazi, literally, posse right with the kids identically dressed who were gay punks. You couldn't tell them apart. I was also clueless in that period of time. I didn't really understand how gay punk was, until years later. I thought I was the only fag who was interested in punk music and later found out you know, that that was not the case at all.

**SS: What did you wear at the time?**

00:20:00 TK: In high school, up until senior year of high school, I was a “hippie.” I had long, long curly hair to my shoulders. '79 – up to that point I only listened to Janis and Jimi and the Doors. This should tell you something – I went on the 10-year reunion of the 1968 Chicago Convention March, which is a ragtag – mainly socialists – all wandering around trying to say, “The whole world is watching!” But there's like, 30 of us. Shit, I was born too late. God, I missed it. And then I turned on a dime really quickly, in the late '70s – '79 I think, even maybe '78, I got introduced to Roxy Music and the Talking Heads and Brian Eno and everything changed. And I became sort of either a punk or I don't know what. After I had the long hair, I just buzz-cutted it off and dyed it bleached blond and wore thrift store army clothes and all that kind of stuff, and succeeded in alienating everyone I went to high school with, much to my pleasure. There

are a few people that I liked from high school, and I had a connection to, but I had a horrible high school experience and was eager to get as far away from it as I could.

**SS: So, speaking of – when did you come to New York?**

TK: I moved to New York in 1987, in the early summer or late – probably end of May, early June. I had always wanted to come here. I'd come here first – I spent a summer here in 1983 for about five or six weeks, living in the East Village, visiting a friend. You know, living – staying for five weeks – and loved it. I'm relieved, actually, in some ways that I didn't come at that stage, because I think at 21 I was still – New York probably would have eaten me alive at that age. So, I was a little older. I guess I was 25 when I moved here. And, I came to do this thing called the Whitney Program, which is, the Whitney Museum has an independent study program. Like every dutiful art student in the mid-'80s, I studied theory, and talked Lacan and Foucault and Althusser – some of which I don't think I understood at all, at the time.

**SS: Had you gone to graduate school, before you did that?**

TK: I did. I did undergraduate at University of Illinois, and I went to graduate school at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and that was, again, a really big transition. I stopped being a painter and started being a photographer and installation artist, and made my first videos – made my first AIDS video there, actually, a tape called *News From Home*, which was made collaboratively with an artist named Stathis Lagoudakis, who's a Greek artist, who now lives in England. Very much – it was 1985 – a tape of its time. It features me obsessively washing my hands – a paranoid AIDS video. I'm sorry, that's my first tape. It's called *Little Soldiers*, but *News from Home* was equally paranoid, and it used found footage and had a sort of semi-fractured narrative

about a couple on the day that one of them finds out they're HIV-positive. Bill Olander, who was at the New Museum, was curating a show. Lyn Blumenthal and Kate Horsfield who were at the Video Data Bank who are a couple and had been a couple since the early '70s, mid-'70s, had gone to art school together, had established the Video Data Bank. They were hugely influential. They were like, this glamorous, fabulous lesbian couple who knew everything I wanted to know and were really interested artists and just smart and great to be with. Lyn, I think, put my work forward to Bill Olander. I forget how Bill even found out about the work, but that was my first connection to New York.

**SS: She found you in Chicago?**

TK: She was teaching there and part of the Video Data Bank, and I made some work at the end of second year in graduate school that got a little notice. Craig Owens came to teach at the Art Institute of Chicago. Craig Owens who's a theoretician – very precociously smart writer, mainly about art – taught a graduate seminar. We hit it off socially, and we hit it off artistically, almost immediately, and I got to know through – and Lyn had been friends with Craig. So, like any smart art student in graduate school, that was what I was gravitating towards, and what was happening in the '80s, certainly, was happening in New York and was a lot of that politically inflected language-based art, which I was immediately drawn to. I'd known John Hartfield and all that stuff, for years, before I'd seen Barbara Kruger's work.

**SS: Now, Bill Olander, Craig and Lyn are all dead, we have to say. Lyn died of cancer and the other two of AIDS.**

TK: Lyn actually died more complicatedly than cancer, but cancer was one of the contributing things, yeah. It's so sad about Craig Owens, mostly. I didn't know Bill,

as well. I knew Chris Cox, who was Bill's lover, and there's a tape I actually made, in this series of tapes I made. Chris is one of the people that's memorialized in the tape. Bill was a really key figure that I wish I got to know more. He was sick already. In the mid-'80s – '86 probably – I had these contacts. I showed, maybe, the first time at the Kitchen. New York was just really absolutely Mecca. I couldn't believe I was showing in the Kitchen – all of that kind of stuff. So, Craig and Barbara Kruger and all the people I met said, "You should apply to the Whitney Program. It's the place you should go." I applied, I got in, came here, lived in Brooklyn, was very broke. And through that time – and followed up on whoever I had a contact with. Amy Taubin had actually curated a show, so I first met Amy, I guess, through that, and Bill through this tape, originally. Then later, when Bill came to ACT UP and asked for people to work on the window, I got to know him a little better then. He died fairly quickly, though.

**SS: I want to back up a little bit. Okay – so, you're saying, basically, you became an artist making work about AIDS from the beginning, while you were in art school.**

TK: Pretty much, but undergraduate my work was mainly – I made paintings. As a painter, I made work that was heavily influenced by the British pop artists – Hockney, chiefly, Richard Hamilton, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg – American artists. Little did I know that Rauschenberg and Johns were lovers. I was so clueless at that stage – and Warhol, definitely. I knew I was not an abstract expressionist in any way, shape or form. I completely recoiled against it, instinctively, before understanding the psycho-sexual politics underneath it, and immediately gravitated towards pop – more the British pop actually, interestingly, although I always admired Warhol or pre-pop, like

Johns and Rauschenberg. So, I made that kind of painting work and that work, eventually, lead to work that – I had contact with Martha Rosler as an undergraduate and a few other artists that started opening up my political consciousness more, so by the end of my senior year of undergraduate, I started making more politically conscious work – that was mostly just about gay identity, about my gay identity – coming out, that kind of work.

**SS: Would you say that going to art school and building those relationships with these gay and lesbian artists gave you a step up on the class ladder?**

TK: Yes, my God. Of course. That's one of the things I'm most interested in my work. I class leapt utterly. The art world has been the absolute entrée in so many ways to rooms I never thought I'd be in. And, even perversely and complicatedly – and even divisively, which we can talk more about – but, in the moment of ACT UP and then subsequently, Gran Fury, and my really, literally first major recognition as an artist, was absolutely all around AIDS. So, there's always been this kind of – the central tragedy of my life has also been the central jettison – it's that thing that has propelled me. It started my career. It gave me visibility, and I don't have much complicated emotion about that. I have always felt like I've been as truthful as I can be in my work and in my life. But, I'm also not deaf to the weird paradox of that. And also, the fact that that has made it possible for me to be reduced, when I am written about, to The Gay American Artist – in other words, that coming out in that way will forever frame my work in both ways that present opportunity and also close down opportunity.

**SS: I want to go back to your first pieces about AIDS. We have plenty of**



time, we're going to go through everything in, so relax.

TK: Yes, of course. Happily. I know it's scary –

**SS: Because you have a lot to tell and I want to be sure that we get to tell your story. Okay, so you're an art student in Chicago – when did you first become aware of AIDS?**

TK: Very early – '82.

**SS: Do you remember how?**

TK: Yeah, newspaper, *New York Times*. It freaks me out – people of our age group, who talk about that narrative. Seven out of 10 of them, no matter where they were in the country, knew from the *New York Times* first, because it's where it was being reported. And then, it was much later that it was on the news. There was – it was so scarily, stereotypical – there was a gay hairdresser in Champaign – first HIV-positive person I knew – Jimmy Walters.

**SS: How did you know him?**

00:30:00 TK: He cut my hair. He was the cool, gay hairdresser. He was older. I was an undergraduate. You are 21, so he was probably 30. And it's all of those things that just were so stereotypical of that time. We were all, "Whew, he's 30, he wears leather and has a mustache. There's no possible way I could be HIV-positive."

**SS: How did you find out that he was HIV?**

TK: Gossip – probably, in the circle. And this probably happened at the very, very end of undergraduate. When is the HIV test invented? '83? '84? I forget the exact year – so, it's right around the identification of HIV as the strain and the antibody test, because he was one of the first people I was aware of, had consciousness that he had

tested and knew. I never knew from him, directly. And, this was like a lot of the narratives around that time. You'd leave or just not seeing that person very much anymore, then you'd hear through the grapevine, and then there'd be that awful sort of, what do I do? Do I call or contact that person? I was never that close, I don't know what to do. And then years later, anecdotally, someone would drop, "Oh yeah, he died." Which became the story of the late '80s. But certainly, by '83, '84, I was aware. And, I started practicing safe sex, absolutely no later than 1984, probably '85.

**SS: When you made that decision – and that's a big decision to make – did you already have people in your life who had AIDS?**

TK: No. Other than Jimmy, no. And then I moved to Chicago in '85 – back to Chicago, to go to school, lived in Wicker Park, which at that time was an affordable artists' neighborhood. I don't know how affordable it is now – probably not. And there was an older couple – Leslie Harvell and – what was his name? Dobie – I forget Dobie's last name – it's not Gillis – and they were probably mid-40s – interesting couple, interracial couple – Dobie was white. Leslie was Black. They both collected Haitian art and had, for years, been really interested and spent a lot of time in Haiti – really interesting, incredibly supportive couple. As an art student, I couldn't buy the canvas and they bought it for me, whatever, that sort of thing. And in 1986, Leslie became sick in the end of the year – in December, November, and became macrobiotic, and clearly was very sick and AIDS was not mentioned. And then, very rapidly, he died three months after that. And for about two months after that – this is taking me to the very end of my graduate school – I became Dobie's – because in our social group I was sort of the most grown up, scary to think – and I became the one that accompanied Dobie to go shopping,

and tried to keep him on his feet and keep him going. And I was 21 or 22, and I didn't even have time to embrace my own grief around Leslie who, of the two, I was actually closer to and had a very simpatico relationship. So, I sort of flipped out and, in some ways, I think that I moved to New York because I was interested in the Whitney Program, and because it's where smart artists went and whatever. But I was also, partially, running away from AIDS, and the crazy part is, where did I run to? The epicenter.

**SS: The epicenter. That's a word from that era.**

TK: I find that very telling about my character frankly. That says everything – that my idea of running away was to run – I couldn't be stalked at arm's length anymore. If this thing was going to be in my life, I was going to go right to it, I was going to deal with it. And, that's very much my character. By that stage, I had sort of found my spine or whatever, and was – the sad part is, thinking back – was I of more use at that stage, in the general sense, being another person involved in ACT UP? Or, could I have been more use in that person's individual life? Dobie of course went on to have HIV and die of AIDS – none of which I knew. That was my last contact with him. So, there's always a wrenching, strange thing around that time. Then, circling up from that – from Leslie and Dobie – there were a bunch of people – Ben – oh God, there's a half a dozen gay men in that circle, most of whom are a bit older, up to much older, who quickly died. So when I would go back to Chicago or have contact you'd hear –

**SS: What was your family's reaction, when your friends started to die?**

TK: I had a pretty severe breakaway from my family after high school. It was normal in my family – because there were so many of us – to move out. It was a joke in

00:35:00

my family – I graduated high school, and I kid you not, I moved out the next day. I loved my mother. My father had died when I was 14, so I grew up in a house with just one parent. My mom was fabulous. It was nothing against her, I just wanted freedom. So, that break that started at 18 went for a long time, if I think back on it, really. I kept a fair amount of distance from my family, up until my mid-20s. I came out very oddly and incrementally. I did not send out a press release. I did not come out to everyone, all at once. One of my brothers knew in high school, because he found gay porn in my room. And eventually, somewhere in my mid-20s, I was comfortable enough, and starting with my mother, I told her and then word spread like wildfire. And there wasn't a lot of talking about it directly, actually. Like I think of many people's experience, it was just too terrifying for my family to talk about and articulate – their fears around HIV and their fear around the fact that I was coming out, precisely at this moment, when this hideous, horrible thing was becoming known. It was also I think, quite – anyone who was perceptive – all my brothers' wives knew I was gay when I was 12. When I was 12 or 13, one of my sisters-in-law said to me, "Do you think you might be homosexual?" And of course, I said, "No, no way!" I had initiated a lot of that stuff in my family, to be honest. I had to be, like – just in case you're wondering, I do practice safe sex. I had to calm them down a little bit, and I'm sure it's something that people still continue to worry about. I mean, it's still part of the narrative of coming out, all these years later, because I think that there's still a connection between homosexuality and –

**SS: Because our friends still seroconvert, after so much time, so it's not just a question that's asked once. So, you came to the Whitney Program, and who did you meet there?**

TK: I met the students I was involved with – probably the most notable person in relationship to thinking about AIDS work, but also, just as a friend and a colleague and someone I had known for a long time, is Alex Juhasz, was in that group – that’s one of the people. Another woman, Caterina Borelli, wasn’t involved in AIDS work, but was a really interesting video artist. Tom Burr, another artist – who’s now become a visual artist – is a gay artist. There’s a German artist named Uli Holm, who died of AIDS, sadly, who was briefly boyfriends with Tom, I believe. And a bunch of artists. The people I named were probably the most influential connection in that program. I was not at the right place for the Whitney Program. It was the ’80s. Ron Clark who runs the Whitney Program would say these things like, “All art has to have a dialectic,” and had really, an intensely Marxist – what I found to be an incredibly rigid take around work. And, I was at the stage where the desire to make didactic political work and its complete opposite – lyrical, poetic, personal work, was sort of warring within me. Because essentially, as much as I might be considered a political artist, I really am first and foremost a lyrical, poetic artist, I think. Someone who I met during that period, Gregg Bordowitz, who was one of the members of ACT UP and who had actually gone to the Whitney Program, used to joke all the time – he was the autodidact, and I was, like, the lyrical Oscar Wilde dandy. At the Whitney Program I was very –

**SS: But I find your work is very engaged. I find it almost humorous that you would describe it that way. Oh, we have to change tapes.**

**SS: Now, you tell me that your work is not dialogic, because I don’t believe that.**

TK: No, it is. I don’t mean to be disingenuous. I guess I think many of my

primary influences are artists whose work, you know – yes, I’m influenced by Genet, but I’m equally influenced by Cocteau. So then in some ways, probably, if I’m honest, more by Cocteau than by Genet – that helps, by way of analogy – meaning, there’s a kind of lyricism and aestheticism, particularly, and to stereotype a kind of effete aestheticism that is definitely always been central in my work and which wars a little bit my aesthetic sense. As much as I have a kind of intense aesthetic sense, there’s also part of me that has a kind of minimalist sensibility. So, there’s a kind of tension or warring in my work that was at that time, in a not productive way, because I couldn’t figure out how to make work that was really terse, very edited, very stripped down and didactic and satisfy, at the same time, my desire to make a beautiful object. So, I think in the Whitney Program – what I see, looking back at that time – is a very sharp split that happens in my work, where I become involved in ACT UP. I move to New York in June. I think ACT UP starts in July of 1987, something like that, in the summer. And, I don’t go during the first eight weeks, but I go after the first 10 weeks, probably. So, I’m there by September, that fall. So, it’s still fairly small. There’s a 100, maybe 150 people in the room at most – and quickly, become almost immediately involved in the – New Museum of Contemporary Art sponsored a window that was put out to ACT UP, as a group, met, very quickly, Mark Simpson, who was one of the most central figures in my life, during that period of time – continues to be, despite the fact that he’s died. And, a lot of the people that I know now from that period that became involved in the group that was called Gran Fury – that work, working on that window – first of all, was crazy, because I had literally moved from Chicago and my thesis show in Chicago was a show of large, blown-up photographs taken mainly from World War II – many of them from the

Nuremberg trials – presented in this kind of postmodern way. And, I didn't self-consciously make parallels between Nazi Germany and the contemporary persecution of homosexuality, but those themes were in my work, for sure. So I came, and I went to this first meeting where they're doing a window, and they're like, "We need to make a giant picture of the Nuremberg trials." And I'm like, "I make photo murals. I'm going to Chicago tomorrow and I have the negative you need." So, it was just this crazy, fortuitous – and just so strange how quickly those two things segued together. So, that presented an opportunity to suddenly make this work a) collectively, so I could disband all this ridiculous, egotistic, author-based bullshit that I was struggling with. It was like being in an anonymous collective, it was incredibly liberating – and, make work that's sole purpose was, you know, along with catching your eye – the core value of it was a political message – trying to challenge or provoke or incite the viewer. And that was really liberating, because then I felt like I didn't have to do that, necessarily, in my work. So my other work, which was still installation and video, went through this kind of odd transformation. I started giving myself permission to think more incorrect thoughts and to make work that was more messy or more based in experience and less theoretically grounded. And by the time *Swoon* came along – I think *Swoon* is evidence of that. It's like the desire to – I'm interested in history, I'm interested in the representation of homosexuality, but I was also attracted to these two really troubled figures who were murderers.

**SS: And Jews.**

TK: And Jews. And intellectuals and all of that. So I was super compelled, and I don't think I would have been capable of making that work had I not had the

opportunity to separate away – for at least a time in my mind – if not necessarily even in the art – these two strands of work. Interestingly, I don't see them at all separated now. I think my work can be both.

**SS: When did you make *They are lost to vision altogether*?**

TK: *They are lost to vision altogether* was first made in 1988. There's a 10-minute version of it. I did it as my graduate project from the Art Institute of Chicago.

**SS: Oh, so it was before ACT UP?**

TK: It was before ACT UP. The first version of it. No, that's not correct, actually. I know what I'm thinking – I had to go back, actually. I graduated in '87, but I really graduated in '88. I was involved in that thesis show. So, I'm now remembering. I moved here in '87. I got involved in ACT UP, in that summer and started in the Whitney Program. Almost simultaneously, I took a job at a non-profit AIDS education company called AIDS Films, which was one of the first companies in the States that did straight ahead, prevention education. The most famous and first film we did was hosted by Ron Reagan – the President's son – Ruben Blades and Beverly Johnson. And, it was broadcast on PBS. It included things like showing how to put a condom on a banana. It was a very straight-ahead, prevention education thing. I stayed there from '87 to '91, for four years and was a producer on a series of films we did that were written, researched and directed by members of communities of color. So, we'd make a film targeted towards young African American females, which was researched by an African American female researcher, written by a screenwriter who's an African American female and directed by an African American female director.

**SS: Who was the director?**



TK: Neema Barnette did the one for African American females. Regge Life did the ones for African American teens. Lourdes Portillo did the one for Latino women and those are the only three I was involved in.

**SS: This is Donald Woods' organization?**

TK: Donald Woods was afterwards. At the time I was there, from 1987 to 1992, John Hoffman – who is now at HBO, actually – was the executive director of it. And, there was a woman named Joyce George, and another woman named Alyce Myatt, who were producers in the series. I think I was hired partially for my street cred. I was involved in ACT UP. I was a lefty. I knew how to go talk to people at community-based organizations and not freak them out. So, I became friends with Yannick Durand, at the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, and Ernesto de la Vega – a bunch of people who were working, basically, in CBOs. They were service organizations, doing outreach and education. And, I was inspired by that work. I was getting paid, it was a job, but I felt useful and I could satisfy one sort of political engagement with the issues around AIDS in ACT UP, and a sort of very different one at my job at AIDS Films, which was not primarily targeted at gay white men, and was really about trying to struggle with very complicated cultural issues of reaching – what's even the difference between an African American female who's 16 and a Latino female that's 16, and all of the different variations in the Latino populations that are possible. It became very clear that education, all that stuff, was really a very complicated issue, in terms of how you would reach and speak to the audiences that you wanted to reach and speak to, starting with what the content was. You can't just say, "Don't use condoms." The idea of modeling behavior, or how people get that kind of information, how people seek that kind of help.

Anyway, that job gave me access to broadcast footage from AIDS and a lot of the libraries – ABC and the rest of them – I could legitimately through my job request broadcast footage for all these shows. So during '87 to '88, while I had that job, I got my hands on all this footage and was like, yipes – and so I made a first draft of *They are lost to vision altogether*, which was actually not prior to ACT UP, it's during ACT UP. So it's '88 the first version was out and it's 10 minutes, and then I went back and made another version of it, which is the official version that most people know – the 13-minute version. There's a Canadian gay artist named Andy Fabo, who's made a bunch of tapes and has been around for a while. He's a sort of funny one. The comparison of those two versions – the 10-minute one is much more lyrical and much less didactic, and the 13-minute one is the much more – I'm much more pointed, politically in that piece. It's much less – there's more Bette Davis in the first one and less in the second – that sort of thing. And that's what that tape came out of is really, my access through working at AIDS Films and becoming aware of broadcast footage – definitely, my involvement with ACT UP – the whole section in *They are lost to vision altogether* where people are kissing was like some ACT UP party, where I would bring a light stand into the hall and go, "I'm shooting people kissing in the hallway – come out and kiss." The heartbreaking part about that is how many people are like – so many people, interestingly, wrote notes later like, "Oh, that was my boyfriend who died of AIDS, can you send me a copy?" And it also came out with a struggle – in that, I think there's a real struggle in that piece between a kind of throwing Edith Piaf *La Vie En Rose* up against – a kind of heightened, heightened romanticism – up against what was going on, in terms of the activism and finding interest out of exploding those two things. So, that's really transitional. I think

that's where my work, in some ways, started actually to be my work, in the way I think of it now. I think a lot of what I did before that time was maybe clever, but very self-conscious and very derivative of the artists I admired. I feel like I started listening to my own instincts that lead me to a more interesting place. And I think really, ACT UP, Gran Fury and AIDS Films – all three of those things – I don't think I would be the artist I am now, if those things didn't happen the way they happened.

**SS: Let's go to some concrete things about ACT UP, because we're trying to explain to people who didn't experience it, what it was like and how it worked.**

**Okay, so you're sitting in an ACT UP meeting at the Center –**

TK: Let's start outside, please. You hear of the thing – I hear of the thing, the first time, I go. You come in, it's like, the complete Community Center smell and vibe the narrow, skinny hallways, papered with all those leaflets of every single kind, seeking roommates, substance abuse – you name it – size 12 pumps for drag queens, everything. You go into the room. It's kind of a crappy room with linoleum floors – green and black, if I remember correctly – with white iron poles all through the room – long in shape. The axis of the room, instead of being stacked the long way, facing this way, was used in the wide way, so there's kind of a wide open – maybe 10 seats deep, facing the front of the room. Maybe there was a teeny little thing you stood on, like a podium, but probably not. I doubt it. Certainly, there was no lectern or microphone or anything. And my first impression when I came in was, like, first of all – who are all these people? Because it was such an incredible mixture, an impressive mixture of people. But also, it was like every fantasy I ever had of '30s New York, socialist, communist meetings. It was like, it reeked of it. It was like the '60s again. I was in SDS. Oh my God. It had that romantic

00:50:00

whiff to it, because it seemed utterly urgent, completely improvised, totally responsive and nimble in that early stage, because it was a fairly small group of people – highly intelligent – terrifying to raise one’s hand, at that stage, and I’m a motor mouth, as you can see. I was like, I am not going to speak.

It was really smart people. I think at that stage – you know, Bradley Ball, Michael Nesline, Maria Maggenti and Rebecca Cole are the people I mostly remember as facilitating those meetings. There’s also a guy whose name I can’t remember – tall and skinny – that was friends with Bradley Ball. And also, Stephen Gendin was very present. The person who was Avram [Finkelstein]’s boyfriend who took his life – Steve [Webb]. There was a kind of wave of those people who clearly seemed to be prior. There was no brochure, there was no orientation, there was no narrative to receive. You walked into this completely chaotic room that was bristling with ideas and energy and you just kind of grabbed the tail of it and held on. That’s what I did in the beginning, and you just shut up and listened and understood what was happening. And, you gathered pretty quickly – it was also beyond all those fantasies of political collectivity. My God, I was in a room where people were talking about AIDS openly and were not just terrified and checking their glands – that there was this ferocious and angry energy that was going to do something, goddamn it. So, that instantly reduces your fear. I just felt a sense of community and a sense of calm and purpose, being there. And it was just irresistible. There was no way not to be involved. And, I first was brought – the person who brought me was a woman – I should have mentioned her earlier, it’s funny I didn’t – Amy Heard, who was in the curatorial part of the Whitney Program. She had gone to ACT UP very early. She was one of the earliest members of what became Gran Fury, and she was the

person who took me to ACT UP the first time. She said, “You’ve got to go to these meetings, they’re completely amazing.” And as far as I know, I’m pretty sure Amy was heterosexual. I haven’t spoken to her in –

**SS: Actually, she e-mailed us. She lives in Hawaii, and she is heterosexual. She’s married with children, and we’re going to interview her when she comes to New York.**

TK: Can you forward me her e-mail?

**SS: I don’t have it anymore.**

TK: I am so curious – people – a short time of knowing them but huge influence, and she was just a key figure, really, of – I don’t think, had I been in the Whitney Program – I probably would have found my way to ACT UP, eventually, but all of what happened wouldn’t have happened as quickly, had it not happened – had she not been right there saying, go.

**SS: So, how did you first plug into the organization?**

TK: So, I came. I went with Amy. We sat in the back. I think my first involvement past going to weekly meetings which were on Monday nights – is that true? It’s so hard to remember – was committee work – was just some basic committee work I did, like outreach or did something. I think I did condom/needle distribution fairly early. I’m sure I did wheat-pasting things – just like, wherever was needed in an ad hoc way. Pretty quickly – “Let the Record Show” goes up in 1988, and it’s winter – it must be January or February. So, certainly by September/October, “Let the Record Show” – the installation at the New Museum of Contemporary Art that Bill Olander had gone to the floor of ACT UP to ask – was underway.

**SS: I just want to stop you there, because I'm really interested in these networks – these gay networks, and how it propels people forward and this type of thing. If you can just tell us really concretely – so, Bill came to the floor?**

00:55:00 TK: I wasn't actually in the room, so it's hard to reconstruct. What I know – people who know the answer to this, specifically, are like – Michael Nesline would probably know, any of the facilitators who were present at that time would probably know. Avram would probably know – Avram Finkelstein. So, they were around – and this is, maybe – I'd say, maybe two weeks before I first came to ACT UP, Bill had appeared, after the appearance of the Silence = Death poster, which was produced by Chris Leone, Avram Finkelstein. I forget all the members – what became known as the Silence = Death Project. And that, incited Bill to come to an ACT UP meeting. Also, he was HIV-positive and was aware, and pretty quickly, it was, like, I want to do this thing, I want to give you the window. So, the window was given to ACT UP, and there was a series of ad hoc meetings, where anybody who wanted to come, could come.

**SS: So, you were just sitting in the room, and they said, anybody who wants to come can come and you decided to go?**

TK: No. When I came, it had already been asked, and they had already met at least once, and possibly twice. So, the design and beginning research for that project was underway. I came to, perhaps, the third meeting. It's really difficult to remember.

**SS: But you came off the floor?**

TK: I came off the floor, and I came also at the recommendation of Amy, who's like, "Hey, heard there's this project going on," and so I went – I pretty quickly started hosting it, actually, because I had a studio downtown at the Whitney Program –

and so the Whitney Program, unofficially, and probably not to Ron's pleasure, became an adjunct club room of that project, because it was a space where we could all sit around and –

**SS: Why do you say, not to Ron's pleasure? It fits his agenda.**

TK: At the time – in retrospect, yes – but at the time, I don't know – I don't know what it is. Ron and I never really connected. I've never been asked back to the Whitney Program as a lecturer, which I find sort of remarkable, given the fact that they advertise that I'm one of their – it's like, hi, don't advertise me, invite me to come and speak to your students. I'd love to. I don't know. Maybe it's a personality thing. I'm too loud and obnoxious for Ron, or something. But Ron, I think, at the time – I always felt, we didn't really connect, and in the early days, I felt like I was perhaps overstepping my boundaries, using this facility, in this way. And it was before ACT UP had proven anything, so I think Ron was just, who is this kid, dragging all these 20 strangers –

**SS: So, the first Gran Fury meeting – was it already called Gran Fury?**

TK: No, it was not called anything at that stage. And, what happened –

**SS: Where was it?**

TK: It started meeting in maybe, Terry Riley – Terry Riley is now the curator at MoMA of Furniture and Design – Architecture, I guess it is – sorry, Terry – he's the curator of Architecture. Terry, Neil Spisak, who was the production designer of *Spiderman*. It's interesting, a lot of the people are big people. Mark Simpson, who died of AIDS in 1996, Michael Nesline, John Lindell – a variety of people who became what was known as Gran Fury – Don Ruddy, who died of AIDS. The fascinating guy who did the neon. Anyway, it was a whole bunch of people had been meeting for a couple of

weeks. They had come up with this idea of gathering AIDS statistics, which was an ongoing project, which they were collecting – since there was no internet – mainly, through newspaper and through the international press. And, also from ACT UP research collective – just all the things that were handed out on the fliers – those bullet points became the LED in the installation. So, there was an ongoing installation that gave statistics about international figures around HIV infection.

**SS: And this was all in the window?**

TK: This was all in the window of the New Museum. That was one layer that was being gathered. It was like, let's get all the horrific facts about AIDS – whether they're quotes from C. Everett Koop, or whether they're from Falwell – whatever they are, let's gather them up.

**SS: I want to stop here and ask you an aesthetic question. So, the content was to be facts about AIDS. What was the discussion about how that information would be presented?**

TK: There was a – and I came in around the middle of that discussion – there was, in the air I think, largely in part because of Larry Kramer, frankly – a strong parallel that was being made to the Holocaust and the burgeoning AIDS crisis – starting obviously, reflected in the choice of the pink triangle and the Silence = Death Project and the inversion of it. Previous to this, in my own work, I had been obsessed. There's a book that one of those lefty gay presses put out in the late '70s called *Men with the Pink Triangle* or whatever. I read everything I could get my hands on, in that way. I had done art about it. I had been very obsessed – and it sort of affirmed in some very weird way – not so weird – affirmed, by the recognition that homosexuals had also been killed in the



01:00:00 Holocaust and understood, further, my identification – that it wasn't just, gee, I knew lots of Jewish people I liked, but there's a collectivity around the population that was represented, that was murdered, that I felt an affinity to. So when I came, there had already been this idea of this analogy being made, or a connection, a comparison being made between the current administration – the Reagan Administration – and the criminals of the Nazi era. It gravitated them towards this discussion around, ah, a trial, let's put them on trial. Oh, the Nuremberg trials. Not so long ago, Douglas Crimp did a roundtable with Gran Fury, which was the first time we were reunited in ages, for *Art Forum* magazine, who were doing a piece on the '80s. And Douglas spent a lot of time trying to get us to be, like – “Come on, that piece is so aesthetically coherent, you cannot tell me that it just kind of bounced around that way.” And, all of us that were there – I think it's kind of telling – we're like, “No, actually it was.” In other words, we sort of landed on our feet. The fact that it was aesthetically polished and finished was a product of, there was some very crafty people involved – Marlene McCarty and John Lindell and Donald Moffett, were highly skilled graphic designers. Neil Spisak had spent a life doing theater and film design. Don Ruddy was a concrete artist. I knew how to do photographic murals. Everybody had skills, so there was an improvised quality to how it came together – and ended up looking, I think, highly, highly considered – and, don't get me wrong, at the end, you get a bunch of creative fags and dykes together, it was, like, control freak festival at the installing of it.

**SS: But there were no dykes – Marlene wasn't out yet, was she?**

TK: No, there were dykes involved in the early things, for sure, because those early meetings were – oh my God – those early meetings – this is – never confuse Gran

Fury with that project because that project is probably 50 people. And Gran Fury, organically, was 20, 25 people that eventually became a dozen, and become codified. There was a point where we were like – we are becoming Gran Fury. This is the group – in part accused, I think, at the time, maybe, of elitism or whatever, but really, practically it just became insane. We were starting things over every single meeting from scratch based on who was there. And in that earlier time, too, there were plenty of people. Alex – I ran into her in the West Village – Alex – she has a young son she adopted recently – I forget her last name. She was so young then, she must have been 19. She was gay.

**SS: Alexis Danzig?**

TK: No. I forget. Anyway, for sure it was gay male dominated and, mostly white gay male dominated. With the exception of Robert Vasquez, who's Latino – I think is like, the only person who's not light in that first round. But there was a certain amount of diversity, and it was a quilting circle. We had – it was retarded, the way that was made – there's one in the backyard, in my garden still – insanely. They were concrete slabs that had quotes of various officials – whether from the Reagan administration or international figures – who said particularly heinous things around AIDS and HIV. The quotes had to be cast in concrete. And, in order to do that, individual letters had to be cut out of quarter inch rubber, and then glued, reverse backwards onto a sheet, and then, concrete poured onto it and cast and pulled off. So, every period, every comma, every "S" with all the loops had to be hand cut. So, there were meeting after meetings of these cutting out of these insane rubber letters. There were so many parts to putting the thing together. And so, there was an earlier stage, which I came in, again, at least halfway through, and perhaps even slightly after the

halfway through part, where content and form was being articulated. Then there was a point where it was clear – there’s a background photograph of the Nuremberg trials. Then, in front, there are going to be a series of bust-like heads, with little slabs underneath them, with their quotes. And then, there’s going to be an LED read-out in one of the corners, and there’s going to be a Silence = Death neon above it. And so it took its form – and then, that was executed, meaning there were people who were involved in that later wave, who weren’t involved necessarily in the meetings about the form or the content, but who actually were invaluable and very much a part of putting the thing together physically. And, a lot of hours were put into it. So, when that happened, it was installed. I’m sure it could be looked up. I know the product of that piece is probably dated ’87. It was probably installed in December or January of either ‘87 or ‘88.

**SS: Was there any discussion – it’s hard to remember with something like this – but, about being impressionistic or abstract, as opposed to –**

01:05:00 TK: No, absolutely representational – not even the thought of it. And that’s, I think, an interesting thing. The work that became Gran Fury, interestingly, became much more abstract than our work – partially, because there was the model of leftist, social graphics, going back to John Heartfield and other figures like that, in the Bolshevik revolution and stuff – that was heavily textural – that was photographic in orientation, and not primarily painting and sculpture. I mean, when you think about “Let the Record Show,” it’s ultimately a sculptural or mixed-media piece, but it’s dominated heavily by photographic imagery and a kind of factuality, a kind of stripped down sense of factuality, that those of us who are art world influenced – and there were a lot of us were

clear – I knew our work was indebted to Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger and Hans Haacke and all these other figures. I understood the way you could read that work as a piece of contemporary art. But there were also people who really weren't part of the art world at all, who gravitated towards a lot of the same aesthetic and stylistic choices – partially because of the burden to get a lot of facts out and to make them readable and visible and compelling to a viewer on the street – to try to arrest the viewer to stop and look at stuff.

**SS: Is there a lesson about realism?**

TK: Yeah, there are limits to it. I think there are lessons about realism around HIV. I think it would be very difficult for me to make a narrative feature film around AIDS or HIV interestingly, sadly, at some level, because I so was there and am there and have so much I could say about it, but have such a hard time, doing that directly. And that's me, partially, as an artist. There are other artists, I'm sure, who could do such a thing and witness, and have done such a thing. God bless all – your project included – all the documentary work that's gone on around this. It's just incredibly invaluable.

**SS: What about people like Ross Bleckner, because this is the same era when he was doing that. How did you guys feel about that?**

TK: I looked down on it, to be honest, I did. I thought it was – and that's terrible probably to admit, but it's true. I thought it was blue chip art that wanted to be topical and get in on the pie, but wasn't going to sacrifice Mary Boone one inch and was still going to get six figures a canvas and, ultimately, was so lyrical and so encoded that, in order to read the thing in the work, you really had to be very precise and delicate in your reading. I have a much different view, I think, of that work, later. Actually,

interestingly then, there was a show the Guggenheim did in the mid-'90s, about Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Ross Bleckner. And, I didn't even address Ross's work. I only talked about Felix's work, because I had more of an affinity. I respect Ross Bleckner, definitely, as an artist. I think at that time, like a lot of people probably at that age – I was obnoxious when I was in my 20s. I would make proclamations and saw myself as a kind of autodidact and saw that work as – not closeted, necessarily, but just ineffectual, in terms of reaching an audience – which I think is really ironic looking back, because I wanted the freedom in my own art to make work that was lyrical and personal and expressive. So, who was I to say that someone couldn't make what they wanted to make? I wasn't compelled – I mean, I read your work fairly early – I was compelled a lot by work that was representational, whether it was in photographic form –

**SS: Don't forget, ACT UP protested the Nicholas Nixon show.**

TK: Of course, yeah.

**SS: And, that's the same era. That's the opposite of Ross Bleckner.**

TK: Yes. And, I wrote a piece early for *Aperture*. I was in the “dubious about Nicholas Nixon's work” camp – and I still stand by – I don't know Nicholas Nixon and never did, but there's always – looking at that time, there was an almost insane insistence on positive representations of people with AIDS, when the fact was, people's bodies were just caving in and collapsing. And, to give witness to that was a powerful and important thing to do. A lot of the work that was documentary work of people with advanced HIV disease or AIDS – at the time – a fair amount of that work kind of creeped me out, because I wondered about the investment of the person, and felt like, is this just like, Arbus or Atget or the descendants of Arbus or – any one of those figures of cataloguing

types. So now we have the tragic AIDS martyr, covered with the deliciously photographic Kaposi's sarcoma lesions. What's the investment? What's the involvement? I was definitely influenced very much by Douglas Crimp during that period of time – got to know him, was in a reading group with him – with Martha Gever and Douglas and other people – Tim Landers and Terry Cafaro and a variety of other people were involved in this reading group that did a series of lectures and stuff and brought Kobena Mercer and Isaac Julien's work and all this stuff to anthology. I partially was in that period a little doctrinaire in my beliefs around things.

01:10:00

**SS: The thing that you're talking about was that there was this anthropological objectification. Since Gran Fury included people with AIDS, I'm just wondering why Gran Fury never depicted people with AIDS.**

TK: That's interesting. I can't give you a direct answer to that. It's not that I can't give you a director answer – a coherent answer on that. I don't really know. I think part of what that was about was, before protease inhibitors and all the rest of class of drugs that extended people's lives and changed things in the mid-'90s, it was very hard, I think, for people who were with advanced HIV or who had AIDS, to deal at some level. I can't speak for people in that experience, but I do know some of them and have spoken to them, so I have some sense of it. I think, part of it is, it's very difficult to grapple with the image and the self-image of what is diseased self – to put it out there and look at it, and to confront others with it. That it was – initially, at least – much easier, and much more empowering to put out pro-active or angry or accusatorial images or texts and that there was something cathartic about saying, to what we thought was a disinterested, so-called general population – wake up, hello, this is going on, and a kind of over-

compensation maybe, in some ways, of being ferocious and strong. Again, I may be way off base there, and it's probably just my take on it, but in some sense, there was a kind of – even interpersonally, there was a difficulty around really embracing what was right in the middle of our lives, even as we were dealing with these things.

**SS: Let's talk about that. In the interior culture of ACT UP, how did people show their illness? And, how was it received?**

TK: Well at that stage, anybody who had less than 250 T-cells, and whose viral load was skyrocketing, usually was quite visible. He had that look, she had that look. It's the look – we all knew the look – wasting syndrome, facial wasting. Depending on the cases, neuropathy, so the inability to walk, Kaposi's sarcoma in a visible place – all of those kinds of things.

**SS: Can you attach it to specific people and experiences you had of them becoming sick?**

TK: Well, I can tell you one story that I think is interesting. There was a boy that helped for "Let the Record Show" – early on, after I decided I was going to help do the thing, and I went back to Chicago and printed the mural, I had agreed with Mark Simpson to go to a studio in Brooklyn. At this time Mark was, I'm sure, HIV-positive, but hadn't tested yet and didn't know. And, there was a boy that agreed to go with, named Frank Miore – I'll never forget his name. He was younger than I was. I was 25 and he was probably 23. He had HIV. He was adorable – this little punky boy. It was the total turning point. You can be 23 and have HIV? I knew this, but there it was – someone younger than me. And he, at that time – there was no external sign whatsoever. I was completely attracted to him, found him just super compelling. He was a New York

kid, who'd grown up here – a real character. And there was a kind of physical affection that never became sexual between the two of us, and a kind of – you could feel that he warmed under my attraction, but also was very guarded and strange about it, which I didn't understand. And as he began to manifest symptoms fairly quickly, it became clear to me – or clear, maybe in retrospect, that he was struggling with body image and self-image and the fact that he felt like damaged goods. I'd had Hepatitis-B, when I was 21, which was transmitted through blood – Craig and I were talking about this. I did the most unbelievable thing, which I still never told my poor mother – she now has Alzheimer's, so she wouldn't know. But I was so afraid, at 21, to come out. I told my family I had Hepatitis A, and my mother went and got a gamma globulin shot, because she thought I would be transmitting to her. Thank God, I checked with the doctor – will it hurt her? Of course, it didn't, but still – I had my mother go get a shot, rather than admit I had a sexually transmitted form of Hepatitis? It was insanity.

01:15:00

So, I understood the lengths to which you go, or the sense of being marked, or feeling damaged and however irrational or empowered you might feel in the group, you're a human being, you still feel these things. So, that's one of those examples – of seeing him begin to be symptomatic, wasting syndrome and KS, seeing him withdraw. Finally, the last time I ever saw Frank, he was in a wheelchair, at a protest. I would always hug him and then it just seemed like in a real practical way, how somebody with advanced HIV disease or AIDS – hugging them was painful. Their bones hurt – all of the kind of things you took for granted. You felt like this big, lumbering bear around these people, and I'm a skinny person. I'd feel like I'd crush people. And also, there was a very clear gap during that period of time around those who had HIV and were



manifesting what was called ARC then – that looked like they had AIDS, and that a lot of those issues – you know, Michael Callen and other people like that – who I knew, and had contact with, were in some ways on a different wavelength, at a different level, experiencing a really different thing than those of us who either didn't know our sero-status, and knew our sero-status and were negative – had a different experience. And those things were very clear, in the room, in some ways. They were partially organic. They were about social groups and age and a lot of the people I knew in that first wave, with the exception of someone like Frank, were older by five or ten years, and so they had their peer groups and their friends. But there was also something in the room, definitely, where – and it would for sure be discussed early on – in the very earliest meetings, about – and the people with AIDS and HIV were very, very vocal about, “We will not be represented for” and –

**SS: Well, how did Gran Fury deal, when its members died?**

TK: Not well, I have to say, not well. I'm surprisingly moved. Gran Fury was the family that met once a week. Well, not surprisingly moved – I just got swept with an intense wave of emotion. An interesting thing – just before I go into that spiel – there is one piece that Gran Fury did, before Gran Fury disbanded, that addressed the feelings at least, and the core emotional values of people with AIDS, which was a piece that I wasn't involved with, but Mark Simpson and other people were involved with – a project called the Four Questions. It was a giant sheet of paper, and printed very teeny, these four questions: When was the last time you cried? Who do you know that's HIV positive? – these four very personal, very small-scale questions. It came at that window of time after the first triumphs of ACT UP, and before the introduction of protease inhibitors, when

despair was just as thick as you could cut it with a knife – the period of my life that I think of as the most miserable period of my life – from '93 to '96, maybe '97 – I don't know the window, exactly, but that early mid-'90s time, when people thought they had just lost their way and a lot of people were becoming very visibly sick – like Vito Russo and other figures, that have been so – that people had taken all the strength from. And, Mark was involved in that, Loring McAlpin. There was a small group of people that continued Gran Fury, after the bigger Gran Fury disbanded.

**SS: Back to the Four Questions – do you remember what the other two questions were?**

TK: I don't, but I can find out for your. I don't remember them by heart. That piece of Gran Fury was the first piece – although not derived – I mean, I think of that piece as a representation of people with AIDS and people with HIV, for sure. Robert Vasquez and Mark were both involved with it. Mark was HIV-positive, and I believe Robert was too, at that time. And it was – more importantly – it took a completely different tack than every other piece of work that Gran Fury made. It was plaintive and emotional and small-scaled and completely humbled and non-visual, almost to an extreme.

**SS: And how was it received?**

TK: You know, by that period of time – by the early '92, '93, a lot of the first wave of people had drifted away from going to weekly ACT UP meetings, so there wasn't that same type of feedback loop and knowing. Certainly ACT UP is still vital and going on, but there is almost a completely different wave that came to the fore, and that started leading meetings and peopling it again. People talked about it, for sure, but there

01:20:00 was that really awful period – I think there’s a James Baldwin quote that I’ve made a piece called, “I hung back, held fire, danced and lied. I’m not going to come crawling out of my ruined house, screaming bloody murder.” It’s a quote about just avoiding a central tragedy in your life and not wanting to come out and cry bloody murder about the shambles of your life, basically, and that – this kind of sense of getting power in the collective recognition that everyone was running around shell-shocked and destroyed. That quote always reminds me of that time, very intensely. And that was the feeling. You’d see it, and it sort of was the painful recognition of all the people that you didn’t see – or all the people who were being nursed slowly to their deaths in a million apartments that you weren’t able to see and the kind of blooming – after the first bloom of intense, empowered feeling that ACT UP represented, this kind of devastating, defeated, fearful – the resurgence of all these feelings, maybe, that had been repressed. Douglas Crimp was doing his writing about melancholy and mourning right at that moment. There was a lot of stuff of people sort of rebounding from the kind of cathartic anger of the first wave that I associate with ’87-’91, ’92. That was just dealing with – catching up a little bit, with the consequences of having so many people having died and, you know, having so much accomplished and yet, still, so much not accomplished.

**SS: What do you think was the consequence on you of so many people dying?**

TK: It numbed me. It delayed my – I tested negative in the late ’80s. I only got tested once. I was so terrified to test that I did not test again until the mid-’90s, when I tested positive. It, well, y’know – I tested positive in the mid-’90s. I surely sero-converted in the late-’80s. I’m one of those un —like Anthony Viti – I don’t know if I

should – I’m sure he’s out around being HIV-positive –

**SS: Yes, of course he is.**

TK: Anthony Viti is somebody who recently sero-converted and came to me with a whole lot of conversations – one of things we talked about – it’s very peculiar to sero-convert. I’m not a crystal meth addicted circuit boy who got HIV because I was screwing without condoms. I’m like a diligent; used rubbers all the time. I’m the lady who got pregnant from the broken condom. And you know, Anthony is the same. And there are – surely in this new wave of people coming out as being infected HIV-positive, that is not the primary narrative. But for some of us, that that is the narrative, there is a kind of – many of our peers – for me telling people that I was HIV-positive for all of those years – the incredulous looks. You? How could this have happened? Well, these things happen in life to people.

**SS: Did that change the way you viewed other people?**

TK: Oh my God, how could it not? It changed everything. I’m now inside the narrative that I was, all that time, circling around outside of. I helped my friend Mark Simpson basically take his life. I was around the last day of his life. He tried to take protease inhibitors – they didn’t work for him. He decided to take his life with an overdose of pills. And, so I spent the last week of his life – fed him caviar, because he’d never had it. We talked and just did everything you could possibly do with your closest friend, before they went. And then I stayed – he took the pills. He died in the middle of the night. I went home, showered and changed, to be greeted by – I kid you not – Andrew Sullivan’s front page *New York Times Magazine* article that was like, “AIDS is over for white fags like me.” Life is brutal, in that way. And then I had to go back and

call the coroner's office and had Mark strapped to a gurney, and brought down the stairs, where I lived in an apartment, and called his family from Texas and that whole insane narrative.

Looking back – how could I have not gotten tested over the years, am I out of my mind? But I was so profoundly relieved when I tested negative. It must have been '86 – early. And, I just knew that I was never going to slip up again, and I knew I was going to have safer sex. And thank God I married Craig Paull, who was, somewhere in the mid-'90s, when I didn't start – I wasn't acting like my normal, healthy energetic self, and my work, especially, became almost impossible for me to do – he was, like, you've got to go.

01:20:00

And I went and all that crazy stuff – I gave blood on a Monday and knew, knew I was HIV-positive. And people say that all the time – so, to now say that, like I gave blood and knew I was going to be HIV-positive, and now to know what that feels like. Or, to know what it feels like for every day for years, now – twice a day, to take my handful of pills. To deal with – need I enumerate them? The lovely shits and fevers and the vulnerabilities to minor infections and blah, blah, blah – the thing that is my life. Or to be, basically, a middle-aged, or older than middle age – I take testosterone, because I have low red blood levels, which is hormone replacement therapy – is usually given to men in their 60s. So, hi, I'm 41, and I'm a man in my 60s. That stuff is profound.

I didn't dwell long. It was an enormous relief to finally know what was stalking me and my work, frankly. It was an enormous relief to realize, okay, I didn't lose it somewhere in my mid-30s. I didn't have all my great ideas when I was 28 years old. I, actually, still am capable of being a functioning artist, and I've been operating with a massively elevated viral load and suppressed T-cells. And, I went through radical

immune reconstitution syndrome – radical – probably, people don't talk about this very often, but I take Sustiva and Combivir – been taking them for years. All the skin on my hands and feet peeled off. My leg had a bowling ball size swelling that started in my thigh, moved down to my knee, down to my ankle – just Frankenstein craziness.

Meanwhile, I'd just gotten a teaching job at Columbia and was trying to pass as a normal person. I'd spent a lifetime trying to pass, when I was closeted, as a gay man to try and pretend to be heterosexual. So now there I was, an HIV-positive person, trying to pass as someone normal, and dealing with all the "God, you look thin," and all of that kind of stuff. So, all that's really profound. I think I would have a very different story to report to you if my boyfriend, and the love of my life, didn't just like, blink and say, okay, and just embrace me in the way he always has embraced me, and if the people in my immediate life haven't made me feel – so, I've been incredibly lucky, in terms of being knowledgeable, having good response to the drugs, having friends that have supported me. And, that isn't to say – I can't really imagine – partially, because I'm a middle-aged married person that doesn't have much of a libido to go chasing people – but, I kind of can't imagine having sex with somebody other than Craig, now. I can't imagine negotiating a conversation of, "Hi, I'm HIV-positive." I do feel like damaged goods in some place inside of me, that is not reachable. A lot of people with HIV talk about it, and no matter how much I rationally put that out there, it doesn't change. Of course, you feel marked – or, I feel marked, and feel like I am literally infectious, and also feel less than desirable, somehow – all those things.

The flip side is – I was so steeped in death, so steeped in death. My dad died when I was 14, starting all the way back – grandparents. By the time I was 21, I had

already known significant deaths. The costume designer of *Swoon* died of an aneurysm at age 21. I've had so many different deaths – breast cancer – all kinds of things. So, to finally sort of welcome it and embrace it and look it right in the face, and actually know the narrative of my life is probably most likely going to be ended from complications relating to AIDS was enormously liberating, and I can really be honest and say, no one can say they're completely unafraid of dying, but I'm not really that fearful of death, and I so vastly prefer having my T-cells back and my viral load low, and feeling like I can direct a feature film, again – that that's almost worth all of it. And that the period of time, which was marked – that's what's so interesting – it was marked with my own personal repression and denial about being tested; my very closest friend dying of AIDS; my recognition that my own body was collapsing, and that I was spiraling into an insane depression, that I could not differentiate. That was the difficulty. I didn't know – what's the difference between, am I depressed because all my friends have died, and that's a normal reason to be depressed? Or, am I depressed because my brain doesn't work correctly, and my body doesn't move correctly? So, that changed everything, and I think the hardest part now for me is the theatricality around announcing one's HIV status – that there's a kind of, I don't really care. I mean, the most interesting part – and I'm glad we're recording this, at some level, because I never told anyone in my family. Ever. Yet. It's been a very conscious choice that I've gone round and around with, that I'm still very comfortable with, because I feel like I can't tell one – I have 10 siblings and a mother. There's just no way, it's unfair. I can't say to my brother – or sister, particularly, who I'm very, very close to – "I'm going to tell you this, but I don't want you tell everyone in the family, because I just don't want to deal with A, the drama of it, and B, I can't bear

01:30:00

the thought that you all worry that much about me, and that I am the prodigal child, the youngest son who went and got the AIDS that you all worried that I would get.” So, I’ve been around and around with it, and I’ve actually come to the conclusion that, you know – my father died in his late fifties, my health is pretty good – I’m probably going to live for awhile longer. I have a good amount of time before opportunistic infections really become a serious issue in my life that is going to interfere with my ability to live that life, so there will be plenty of time for people to hover over my bed and worry about me, and that, maybe it’s selfish – this is the part I’m glad you’re recording, because if my family ever sees this later and is seeking resolution on this issue, they’ll understand I just wanted them to spare themselves and me the drama, the narrative of being that subject. I don’t want to be – because it’s human nature. If someone has cancer – because I know what it was like to talk to Mark, when he had AIDS. I know the look that was on my face, and I know that it was tiresome for Mark, sometimes, to have to start a transaction, with that as the place that we were starting from.

**SS: How do you know that?**

TK: Because he told me that. And now I know it, because I know the other side of it. That’s what’s the profound part about having HIV – is now I know, the people who know me, who see me get a cold, who know I have HIV, who look at me, like, is it a cold or are you okay? And, I go, for God’s sake, can’t I just fucking have a cold.

**SS: Isn’t there also, now, the blasé, blasé?**

TK: There’s also the flip side, which is the feeling you have that you’re going to make the big, theatrical announcement to people, and they’re like, “Yeah so, whatever.” The part I think that’s most difficult for me – so, anyway, this has affected



me, to some degree – this is very interesting, because I’m at a threshold point where, in my work – my experimental work – I am beginning, in some way – I’m not quite sure how to address my HIV status. There’s a piece of work I’m working on, that probably isn’t going to be done for awhile, so I don’t know, to what degree I’m going to be confessional and specific or not – and this will absolutely require me – and, in some ways, it is myself involuntarily or not involuntarily forcing myself to talk to my family about this, because I wouldn’t – this is borderline behavior right now, for me, in other words. I’ve told people in my immediate circle, who I know don’t know my family, are not going to run out, but I also feel that there’s something wrong, at some level, not being able to – they’re my closest – no matter what tensions I’ve ever had with my family, I love them all. They’re my closest core, so there’s something very odd to be able to – I couldn’t imagine being heavily public, as a person with HIV, until such time I could tell all of them and deal with them, and that’s one of those things – you know, your life will prepare you for. And I think I will find myself in the place ready to. In some ways I think my work is one of the atoms that’s going to happen. I feel an incremental process of being able to tell the people, the small circle around you, and the circles out from there. I don’t know, I think it’s an interesting thing – all these questions, because, if you’re not HIV positive, and you went through the AIDS crisis, and you have all these experiences with this stuff, you have a whole thought and experiences about how you interact and relate. And then, a switch gets flipped, and suddenly, you’re on the exact opposite side of the subjectivity of the thing, and it’s surprising. I’m surprised that I didn’t immediately tell my whole family. And then I had to really go – I had a little therapy about it, and talked to all my friends about it and double-checked with everyone.

Is it ethical to not tell my family? Is that a bullshit reason – to say, you know, whatever – that stuff is really the meat and potatoes of what it is, in part, about. And then the last thing is just the feeling of, the kind of blasé, blasé around HIV infection. The part that's most infuriating, most difficult for me to keep my mouth shut about is when I encounter students. I have a student recently who sero-converted who just blurted it out in office hours, and it's the first student, I ever was like, "So am I, I'm fine. I've been on drugs for a long time, and you're going to be okay." He's doing a documentary around AIDS and HIV infection. It's been a great connection, and I think I said the right thing to that specific person and really helped him out. You know, I have these cavalier kids – other ones who are interested in bare-backing movies and stuff like that, and you're just like –

01:30:00 part of me is, I just throw my hands up in disgust at some level, really. What are you going to say?

**SS: There's two things I want to ask you. The first is, everyone we've interviewed who's HIV – we've just asked them to say what medication they're on, if you don't mind?**

TK: I'm on Sustiva and Combivir and AndroGel, which is a topical lotion of testosterone. And, Sustiva is the ur-drug of the anti-Christ! I hate it. It makes me psychotic. I'm scared to change drugs right now, because except for the dream issue of Sustiva, I am good and they really agree with me, and my body is reacting quite well with the drugs. The dream issue, which is supposed to be a week or a month – in my case, it's been going on for I don't know, four years – like a long time, now. It's inexplicable, that's all I can say, really. It's like taking LSD and dreaming – but they're pedestrian and normal ordinary dreams. You have dreams like – things that sound laughable when you

describe them – Craig leaves me for my sister – but you wake up wrenched and weeping and convinced that all your life has crumbled apart. And then you got to go and teach, or get up and do your work. And, this can happen – I can go through spells of having two or three dreams like that a night, for a month in a row. So, not so crazy for it.

**SS: Now, I want to go back to the Andrew Sullivan moment. Mark Simpson's death – and you come home, and here's this thing – "AIDS is over." How do you understand that type of behavior?**

TK: Andrew Sullivan you just almost can't help taking personally, or I can't. And, all the kind of hypocrisy, which I'm not even going to get into, that's been revealed around him, in the gossipy sense of – being HIV-positive, and not advertising in personal ads honestly – blah, blah, blah – not for me to say – but yes, that repels me. But just more the – you know, profoundly self-serving – reflective of what was always troubling about the troubling side of AIDS activism and ACT UP. Especially for me, the dividing point was the movement towards things like Queer Nation in that moment, and particularly, the use of "queer" which always troubled me, because I was like – it was like some rhetorical leap frog, over the fact that there was a power cultural and social status difference between gay men and lesbians – let alone, entering race and class into the equation. It was like we could will ourselves into a collectivity that I aspire to, absolutely, but just did not seem to be truthful. So, Andrew Sullivan embodies to me that kind of privilege. Well, bully for you. You got the drugs. You're an upper middle class, white, gay man, who has access and is connected in an urban environment and getting your hands on them and take them, and they work for you. Yippee, I'm so happy. Now, what about all the other people who, for class, race, access – all those reasons – could not

get their hands on the drugs? Why is the narrative of your life and your survival somehow more important or more interesting than all those other people? It's devastating. Then there's the personal kicker, which is, Mark Simpson got more or less slowly eroded away by a staph infection, which is one of those things that is just miserable and grizzly and horrible. He tried to take the first wave of drugs and he could not tolerate them in any way, shape or form. And, watching your very best friend – it was like a horrible cartoon, where they're holding onto a rope, and then it's a series of 10 strings, and then it's a piece of dental floss. And then, it's stretching, and then it snaps, and they fall and they're gone, while other people are climbing up and totally fine. It's just devastating. I was enraged, and it just seemed so brutally, brutally unfair.

**SS: Before, when I asked you how Gran Fury dealt with the illness and death of its members, you said, not well. Can you tell us a little bit about that?**

TK: Yeah, and to all my Gran Fury friends – God bless you all, I love you all, and this is my experience. Mark took his life, in part, because his body was conspiring against him, and he couldn't sit in his apartment in the afternoon and have sunlight in his face without him feeling like a vampire, and feeling scorched. So, the simplest things he enjoyed were no longer accessible to him. Mark took his life as much though for a profound sense of loneliness that no person could fill. I was never Mark's lover, but I was always really, really close friends with him, and no one can fill that space for another person. But God, maybe I could have tried more. And, I feel like that's what was devastating – was that, Mark was always somebody who – you know, Mark never filed income taxes as an adult. Mark was an old school, East Village type, who never had his career window open. He wasn't sexy in the way – by the late '80s and early '90s – Mark

01:40:00

wasn't sexy in the way that he might have been in 1983. He was there and knew everyone to know, but he wasn't go-go '80s. He wasn't succeeding economically. And that's a drag to be around, maybe, while your careers and your lives are going in different places. And, I'm not attacking anybody. I'm not criticizing really anybody. But, I think people's lives went different places, and it wasn't missed on Mark, though, the kind of profound irony – that the place he felt most at home, the place he felt most embraced were in those meetings and were with ACT UP. The place that made him most able to fight against his own sense of being marked and being sick was what went on within Gran Fury meetings, and that those very people weren't able, as much as maybe they wanted to or as he wanted them to, be around – to visit him. Again, I have a very skewed perspective, because when a close friend is dying, you see every single minute, and every single day of it. And, somebody else – two weeks go by, and it's a minute. Oh shit, I need to see Mark. I need to call him. And, I know many people wanted to. I've had conversations with the people I'm close to who felt – who either thanked me because they were like, “You were such a good friend to him, and you carried such a burden for him.” And I was like – that's not how I saw it. There wasn't a choice. I loved him. He was somebody I wanted to be with as long as I could be with him. For me – and again, that's a very personal thing – that was painful to see.

**SS: But you're opening up a whole other topic here, which is, okay, here's a person who needed more support than he got. And your assumption is that that support should have come from other gay people – AIDS activist people. Then, after he dies, then you call his family. Was there ever any thought that his family had a responsibility to him?**

TK: That's a very interesting thing. The thing is he was the guardian of that gate, like all of us with our family. And, that's why it's interesting that I just talked in that way – in other words, seeing how Mark behaved, I'm like, hmm, I can't do what he did. In other words, he couldn't deal with them at all for a long time – about any of it. So even, "I have HIV," was really late, late, late for him – later than I assume, for instance, if I think of myself that I would allow it to go, because he had been hospitalized and stuff. It's like, the minute I'm in the hospital and I'm serious, my family's going to know before.

**SS: Is that caused by oppression? Is that a consequence of the oppression?**

TK: He had such a devastating childhood, a very difficult family. He had a schizophrenic mother – really, truly, schizophrenic, and a really devastated childhood, and very deeply bonded but damaged relationships with all the siblings.

**SS: Let me interrupt you for a second. I want to make it a little bit broader. When you think about people in ACT UP who died – all the people that you knew, that we knew – where were their families, in general?**

TK: That's such a good question. That's really the question. In so many cases, not around. In so many cases, just completely afraid and not around – and not able to offer support. And so for the ones that were, and you saw or even heard of, stood out unbelievably and you just couldn't believe it. The sad part – in a lot of those cases – in some of those cases, and the ones I know, specifically – Mark, again, specifically because he's the one where I know the most details – what was the most poignant and sort of heartbreaking about it was – you cannot take your life and not talk to all of your family.

You don't have to tell them you're taking your life, but you are not going to do this, and have me telling them what the last week of your life was like. I just can't do that. So, he calls everybody up, and takes his life a week later. What are they all going to think? So, I'm tiptoeing around this whole, insane subject – the sister with whom I have the closest relationship, Linda, comes – and at the end of the time, she's like, "Do you think Mark took his life?" And I just collapsed into a bag of beans on the floor and said, "Yes, of course, Mark took his life, and God bless you for asking, and I was so afraid you'd never know." She's a fundamentalist Christian, Baptist. I had my own dealings with my family, and Mark had described them and made them seem incapable of dealing with something that, sadly, they weren't incapable of dealing with. And that was something that really broke my heart the most about it. Linda was like, "Look, my husband died of cancer. If he hadn't died of cancer when he died, we were going to pursue euthanasia. He was going to take an overdose or take his own life, because he couldn't deal with the suffering." She was just completely matter of fact about it. So I was devastated to think, and he never knew this from his own sister? What's the gap that would make you think that your own family couldn't, in this case –?

01:45:00

**SS: It would be previous experience, right?**

TK: But then, thinking back, you wonder about the kind of solipsism and the way we – just whatever – you wonder about the limits of that. That's one of the ways, I think – that's why, like going back – and me specifically, because you can only really talk about your own subjectivity – I don't dare presume to assume how any of them are going to – and I actually am very prepared to be more than surprised how marvelous, understanding, accommodating and able to deal with this, my family is going to be. And

that, yes, the central thing is, I'm clearly not ready to be the center of that narrative yet, but I don't want to mistake – the lesson I learned from seeing Mark is – because I know – in fact, my sister is going to be – my sister Patty, who's two years older is going to be incredible.

**SS: When did Mark die?**

TK: 1996.

**SS: There's a whole social cultural paradigm shift. So, the person with AIDS who can't tell their family in 1986 is really different than in 2001.**

TK: Totally. The thing is, Mark had been so divorced from his family in so many ways, that some of these connections and the roads back to them had become blurred and confused to him, and I think feelings were motivating a lot of things, that weren't necessarily compared to what the facts were.

**SS: I want to go to some other stuff, because we have so much more to talk about. Let's go back to Gran Fury and some of the projects you worked on, after the window.**

TK: The first project we worked on, after the window – there was a core group of people that said, hey, this was amazing, let's continue. We decided to first do a project – initiated I believe, specifically by Robert Vasquez – that was called "AIDS: 1 in 61." It was a poster that said that one baby of 61 babies born to parents of color were HIV-infected, and why was this? And, why was this not being reported? It was basically a very self conscious attempt to extend our work outside what some of us perceived to be a very narrowly defined, primarily white gay male audience, and try to sort of see what happened. We produced a poster –



**SS: There was an impulse in ACT UP at a certain era, in this era that you're describing, to try to persuade the general public that AIDS was not a gay disease. So, there's two different impulses. There's the one that you're describing, of people wanting to reach beyond themselves, and then there's the other impulse of knowing that, if AIDS is a gay disease, no one is ever going to care about it.**

TK: And, the sad fact that because of the epidemiological wave of women of color, primarily, had begun to crest in the late '80s, there wasn't the facts and figures to back it up. So, much more sero-conversion happened than needed to. Any sero-conversion doesn't need to happen, but massive sero-conversion happened in a period of time in that window of opportunity, I think, because people who were very much at risk for HIV infection, because of the nature of their sexual partner's history or whatever, were not protecting themselves.

**SS: Did you guys, in this project – did you overtly discuss the persuasion element?**

TK: No, we were more – I think that both of those sentiments were floating around the room, actually – to be honest. One was – I worked in AIDS Films. I did a ton of epidemiological reading and medical reading and stuff. So I was utterly sure that like, the wave is coming. And that African American females may not think that they're at risk, but, yipes, in terms of what's going to be cresting, two or three and 4 years down the line. The population of ACT UP started rapidly changing, so by early '88 for sure, you started seeing a much more diverse population of who was in the room, in terms of gender, race, class – all those kinds of things. And also, who was identifying as HIV-positive. My job at AIDS Films was putting me increasingly in contact with community-

based organizers, who were dealing with AIDS education issues that opened my eyes to the complete and different way you had to talk to a 28-year-old woman who had two children, who was starting to have sex with a new man and what issues she had to deal with around condom use, with a 17-year-old gay boy, or something very different. So, each of us brought a perspective. Robert obviously, I think, brought concern about this, in a very personal sense. He grew up in the Bronx and felt like this was his home and community that was being devastated, along with his other chosen home and community of the gay world – trying to bring these things into a dialog. There was a very porous relationship between what went on on the floor in ACT UP – the demos we did in ACT UP – and what went on in Gran Fury, for quite a while. Really, all the way through. But I think, especially in the beginning, there was a kind of direct relationship between Gran Fury. This poster that we did – “1 in 61” – we decided to name ourselves at that stage. We came up with the name Gran Fury. It’s the Plymouth automobile that the police department used as the undercover car – at least during the late ’80s in New York. We thought we were being very clever, because we were an undercover agent, but we were also big anger – *Grand* Fury – except it didn’t have a “d”. And at that stage, Gran Fury was not closed. Anthony Viti was involved in it, Todd Haynes was involved in it – a whole variety of people. Mark Harrington was involved in it. A lot of people came in and out of that group at that stage. Then there were the Days of Outrage. That was the protest where the kiss-in happened, and we did a series of leaflets for that. So, “Read My Lips” came out of that. “All People With AIDS Are Innocent,” came out of that. There’s a whole series. “Men Use Condoms or Beat It” came out of that.

**SS: Can you talk a little bit about that poster?**

TK: That poster always made me uncomfortable. Must we have a large erection on that poster? The sex positive people were like, “Yes, we must!”

**SS: Who was the model?**

TK: Can’t we think of the relationship to feminism, at all? And they were like, “Oh, shut up, whatever.” I’m not being fair. I think that’s a great piece, and part of the strength of it is putting an erect penis in the street. I also liked the version of the piece that was just text.

**SS: Whose idea was it, and who was the model?**

TK: The model was from a porn magazine. Donald Moffat did the paste-up of the poster. You know – different one – “Read My Lips” if I remember correctly, it was a slogan that stuck in my head and I brought it to the meeting, and it was almost exactly parallel to Bush using “read my lips” – and it just leapt out. I was looking for aphorisms. I was in Barbara Kruger/Jenny Holzer mode. So – looking for these kinds of things. I somehow was like, read my lips and kissing. And then Mark Harrington, specifically – no, for sure, he’s the one – brought the picture of these two sailors kissing, and I remember setting the type – Futura Ultra bold. Things would come together in that way. One, two, three people would be the kernel. Donald I remember mostly being involved in “Men Use Condoms or Beat It.” Because there had been advertising experience among some of those people, and some of them were wise about how to elicit those kinds of responses. It’s like writing comedy when people do it as a group. You’re just throwing stuff out. So, people come up with a clever expression and then, “Men Use Condoms or Beat It.” Oh, okay – and, it would take off. So, of that series – John Lindell was primarily doing, “All People with AIDS are Innocent.” Loring did the one on AIDS

and prisoners and, I think, was also involved in the paste-up of the “Men Use Condoms or Beat It.” The group would have these organic connections between people, that would – two, three, four – sometimes all ten or 11 or 12, would talk and it would either – and then, there would be smaller sessions where they would get pasted up. We would agree what we were doing, then we’d print them and post them.

As we went on, it became, I think, a bit more self-consciously collective. So, we would have longer meetings to consider, and longer time to consider everything about the project, and then we would be – many more people’s hands would touch each piece. In the early days, it still was slightly more like ad hoc-ish sub-groups, like ACT UP was. And, later, Gran Fury became more – everyone was involved in a lengthy discussion about what the project was. Not everyone was involved with the paste-up or the photographing or that kind of stuff. But, a lot of times, many of us were. When we did the Kissing Doesn’t Kill campaign, almost everybody in Gran Fury that was involved was either there propping or doing hair or shooting or signing in the people, or doing whatever, or appearing on camera. So, that the work became – it took its model, very much, from ACT UP, really. We didn’t run the meetings with Robert’s Rules of Order. We did try to facilitate each other, if it became too insane, so there would be a facilitator among us, but it wasn’t always the same.

**SS: Were there ever big fights about any of the projects?**

TK: Yeah, there were always fights, but in a really, productive great way – the most traumatic thing that happened, I think, in the mid-early period – there was a point where it became clear that for logistical and other reasons, we had to not continue to allow people to come into the meeting every week, because it was just like – we were

inventing the wheel from scratch. There had also been a kind of informal relationship made with the floor of ACT UP, where we would design t-shirts and give them to ACT UP, that could sell them for the profit of ACT UP, but we wanted a teeny percentage – I think it was five percentage of the profits – to be able to continue to do other projects, because we had not yet met any art world support or success. So there was no money – I was paying \$500, which I couldn't afford at that stage, literally, to do printing costs, and other people put far more money than I did. This was fine for awhile, and then it lead to tension, very understandably, because there was a kind of – why are you a closed group before an open collective, and why should you, as a sub-group, receive money from us, and you're like, because part of the reason you're such a large group now is because we design t-shirts that you sold to help fuel – if you remember the early days of ACT UP, a lot of the money got raised in t-shirts. In the end, we all backed off, and it was, like, fine, I would far rather see ACT UP have a healthy existence, and make as much money as they possibly can, in whatever way, and we'll find our way. And this fortunately corresponded with the fact that we had become flavor of the month in the art world and got institutional support.

**SS: Let's talk about that. How did that happen? Really, truly, how did that happen?**

TK: I think the curatorial smart crowd in New York – people associated with the New Museum – Bill Olander and people like that, and circles off from that, are always looking for such a thing – spearheaded by the language-based feminist art movement that came – that finds its first roots in the late seventies, maybe – like, Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger's early, early work – that became a movement by the mid-

'80s. Douglas Crimp was absolutely instrumental. Douglas Crimp wrote the article "Pictures" that was about Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger and Richard Prince's early work that helped launch and kind of critically frame the discussion of that work, and very quickly, Douglas dedicated a special issue of *October* to "Let the Record Show" and to other ACT UP related themes and issues. So, that was a pretty big spotlight to be hitting us right away. Some of us were – myself, for sure included – savvy about the art world at that point, already knew. And I was already becoming a very good grant writer, because I worked at AIDS Films, doing grant development and was simultaneously writing grants for my own work – saw a window of opportunity, and, along with other people – Donald, Marlene, John Lindell – who were quite knowledgeable – Mark Simpson, who were quite knowledgeable about the art world, strategized about how to raise money to put grant proposals out, and the combination of the kind of good will generated by people like Bill Olander and Douglas Crimp and other curators, and our efforts to find support – and, also, our inflexibility about, we're not going to do work inside the gallery. We only want to do work outside, so if you want to do a project with us, it has to be something that's public. And, also, the urgency of AIDS as an issue, and the fact that the art world had been so – that everybody knew somebody who had been devastated either personally or –

**SS: So, which grants did you get? Do you remember the first one?**

TK: Probably the first one was Art Matters and Creative Time.

**SS: Who were the people in the organizations who worked with you?**

TK: Cee Brown was one of them. Marianne Weems was administrator for it – didn't run it, but was involved in it. Philip Yenawine, who was involved and knowledgeable about us and certainly, I'm sure, helped promote us. Annie Philbin was

really critical, I think, Ruby Rich. People who were around in various art and film and video ways. When we started doing things, for instance, like film and video, I spearheaded that, because I was one in the group who was a film and video maker. But, *Kissing Doesn't Kill* – everyone in *Gran Fury* is equally involved. It's not my work, any more than it is the work of anyone in *Gran Fury*, just like the things that were graphic works. Though Marlene and Donald and John Lindell, had a lot of experience as graphic designers. Many of us were involved. There was something nice about the work, that people had different skills, but we could still work collectively.

**SS: You said, B. Ruby Rich – what was she doing at the time, when she gave money to –**

TK: She didn't give money directly to us. She helped us more curatorially and word of mouth. Ruby was at NYSCA [New York State Council for the Arts] at that time. I had met Ruby through Cynthia Chris. Cynthia Chris was the director of the Visiting Artist Program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and I was her assistant while I was in graduate school. We became very close friends from '85 to '87. I moved slightly before she did. She moved here six months to a year after, and Cynthia has been – pretty much, all of Cynthia's girlfriends are friends of mine in some way or another. Suzie Silver, who she was involved with, was one of my friends in graduate school. And so, I met Ruby through –

**SS: From *Elevator Repair Service* – that Suzie Silver? Or a different one?**

TK: No, Suzie Silver is a video artist who teaches at Carnegie Mellon. I met Ruby – through Cynthia, Ruby had long-term Chicago ties. Ruby had also been involved with a woman named Nereyda Garcia[-Ferraz], a sort of legendary Cuban-American

02:00:00

artist – in the Chicago scene she seemed legendary, at least – a real heartbreaker.

**SS: Her lover was working for AIDS Films – Lourdes Portillo.**

TK: Yes, exactly. Ruby's later lover worked for AIDS Films. So I met Ruby, briefly, as a sort of, young graduate student. She was the fearsome but friendly friend of Cynthia's – sort of very in awe of her. And then later, I made *They are lost to vision altogether*. A lot changed. I got embraced very heavily for that piece of work, and I met Ruby – I became a panelist, I think, for NYSCA. And then, Ruby was just really great, in that way, of just like pointing people of like mind together. I don't think we got directly funded by NYSCA. A lot of Gran Fury's funding would not come in the form of free-floating individual artists checks. They were project-based budgets, which was a good thing, because there were 11 people involved, and it would have been insane to give us, like, a \$50,000 grant, because who knows what would have happened.

**SS: But, did it come through ACT UP? Did the money go to ACT UP?**

TK: No, the money came through Gran Fury after a certain point.

**SS: So you have your own 501(c)3?**

TK: No, we were too disorganized to have a 501(c)3 for a long time, so we just had a DBA – “doing business as” Gran Fury, and we had a checking account, which was disastrous and ridiculous, and could have put us all at tax risk, and the rest of it.

**SS: Who was the treasurer?**

TK: Oh God, this is how bad we were. We were not – it was a bunch of creative divas in a room – who wanted to be the treasurer? So, . Later, as we went on and had a little more support – Like when we did something in Los Angeles, we did a series of bus shelters, about women and AIDS. And, it was



with the Museum of Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles. That entire production of the Duratrans all we did was provide the original art, and they physically paid for it.

**SS: Who was the contact there?**

TK: Museum of Contemporary Art – I don't remember who the curator was.

**SS: Okay, now I have to ask you such a big question, Tom. It's huge.**

TK: Yes, please.

**SS: Okay, you go to art school. These guys come, you meet them, they like you, they help you get into the Whitney Program, the curator brings you to ACT UP. You join Gran Fury, you're in with these guys who are having big careers, like Donald Moffat and Bob Gober and all of that. B. Ruby Rich – her lover is working at your company. She's giving money to Gran Fury, and then years later, she writes that famous article – "The New Queer Cinema," starring you.**

TK: Yes.

**SS: Here's my question, and I guess – I'm 45 years old, I should know the answer, but – can a person make art that really matters in a way that's well made and be seen for the quality of their voice and work, and have a career? Or, can you only have a career because you've built relationships with people who are in power positions and create careers?**

TK: That's a really good question. First of all, I think it depends on what you define as a career. And I think, having been up and having been down in my own career – having stood in front of a big auditorium of lots of people, and having had screenings where there are 16 people in the room – on a very personal level, what I came to

02:05:00 understand, at least for myself, is that in the end, I make my work because there's a connection to an audience, and it makes me feel alive and recognized and authenticated and expressing something. And, I've been lucky, because I can say that. If I had only shown my work in rooms where 10 people were, my entire career, I don't know if I would say that same thing. And, that absolutely, positively – much of the access that went in my career was a mixture of luck, ambitiousness and interpersonal connections. And, in the way that New York can be transformative – all the way back to the origination of New York – forget AIDS – just the stew of the Irish Catholic, lower middle-class kid who comes to New York with ambitions and a dream and a lot of moxie, trying to figure out that many people have succeeded in this way before, and most of the people, I'd say, who have succeeded in any substantial way, that is recognized, had been given a great deal of help, through their connections, through their human relationships. I think these questions are very interesting.

I'm working on an experimental narrative piece about a writer named Alfred Chester. For whatever reason, I've often become very obsessed in my own life with people who came on very strong early in their work, were not considered primary or major artists at the time that they worked in, and, in fact, were considered secondary artists. Cynthia Ozick wrote an essay about Alfred Chester called, "Alfred Chester's Wig" with a beautiful section that talks about, maybe the character of the times is to be found in the so-called secondary artists – almost as much, if not more, than the primary artists of their time or the major artists of the time. To be really honest, about thinking of my own work – I have always and will always think of myself as one of those artists, meaning a secondary artist. I'm not a – I think of someone like Todd Haynes – Todd

Haynes is a primary artist in the way of making narrative films revisiting genres and the rest of it. His work is significant. He might be a major innovator, in a certain way – that I – one has no perspective in their work – do not feel that I am. I don't feel diminished by that at all, and in fact, have come to embrace that thing intensely, because I realize it's the thing that gives my work character and flavor. Thus, the eccentricity of my career. I made a feature film. What most people do after a feature film is abandon their short, experimental work and just try to make another feature film. What did I do? I went and produced *Go Fish* and *I Shot Andy Warhol* and made weird experimental work. I've manifested – and that's in part, a very deliberate choice – meaning, that I rejected the idea that I was some auteur genius that is just going to do one thing and only that thing – that ridiculous mythology. And also because opportunity in life led me there. So, you know, I don't know if I'm really answering your question directly, but I think – you could talk about this, too.

**SS: We're talking about you.**

TK: All three of us could. There are just different ways about – what it means when the window opens, what it means when you have an opportunity to fly through and go someplace you didn't think you could go before. And, that there are times when the window opened for me, and I went through it, and it took me to a place I could not believe. One of those times was the reception of *Swoon* – how it helped me to have a career of working in feature films that I never thought I've have, and expose my work to an audience I never thought would see it. There have been other times when the window has opened and I have not gone through it, because I was physically unable or disinterested or distracted or whatever. The more obvious movements in my career are

related to the ones that are closer to the centers of power – the bigger movements of my career. But, the smaller, incremental movements, starting with, I'm in love with Craig Paul, and my life has been shaped by making a partnership with him, and a marriage with him, and all the millions of little ways, it's affected my work – whether it means, not wanting to go travel through Europe for two years, to make a different kind of work, or not pursuing grant support, or including him as a subject in my work – all the ways that people impact your life, those things seem as important to me as the bigger things do. And I seem that way because – you know, I think you find out about your essential character through these things – especially, when the window opens and a big opportunity presents itself. There I was, photographed and interviewed, in glossy magazines, and if I can be honest – yeah, it tickled my ego for a few minutes, and then I was horrified and it really kind of shattered and fucked up my life, and it was a kind of before and after of people who suspected I was vain and successful and an asshole – and without knowing me, well. Or, people who I had known for years who suddenly treated me differently in a way that I couldn't comprehend it. And, I realized, I don't have a bottomless appetite to be talked about or reported or photographed. And, in fact, as much as I am a public and sociable person, I'm actually very private, in a certain ways. So, 02:10:00 telling you that I'm HIV-positive on camera is something I actually have to consider and impel myself towards – or making any personal confession, I am able to do it, but reserved about it at some level.

**SS: So then, let's theorize more broadly, because a key generation of gay and lesbian filmmakers came out of ACT UP – people who made significant, feature-length, commercially-recognized films – yourself, Jennie Livingston, Todd**

**Haynes, Christine Vachon and Maria Maggenti, at least. And the people who came after them – like Rose Troche – they were too young, they're the next generation.**

TK: Although Rose, interestingly, was very involved in ACT UP in Chicago, in this sort of, what we'd consider a second wave of ACT UP.

**SS: Okay – but generationally – and she inherited a certain possibility that was created by the group that came before. Okay, so let's just talk about the role of ACT UP in facilitating the creation of those films, if you can delineate.**

TK: What I also want to do, very importantly – it just has to be said – devastating to me that this ever gets erased – Lizzie Borden and *Born in Flames*.

**SS: That's the previous generation.**

TK: I know, but I'm naming these people. All of the people – all of the filmmakers, you know – even though it's not necessarily content-wise, but just as a figure, like Amos Poe or Jim Jarmusch or Bette Gordon or Yvonne Rainer, who is even the generation before that – Su Friedrich – or on and on – Marlon Riggs, Isaac Julien – I mean, the list just goes on and on of people, you know – Jerry Tartaglia. Da da da Jack Smith. I just cite all those names. They are who paved the road, for me at least, in a very personal way. And the sad part is that many of the people I named didn't get the slice of pie. The door swung open for some of us. In other words, the career leaps I make are in direct benefit, or built on the backs of some of the filmmakers I've just described and whose work wasn't recognized in same way or who proceeded by five years or seven years or slightly older. And, I'm sure there was a certain amount of – sure, I can't speak for any of those people, but I'm sure that some of us must have looked like brats you wanted to smack down – the golden children everything good happened to.

**SS: I can attest to that. We showed Todd's first film, Maria's first film and Jennie's first film. Christine's first film and Jennie's. We were the first people to show Jennie's film.**

TK: And you also gave me my first writing gig, for God's sake. I wrote for *The Independent* when I reviewed the [New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film] Festival. In other words, I never saw – what was disturbing – and this is, actually, an interesting thing – what was disturbing was to suddenly be propelled on the other side of that and to be seen as ungrateful or blind to what had gone before. Or even, frankly, like *Swoon* – *Swoon* is as much influenced by Julie Dash's movie called *Illusions*, which was profoundly influential on me. It empowered me to think, oh, I could do a period film. Oh, it's a film, it's a period film, articulating the issues about race, during a period – I'm so indebted to – I don't really know Julie, I've met her a few times. But all kinds of work – Su Friedrich's work. There are so many people whose work inspired, challenged, provoked me to make the work I was able to make. And surely, just speaking for Todd and Christine, who I know best of that group of people, they were aware of that work, they saw their work in relationship or continuing to it. They were shown in the same venues. Christine's take on this now is that, Todd's work was spurned by the generation immediately prior, because it was vulgar and narrative. She's at least gone in print saying that.

**SS: I just read that. Oh, where did I read that. Oh that book. She's right, but she's missing what the issue was. It was because of the gay content. This is why we started MIX, because the experimental film community was not recognizing work with gay content and not supporting it.**

TK: I think she's right, but I think her point is saying, people are seen as vulgarities for embracing genre or narrative, and that was never the feeling – frankly, I worked with Yvonne, at the Whitney Program, and that's never been the feeling that Yvonne has ever – at least, to my face – made me feel like –

**SS: But she said The Collective [for Living Cinema], and I wasn't surprised at all. There was just no support for gay content.**

TK: There wasn't. I think the thing was, I also lucked out at having somebody like Lyn Blumenthal early on, because she made experimental work that did – her work showed in Documenta. She was career attached, and didn't seem marginalized. And also, I had relationships with Martha Gever, and Yvonne Rainer, and a circle of filmmakers and makers in New York.

02:15:00

**SS: This is great that you say this, but let's get to this other issue.**

TK: I think it's important to say that first, I think the relationship is really, really hard to pin down.

**SS: Let's go through each of the films and see the relationship to ACT UP, can we do that?**

TK: Yeah, sure.

**SS: Let's start with Jennie Livingston.**

TK: Jennie Livingston, I think, precedes ACT UP for sure in terms of the making of *Paris Is Burning*. I believe *Paris Is Burning* might have been filmed as early as '85, '86. You'd have to talk to Jennie.

**SS: I remember watching a videotape of excerpts of it at her house, when she was still living with Ray [Navarro] and Anthony [Ledesma]. So, that's in the**

**middle of ACT UP, and it was not yet finished.**

TK: The thing I think is that Jennie probably started the very early wave of that thing – either, exactly concurrent with ACT UP, or just prior to the formation of ACT UP. And, the parallel between that has to do with, you know – I guess, in the light-hearted sense – that kind of fabulous quotient of club culture, and the ball culture at that time, and the fact that hip gay white men were cognizant of ball culture, and a hip gay, white lesbian – Jennie – was cognizant of ball culture. So, the collision of race and class and all those things like that represented – had in-roads due to club culture, or underground culture.

**SS: Who was the producer? Who put the money up for that?**

TK: For Jennie's film? There were people involved in ACT UP, but I don't know, actually. It's a very good question. I can't remember all of them. One of them was definitely an ACT UP member.

**SS: Do you know who?**

TK: I can't remember their names. I can see the person, and I can't remember the name. Jennie had more than one producer. There were a bunch of people who were involved, and who came in at different stages of that project. And, I didn't know Jennie, nearly as well. I just kind of met her a bit, then the movie came out and, of course, I know the movie. I've always sort of have known her, but not super, super well.

**SS: Also, she grew up in Beverly Hills. Her uncle was Alan Pakula. She had gone to Yale, so she had those kinds of relationships. But I don't think she ever made another feature.**

TK: No, she did not. Yes, I think there was a class access. And Todd grew up



in California, as well, comes from a fairly affluent family, went to Brown University at the same time Christine did, along with Barry Ellsworth. The three of them formed a company called Apparatus. Barry is one of the Binghamms – he had family money that he put into that thing. In that way, my narrative and their narrative couldn't be more different, because I'm as unconnected as you can possibly be. There is no family money. I didn't go to an Ivy League school, for either undergraduate or graduate school.

**SS: So, how did you get hooked up with them?**

TK: I met Todd first in ACT UP. I scored pot for him, because he's a pothead and so am I and he wanted some. And then, I saw *Superstar* and was devastated by it, and I wrote Cynthia Schneider and Todd, both a letter, because Cynthia was Todd's collaborator that was just like – I've just moved to New York. I kind of can't comprehend how brilliant the movie is. It's like, I've seen the light. It was like a fan letter – an embarrassing fan, mash letter, and they were both kind, and took pity on me and didn't laugh at me, and didn't make me feel stupid. And I befriended them, and Todd was really encouraging. Todd saw my experimental work and liked it, and supported it and was like, "You should submit something to Apparatus." And, Apparatus at this time was a company that was – and for sure, privilege and access and money made all that possible. They couldn't have had that company, if Barry wasn't involved in the money that was involved. Christine can sometimes say, "Oh, growing up in New York City is no different than growing up any place else." Her father was a WPA photographer. She was surrounded by – her sister Gail was involved as an experimental filmmaker for years. She had a kind of access and image of these things. I was an idiot when I moved here. I didn't know any of these things. I didn't know what the Collective

for Living Cinema was.

**SS: How did you meet Christine? Was it through ACT UP?**

TK: I met Christine through Todd.

**SS: So, also as a consequence of ACT UP?**

TK: As a consequence of ACT UP, yes. And, Christine and I didn't hit it off initially, because Christine was very bristly and would mock me, like she does with people often. "You could project a movie on your forehead." I was embarrassed. I got to like her, and Barry and Todd, and was very intrigued by what they were doing, but didn't really submit a proposal to do a short film, because I wasn't doing narrative film. And then – they had done *Apparatus*, for a while. Todd had raised a certain amount of money through the grant circuit, and partially, because *Superstar* clearly had gotten the kind of attention – Bill Sherwood, was a very important figure, for instance. Bill Sherwood – *Parting Glances* – the casting director for Bill Sherwood, Dan Haughey, was the same person who cast *Swoon*. At the time, Christine was a sound editor or something. Contrary to what we're talking about – one thing that should be said is that Christine has a ferocious, intense, deep work ethic, and persistence and tenaciousness – well before she was connected to anything – when she was just another, fresh out of Brown kid, who wanted to get into film, was a lot of what made her – she really put in the time, early on, to try and find those connections, and then, later, when a window of opportunity opened, she was just tenacious about it. She just really held on. So, Todd had raised some money. Christine and Todd had been collaborators to a certain degree, and Christine was still working, sort of, as both director and producer. Todd had made *Superstar* – he probably got NYSCA and NEA support – in fact, I know he did. He got

02:15:00

NEA support. He got NYSCA support. I'm not sure what else he got. They made *Poison*. They shot *Poison* in '90, finished it, went to Sundance in '91, the same year Jennie is there. Todd wins the Grand Jury Prize, Jennie wins the Grand Jury Prize, documentary and dramatic.

I had moved to New York. For the first three years of living in New York, I submitted to every single grant application you possibly could, and was rejected by everybody. *They are lost to vision altogether* happened – literally everything changed – like this. Suddenly, grant, grant, grant. It was an amazing year. I raised a lot of money. I raised \$100,000, which is unthinkable now through that system. Partially also, I was really skilled as a grant writer, through having a job at AIDSfilms. I learned how to write a grant. That money came together, and I had seen *Poison* sort of take shape and get off the ground, and I was somewhat knowledgeable, but not nearly knowledgeable enough to really produce a feature film by myself. And, so, I approached Christine and said, look, I've got a bunch of money here, I want to make a movie. I didn't really understand I was making a feature, to be honest, initially. I was scared to make a feature. So, I was going to make – originally, *Swoon* was called *Intolerance*, revisiting D.W. Griffith's racist masterpiece – and I was going to tell three stories. One was Leopold and Loeb. One was rooted during the Hollywood blacklisting era, and one was a little-known story about Theodore Roosevelt using men in the military to entrap homosexuals during 1916 through 1920. I jettisoned those two other stories – really, largely, at the urging of Hilton Als, who I got to know at the same time – who was incredibly encouraging, and was just like, you're clearly passionate about Leopold and Loeb. It represents your hometown, and there's a kind of irrational passion you have for it that's different from

the rest of the stuff. You're attracted to those two people in some way that makes you feel contradictory. So, he became a collaborator on the script, and a really important figure. And, that's kind of what happened. Christine, building on her experience of having made *Poison* and, I think, forming in her mind, a clearer intention to become a producer more, primarily, than a director, came aboard and helped to – with her contacts and people that she knew, and interviewing people – helped lead to making the film.

**SS: Did she bring in Ellen Kuras?**

TK: She had known Ellen Kuras. Ellen Kuras was an electrician, before she was a DP, and she at that time was in a relationship with a guy named Steve Kazmierski who had shot for *Apparatus* or something. I interviewed a few people. Ellen had only shot a documentary at that stage, called *Some Sorrow* – which was this incredibly lyrical, totally beautiful documentary, which I fell in love with. I don't care that she never shot narrative, I don't care that she never shot black and white – her eye's amazing. And then we just met and it was instant simpatico. She's a Polish worker bee, and I'm a Lithuanian Irish worker bee. Our characters are related. We had a real easy time connecting. Todd and Christine had sort of known Ellen because they went to Brown, but I think she was ahead of them, and they weren't really particularly friendly. But, certainly – and I think that's the thing, too – there was a burgeoning indie scene that is far larger than the people we're naming here, which is made up of all the various crew and other members, who are probably distinct from the previous generation, meaning that, maybe things were moving away from things like bathtub development of Super 8 – and things that I had come out of, and moving towards things like using laboratories, and a more commercial model for making work. And, you can't underestimate things like, you

02:25:00

know – I mean, if you read that Peter Biskind book, which I could not bring myself to read – but, read 20 pages and just thought, yipes – you know, you can construct a narrative that connects the momentum of things like *Stranger Than Paradise* or *She's Gotta Have It* and the example that they set. Or for me really more, Sheila McLaughlin and people like that were more, sort of – I aspired to that – making that sort of film.

What was that called, that film?

**SS: What was that film called?**

TK: *She Must Be Seeing Things*. And I'm aware of Lyn Tillman's writing and some of those people partially through Craig Owens. And, so I didn't really – I might have been a little different than that core group, because I really was – I'm not trying to make myself sound like a naïf more than I was – I really didn't understand that I was making a feature for a long time, and I really did think I was making – you know, again, Collective for Living Cinema, three nights, would have been woo-woo for me.

**SS: Is it fair for me to summarize that it was ACT UP let you into a world that was defined by Brown University and certain kinds of access?**

TK: Yes, for sure. And, combined with the Whitney Program – and that my early experiences in New York were profoundly neurotic on a class basis, which is why my work continues to be obsessed with class, because – I mean, even teaching at Columbia – it took me, maybe three years at Columbia to be like, you're the teacher, calm down. I teach kids who are pathologically wealthy.

**SS: I remember Leslie Thornton, teaching at Brown saying that her students had more money to spend on their student films than she had on her films.**

TK: Easily. My students are just filled with gadgets and technology and

access, and it's just absurd what they have. The thing that is really – in my individual case, it was the Whitney Program that opened the door to class-jumping, and it was the connections provided there that led, one way or another, to ACT UP. And then, certainly, ACT UP was a social melting pot for a lot of these things. I think the thing that's interesting – I think because I'm researching for *Savage Grace*, the movie I'm working on now – looking at the late '60s, for instance, and particularly England in the late '60s. There are a lot of figures – a fashion designer named Ossie Clark, who was in the David Hockney circle – a very interesting person – lead a very tortured life, in the later part of his life, and died in a horrible way. But he was somebody who was just a working class boy who had no access, and there was a kind of explosion of high and low during the '60s, that was fueled, partially, by rock and roll culture – like, The Stones, working class boys who had never had money, suddenly were wealthy, were hob-knobbing with Catherine Guinness and this title duke, and that title duke. And there's a version of that that went on and that goes on, I think, throughout actually the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and probably into the present, where there are moments of – and that was one of the most pronounced ones, I think, in the late '60s – of high and low, melting together – so, where class jumping becomes possible.

**SS: But, if you had been straight, none of this ever would have happened.**

TK: Never. What I'm saying – parallel to this – it's not rock and roll, but there's a kind of elitist pop culture thing, that, as a gay person – and, particularly, as a clever, smart talking gay man, I had access to, so I could give good talk. And, those are the kinds of things, you know, preceding AIDS, and going back all the way to the '60s, again, and through the '70s. Look at Warhol's influence, and how many people Warhol

allowed to class jump; how he himself class jumped, and how I hold up Warhol is a very ambivalent model. I hope to be as influenced by Valerie Solanas, as I am by Andy Warhol.

**SS: As a success model?**

TK: No, it might just also mean the idea that this kind of way in which knowledge of popular culture or attentiveness to pop culture – it's unfolding underneath you – provides opportunities for connections and alliances to be made, that might not happen otherwise, and whether that's rock and roll, or the newest, edgiest activist movement, ACT UP, which is a gross way to think of ACT UP, but there is that element – that those places become breeding grounds, definitely, and that ambitious people in those situations, end up making connections and going places. And, that in my particular instance, a lot of those connections bang, bang, bang, lined up. And that, for sure, I leapt for those things when they were in front of me. The part that I look back on – I think there are plenty of people who didn't get to make their first feature right at that window, who almost did. And those are the stories that are just as interesting, to me as what's the dividing line? Who's to say – it gets back to the thing that we talked about before – who is considered a primary artist of their generation who is considered a secondary artist or tertiary whatever – how do you rank the relative importance of people's work? And also, how are you to analyze work – particularly in film – where, in order to actually manifest the work, it requires so much money in capital. I'm not a novelist. I can't just write a novel, which is an incredibly enviable thing to do, and also, not an enviable thing to do. Yipes, the life of a writer.

**SS: I think it's better.**

TK: It's better, but it's also a scary thing, because there's a kind of intense solitary quality to it. It has its ups and its downs. So, what about all those films we didn't see, from the people who didn't get permission, because they weren't clever enough, or didn't have connections to the right power base or the right people, who surely would have made really excellent films? It's like Carl George's *DHPG Mon Amour* – many films of that period that I think are – or Stashu Kybartus, who I went to Chicago with – there was a really incredible breeding ground of work. That's why this project is partially exciting – to look back and consider some of that work – and not just AIDS as a way that stopped people from making their work, but all the other things in life that conspire you to not have an opportunity. I probably also was a terror at that age. So, anyone who wanted to smack us down, because we were golden children and we were lucky – should have probably smacked us down. Life is marvelously fair, because during my 30s, all through the '90s, life was brutal and excruciating, and I almost, entirely lost my way. So now, on the other side of it, God, do I realize how lucky I was – incredibly, and I am so grateful that what happened that's allowed that at least I am considered viable enough to continue to make my work in whatever way I can be supported. And, I'm thankful that life actually gave me that lesson as well, because I feel like a much more rounded person as a result of it – as much pain and difficulty as it's entailed.

**SS: In that case, let me ask you a completely different question. What was the Swim Team?**

TK: The Swim Team – oh my God. One of the chief members of Swim Team was Matt Ebert. Some people who are cruel and wicked about lovely Matt Ebert call him Mebert. The Swim Team was a group – and Adam Smith was also a prominent member



of the Swim Team – the Swim Team was a slang – I also called them the Pussy Posse – they were a group of boys in ACT UP who were among the most – considered to be physically attractive boys – almost exclusively white, almost exclusively symmetrical in muscle, almost exclusively with versions on the '50s rockabilly haircut – long sideburns, a little longer on top, or military haircuts – who knew how to wear, with exact perfection, the black wide belts and the torn jeans and the combat boots and the t-shirts. They were the collective object of desire in the room of ACT UP, among many. It's just howlingly funny now. They were a micro-culture. They were the cheerleaders in high school. That's why we call them the Swim Team, because they were boys. They were the self-appointed, but also, somehow, communally recognized cool ones, who everyone wanted to sleep with. I have to confess – my taste being a little bit more idiosyncratic and a little bit less goyishe than that – I was never wild about most of the swim team, personally. And, also, they never quite, I think, knew what to do with me, because I was sort of cute, but not hot in that way. And, I certainly was too unpredictable. And also, I tended in that stage, as I probably still do, to dress in lots of drags. So, I would wear their drag. I would wear the ACT UP drag. And then I would come to ACT UP wearing my suit sometimes. I remember having some scuffle with Adam Smith, early on, about my lack of credibility because I wore motorcycle boots one day and Oxfords the next and how that was – which I think, he would probably laugh at, now. And that's who the Swim Team were.

02:35:00

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

TK: I think I had intense exhaustion and collapse – '91, up until '92, having spent four years at AIDS Films, starting at 40 hours a week and then 60 hours a week job,

and also, my individual work being so centered around AIDS. And also, for the beginning of the feeling, I didn't really understand at the time, grew over time, of that sense of despair and battle fatigue or whatever – feeling like we had accomplished a lot, but also, there was so much more to accomplish, and just nursing wounds a little bit. And being really freaked out by people I looked at, becoming substantially sick – your early figures of the group, where people who had embraced me or who had been kind in whatever way. Vito Russo was really incredibly kind to me – incredibly, when I think back. I remember my Vito Russo stories. I literally went to my public high school as kid and looked up homosexuality in the card catalog and he was one of the first names that I found, because he was one of the first published authors. So, he was somebody for years, before I'd met Vito, he was like a legendary known and recognized homosexual. So, meeting him and saying, "Vito, I hear you have this Edison footage of two men dancing together, which I want to see, can you give me a copy?" And him being like, "Oh, come over to my house and here's a 3/4 –"

**SS: It's so nice that in "The Celluloid Closet," *Swoon* is presented as a film that inherited the legacy – at the end of the film – that's just a nice moment for you.**

TK: Completely. What's the piece called *Aged in Wood* – Roger Jacoby? I remember being at some screening, where *Aged in Wood* is played, and Vito knowing every single Bette Davis reference known to man, whatever. *They are lost to vision altogether* involved dialogue from *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* A lot of people didn't know it was dialogue from it, because I didn't want to get in rights trouble. Vito would know every line of it. I just remember that. I remember *Aged in Wood*, actually,

very well. That was in the year that I reviewed your festival. And so was *Kamikaze Hearts* and a bunch of it.

**SS: Tom, we've come to the end of the tape. Thank you so much.**

TK: It was a complete pleasure. Thank you guys for doing this thing. It's amazing.