

Fever in the Archive


AIDS Activist Videotapes from the Royal S. Marks Collection

Guggenheim FILM

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The Sackler Center for Arts Education
Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum
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Guest-curated by Jim Hubbard, Project Director for the AIDS Activist Video Preservation Program of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, and co-organized with John G. Hanhardt, Senior Curator of Film and Media Arts, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum.

Presented in collaboration with the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS.

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Program notes by Jim Hubbard, Guest Curator

Introduction

AIDS activist video remains one of the most significant cultural developments of the AIDS crisis. The videotapes grew out of a large-scale, diverse, unorganized, yet concerted effort by activists and videomakers to respond to the epidemic. They resulted from the widespread availability of high-quality, relatively inexpensive consumer video and a desperate need to convey lifesaving information. Many of these tapes, although made solely as timely responses to the crisis, retain an extraordinary vitality. The videomakers clearly positioned themselves in opposition to an unresponsive and often antagonistic government and mainstream media. They eschewed the authoritative voice-over, the removed, dispassionate expert, and scapegoating, while embracing a vibrant sexuality and righteous anger.

The videotapes in this series were drawn from the Royal S. Marks AIDS Activist Video Collection of the New York Public Library. This collection resulted from an effort by the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, a project of the Alliance for the Arts, to preserve the grassroots response of video artists and activists to the AIDS crisis. Made possible by major support from the New York Community Trust–Royal S. Marks Foundation Fund with additional support from the Snowdon Foundation and the New York State Council on the Arts, the collection consists of over 2,000 hours of masters of finished work and original camera tapes. One thousand hours of these tapes will be remastered for archival and research purposes.

Early on, Patrick Moore, Director of the Estate Project, advocated preserving this body of work and its remarkable story of AIDS activism. He felt a strong commitment to AIDS video because of his long and intense involvement with ACT UP. In order to convey fully the historical significance of AIDS activism as well as to highlight the artistic achievement of the videomakers, the collection includes not only finished works but also large amounts of original, unedited footage. The New York Public Library was the only institution in the country that demonstrated both an interest in the material and the ability to care for it. In addition, Mimi Bowling, Curator of the library's Division of Archives and Manuscripts, was personally enthusiastic about receiving the collection.

A Short History of AIDS Activist Video

AIDS activist video is a direct descendant of a rich and varied tradition of alternative cinema. Its antecedents include the work of Dziga Vertov in Soviet Russia, the New American Cinema, the portapak tapes made by such groups as TVTV and Videofreex, feminist documentaries of the 1960s and 1970s, and the political filmmaking collective Newsreel. Furthermore, the activists continued the practice of using whatever tools were available to convey their message. In general, activists used Hi-8 camcorders and edited their tapes for little or no money at public-access media-arts centers, AIDS organizations, schools and, late at night, at commercial facilities.

From 1981, when the syndrome was first recognized, until 1985, when Rock Hudson died, AIDS received scant attention from the mainstream media. The reports that did appear relied on scientific experts to explain the disease, blamed gay men and their promiscuous sexual habits for the disease, and sought out innocent victims to pity. Television coverage was aimed at a presumed "general" public that did not include gay men, lesbians, intravenous-drug users, or people of color.

A handful of AIDS films and videotapes depicting the epidemic from the inside began appearing in 1984. These included Stuart Marshall's *Bright Eyes* (1984; made for Britain's Channel 4), Arthur Bressan's *Buddies* (1985), Larry Brose's *An Individual Desires Solution* (1986), Tina DeFeliciano's *Living with AIDS* (1986), Barbara Hammer's *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS* (1986), and Mark Huestis and Wendy Dallas's *Chuck Solomon: Coming of Age* (1986).

AIDS activist video began in earnest in 1987, mostly in New York, at the same time as a sharp increase in political activism. ACT UP formed in early March and held its first demonstration on Wall Street on March 24. Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) hired Jean Carlomusto, and the *Living with AIDS* show began regular broadcasts on cable access (although a few shows can be dated as early as December 1984). Also in 1987, *Testing the Limits* began to document the burgeoning AIDS movement. By 1989, ACT UP/New York spawned a videomaking affinity group, Damned Interfering Video Activist Television (DIVA TV), that collectively produced three tapes within a year.

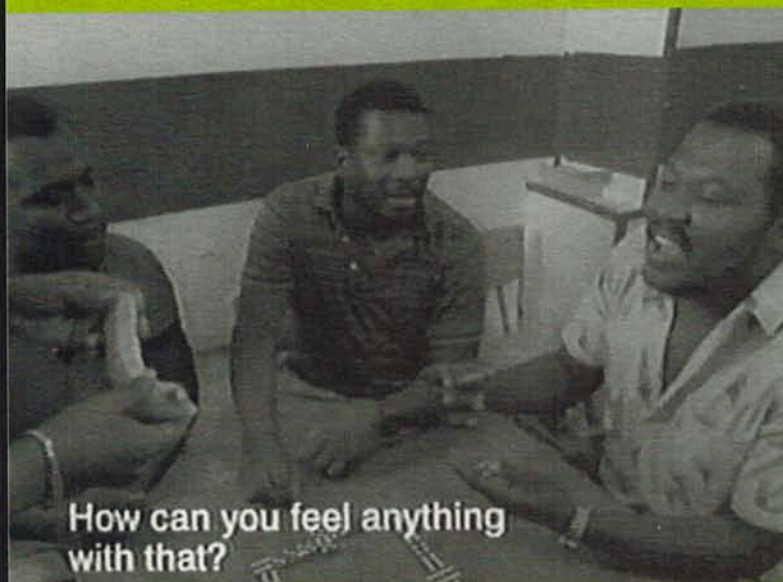
From 1988 to 1993, an explosion of AIDS activist video occurred. Hundreds of videotapes were produced. The vast majority of work continued to be made in New York, although a significant number of videotapes were produced in San Francisco, Los Angeles, and Chicago. There were also videomakers in Boston, Philadelphia, Seattle, and Washington, D.C., as well as such smaller cities as Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Austin, Texas. More videotapes were produced in New York not only because it was the epicenter of the disease and the dominant center of activism, but also because there was an infrastructure of support for alternative video. There were art schools and media-access centers offering classes and affordable equipment (New York University, Film/Video Arts, Downtown Community Television), a well-established community of videomakers, occasional grants, and even a graduate program forging a theoretical underpinning for the endeavor (the Whitney Independent Studies Program).

Beginning in 1994–95, a perceptible decline in production occurred, corresponding with the waning of street activism (see ACT UP/New York's time lines at www.actupny.org/documents/capsule-home.html). One notable exception to this was James Wentzy's *AIDS Community Television*, which was broadcast on cable access. Wentzy produced over 150 half-hour programs from 1993 to 1996 and, significantly, maintained his ties to ACT UP throughout.

Characteristics of AIDS Activist Video

The immediate impetus for AIDS activist video was the deadly, inadequate government response and the antagonistic, meager reporting of the mainstream media. These videomakers felt compelled to tell the real story of AIDS from the point of view of people with AIDS (PWAs). The videotapes portrayed PWAs as neither victims nor pariahs, but as empowered activists taking charge of their health in both the political and medical arenas. This was not the whole story, but it served as a necessary counterpoint to the relentlessly negative depiction in the mainstream media.

While AIDS activist video always maintained its critical stance toward the mainstream representation of AIDS, many activist videotapes appropriated mass-media techniques to convey their message. Numerous tapes employed the language of music videos—quick cutting and the use of dance and rap music. The “talking head” imparts authority, and the substitution of PWAs and activists for scientists and doctors asserted the expertise of people actually living with the disease as well as subverting the conventions of the mass media. The videotapes often scrutinized the mainstream representation of AIDS and PWAs and offered an alternative view. Nearly all mainstream media employed three characters: the white gay man wasting away from AIDS, the innocent victim, and the drug abuser of color. From the viewpoint of various communities affected by AIDS, activist video revealed the social, political, economic, and medical complexities of the disease. The eight thematic programs and more than 40 works in *Fever in the Archive* indicate the large range of AIDS activist video. What unifies these tapes is their urgency, passion, and belief. Made by members of a particular community affected by AIDS, each tape speaks directly to a community in its own language.



How can you feel anything with that?

*Jim Hubbard, Project Director for the Estate Project's AIDS Activist Video Preservation Program, is a filmmaker whose films include *Elegy in the Streets* (1989) and *Two Marches* (1991), both of which explore the personal and political responses to the AIDS crisis, and is co-founder of MIX: The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film/Video Festival.*

Fri Dec 1, 7 pm

Collective Action

Testing the Limits: NYC (Part 1) (1987), Testing the Limits, 28 min.
All People with AIDS Are Innocent (ca. 1990), GANG, 10 sec.
We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS (1990), Women's AIDS Video Enterprise (WAVE), 30 min.
Kissing Doesn't Kill (1990), GranFury, 2 min.
Target City Hall (1989), DIVA TV, 28 min.

Collectives formed the vanguard of the AIDS activist video movement. The impulse for videotaping derived from a political movement, and numerous tapes featured demonstrations. Having many people with cameras facilitated the documentation of multifaceted events. Conversely, collective editing was inefficient. The consequent tension contributed to the evolving structure of *Testing the Limits* and the dissolution of DIVA TV. *Testing the Limits* is arguably the first true AIDS activist videotape and, in many ways, provided a model for others with its lack of voice-over and with quick editing, often to the beat of disco and rap music. *All People with AIDS Are Innocent* presents a basic tenet of the movement. *We Care*, made by women of color and for a different audience, concentrates on care-giving and the effect of AIDS on people's lives. GranFury is more widely known for its graphics and, indeed, a still version of *Kissing Doesn't Kill* adorned city buses in New York. *Target City Hall*, DIVA TV's first tape, contrasts the democratic process of ACT UP's affinity groups with the illegal, degrading strip searches of women arrested at a demonstration.

Sat Dec 2, 3 pm

Speak for Yourself

GMHC Oral History Project (excerpts) (ca. 1988-93), GMHC Audio-Visual Department, 60 min.
Voices from the Front (ACT UP excerpts) (1992), Testing the Limits, 4 min.
Interview with Paul Monette (ca. 1993), Phil Tarley, 4 min.
ACT UP Ten Year Anniversary Storytellings (excerpts) (1997), James Wentzy, 20 min.

The GMHC Oral History Project represents a remarkable attempt to preserve the early history of the organization and the first responses to the AIDS crisis. These interviews of the founders and shapers of the organization impart not only details but also the flavor of the period—no holds barred. More than 60 tapes with over 30 subjects survive. The excerpts to be shown include interviews with Larry Kramer, Rodger McFarlane, Jay Lipner, Luis Palacios, Mel Rosen, and others. The ACT UP sections from *Voices from the Front* provide a glimpse of an ACT UP/New York Monday night meeting. *Storytellings* records people who were deeply involved with ACT UP, reminiscing and analyzing their own accomplishments in a tender and revealing manner.

ABOVE, RIGHT: *Testing the Limits: NYC (Part 1)* (1987), Testing the Limits

FACING PAGE: *Se Met Ko* (1989), Patricia Benoit



Sat Dec 2, 5 pm

First Person Singular

Danny (1987), Stashu Kybartas, 20 min.
Identities (1991), Nino Rodriguez, 7 min.
They are lost to vision altogether (1989), Tom Kalin, 13 min.
Virus (1994), Stuart Gaffney, 5 min.
Portraits of People Living with HIV (selections) (1991-94), Gregg Bordowitz, 20 min.
Stolen Shadows (1995), John R. Killackey and Steven Grandell, black and white, 10 min.
Rubber Queen: an AIDS docu-diary, episode 3: "Lying in Wait" (1992), Adam Gale, Chris Belcher, and Franklin Wassmer, 29 min.
By Any Means Necessary (1994), James Wentzy, 6 min.

AIDS activism was not always a group response; there were personal responses as well. *Danny* is a heartfelt exploration of the psyche of a young man with AIDS and his relationships to his family and the videomaker. By using an AIDS documentary's outtakes, which show the moments just before an unnamed PWA speaks, *Identities* movingly portrays the frustration, anger, and dignity of living with AIDS. In the words of Tom Kalin, his *They are lost to vision altogether* "attempts to reclaim eroticism . . . in the face of a monolithic and culturally compulsory heterosexuality." "It takes all my energy these days just to keep things the way they are . . . normal, regular," says the man in *Virus*. Gregg Bordowitz, the consummate AIDS activist videomaker, steps back to take a more personal look at some of his friends in *Portraits of People Living with HIV*. The narrator of *Stolen Shadows* treks from the Upper East Side to the Village mourning his dead angels. *Rubber Queen*, a six-episode series made for cable access, explores Adam Gale's life as a dancer, performance artist, and person struggling with AIDS: awakened by night sweats and a full bladder, he talks to the camera in episode 3, "Lying in Wait." As is stated in James Wentzy's *By Any Means Necessary*, "I am someone with AIDS, and I want to live by any means necessary."

Sat Dec 2, 7 pm

Reclaiming Desire: How to Have Sex in an Epidemic

Please be advised that this program contains graphic sexual content that may not be suitable for all audiences.

A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M. (1988), Jerry Tartaglia, 16mm film, 6 min.
Grey Hideaway (1986), Merrill Aldighieri and Joe Tripician, 5 min.
Safe Sex Slut (1987), Carol Leigh (Scarlot Harlot), 3 min.
GMHC Safe Sex Shorts (1989-90), Gregg Bordowitz, Jean Carlomusto, Charles Brack, Robert Huff, David Bronstein, and Richard Fung, 28 min.
Fear of Disclosure (1990), Phil Zwickler and David Wojnarowicz, 5 min.
SaferSister (1992), Maria Perez and Wellington Love, 2 min.
Bareback (1999), Stuart Gaffney, black and white, 4 min.
Laff at the Fags (1985), Scott Heron and Erik Paulo, 29 min.

At bottom, sex is what it's all about. The struggle to define safe sexual practices has plagued the AIDS epidemic from the beginning. The immediate response was the erotophobic "just stop having sex." Yeah, right. *A.I.D.S.C.R.E.A.M.* sets the tone immediately as its narrator angrily asserts, "I'm a human being, not a viral carrier" and attacks the heart of the problem, "Four out of five doctors agree: No sex for gay men!" *Grey Hideaway*, with the legendary porn star Casey Donovan, is a stand-alone music video made from footage shot for *Chance of a Lifetime* (1986), the earliest attempt to promote hot safe sex. The *GMHC Safe Sex Shorts* forthrightly showcase diversity and hot safe sex for both gay men and lesbians. *Fear of Disclosure* bemoans the intricacies of serodiscordant dating, while cute boys in gold-lamé shorts gyrate. Four public-service announcements in English and Spanish (*SaferSister*) elegantly advocate safe sex for women. *Bareback* explores the complicated feelings behind the recent phenomenon of purposeful anal intercourse without condoms. The pornographic *Laff at the Fags* was described in the *Village Voice* as "probably the world's first avant-garde, gay punk, safe-sex spoof"; fifteen years later it remains sui generis. Made by members of the first generation of gay men who had to confront AIDS as they were coming of age, this video is highly influenced by earlier traditions of experimental film and completely unlike the earnest attempts to make safe sex hot that make up the bulk of this program. The videomakers perform the most outrageous acts of (safe) sexual abandon. *Laff at the Fags* is not for the squeamish or those who are not amused by coprophilia, sadomasochism, the sexual exploitation of vegetables, and other acts of human depravity.

Wed Dec 6, 7 pm

Panel Discussion

NYU Main Building, Room 300, 100 Washington Square East

Hosted by The Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at New York University, with Jean Carlomusto, Douglas Crimp, Ann Cvetkovich, Gerard Fergerson, and Alexandra Juhasz, moderated by Jim Hubbard. For information, call (212) 992-9541.

Jean Carlomusto discusses her experiences and evolving concerns over the past 12 years of producing works related to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Douglas Crimp talks about activist works that use self-reflexive strategies, particularly those that adopt a self-critical or otherwise skeptical view of works from just a few years earlier, interrogating just what we mean when we designate certain types of video work as "AIDS activist." Ann Cvetkovich extends her interest in the legacies of AIDS activism to the specific terrain of activist video, how this work continues to matter, and the value of having a video archive as a mode of preservation. Gerard Fergerson's special interests include racial disparities, HIV/AIDS, and vulnerable populations; he will bring a public-health policy perspective to the panel, including the public policy and health-care legacies of AIDS activism and video. Alexandra Juhasz examines the death of AIDS video activism, discussing what it accomplished, asking where it went, why it ended, and whether we still need it.

Fri Dec 8, 7 pm

A Voice in the 'Hood: Constructing Community in the Age of AIDS

Se Met Ko (1989), Patricia Benoit, 29 min. (In Creole, subtitled in English)

Native Americans, Two Spirits and HIV (1991), American Indian Community House, 12 min.

AIDS in the Barrio: Eso No Me Pasa a Mí (1989), Peter Biella, David Haas, Alba Martinez, and Frances Negrón-Muntaner, 30 min. (In English and Spanish with English subtitles)

Fighting in Southwest Louisiana (1991), Peter Friedman and Jean-François Brunet, 26 min.

DiAna's Hair Ego: AIDS Info Up Front (1989), Ellen Spiro, 30 min.

If AIDS activist video is truly a grassroots endeavor, then it must come out of a community and speak directly to that community in its own language. *Se Met Ko* is a perfectly told story in the *telenovela* style that conveys AIDS information and examines how it is disseminated through the resources and traditions of the Haitian community of Brooklyn. Native beliefs, traditional medicine, and the devastation wrought by white people inform *Native Americans: Two Spirits and HIV*. *AIDS in the Barrio* examines the intertwined problems of drugs, poverty, and the complex construction of sexuality among Latinos in Philadelphia. As Danny Cooper delivers the mail and chats with his neighbors in *Fighting in Southwest Louisiana*, he speaks about the response of his tiny hometown to his lover's death and his struggle with AIDS. Because her hair salon is the nexus of a vulnerable community ignored by the government of South Carolina, the completely fabulous DiAna DiAna distributes condoms and AIDS information while styling hair in *DiAna's Hair Ego*.





Sat Dec 9, 3 pm

From Witness to Subject: Women in the AIDS Crisis

Doctors, Liars and Women: AIDS Activists Say No to Cosmo (1988), Jean Carlomusto and Maria Maggenti, 23 min.
My Body's My Business (1992), Vivian Kleiman, 16 min.
Keep Your Laws Off My Body (1990), Catherine [Saalfield] Gund and Zoe Leonard, black and white, 13 min.
He Left Me His Strength (1989), Merle Jawitz, Sherry Busbee, Joanne Basinger, and Sheila Ward, 13 min.
I'm You, You're Me: Women Surviving Prisons (1992), Debra Levine and Catherine [Saalfield] Gund, 28 min.

Because women have long been ill served by the health-care system and because women transmitted their knowledge of activism to the legions of middle-class men suddenly moved to political activism by the AIDS crisis, they have served as the backbone of the movement. *Doctors, Liars and Women* documents perhaps the earliest example of women's insistence that issues vital to them had to be an essential part of the movement. The difficulties of being a prostitute in the midst of the AIDS crisis are detailed in *My Body's My Business*. *Keep Your Laws Off My Body* juxtaposes footage of a lesbian couple and police activity at AIDS demonstrations to talk about the restrictions to bodily freedom. The heartwarming tale of Mildred Pearson, who became an AIDS activist after her gay son's death, is related in *He Left Me His Strength*. Formerly imprisoned women speak for themselves in *I'm You, You're Me*.

ABOVE: *Undetectable* (2000), Jay Corcoran

FACING PAGE: *Doctors, Liars and Women: AIDS Activists Say No to Cosmo* (1988), Jean Carlomusto and Maria Maggenti

Sat Dec 9, 5 pm

Drugs into Bodies

DHPG Mon Amour (1989), Carl Michael George, Super 8 transferred to 16mm film, 12 min.
Needle Nightmare (ca. 1991), Phil Zwickler, 8 min.
Acting Up for Prisoners (1992), Eric Slade and Mic Sweney, 26 min.
Clean Needles Save Lives (1991), Richard Elovich, 27 min.
Undetectable (excerpt) (2000), Jay Corcoran, 15 min.

"Drugs into Bodies" was a simple, catchy slogan, but the reality behind it was much more complex. The mainstream press has portrayed AIDS drugs from AZT to protease inhibitors as simple, unalloyed miracles. In order to dispel this myth, Joe Walsh and David Conover invite us into their heroic everyday lives in *DHPG Mon Amour*, demonstrating the complicated ritual necessary to stave off David's blindness. Phil Zwickler meditates on blindness and bucolic peace in the unfinished *Needle Nightmare*. In *Acting Up for Prisoners*, ACT UP invades the office of the Medical Director of the California State Prison System in order to obtain health care for women inmates. People take drugs for many reasons, not only to ameliorate the effects of HIV, and *Clean Needles Save Lives* demonstrates how to use intravenous drugs safely. Finally, consider the problems of the remarkable AIDS activist Matilde Garcia in *Undetectable*: she copes not only with her own unsteady health and the difficulties of taking the drug cocktail, but also with her eight-year-old HIV-positive son, her positive husband whose immigration problems may send him back to Cuba, and her two negative daughters.

Sat Dec 9, 7 pm

Desperate Measures

Seize Control of the FDA (1988), Gregg Bordowitz and Jean Carlomusto, 25 min.
Like a Prayer (1989), DIVA TV, 30 min.
Stop the Church (1990), Robert Hilferty, 28 min.
The Ashes Action (1995), James Wentzy, 30 min.

In the end, the AIDS activist movement was characterized by bold, dramatic action that, in a highly visible way, brought its message to the media, the people, and the government. Those who obstructed progress in finding a cure, those who opposed the dissemination of appropriate and explicit safe sex information, and, in general, anyone who hindered progress toward the end of AIDS would not be tolerated. *Seize Control of the FDA* is one of many videotapes that record what was arguably the most successful of ACT UP's actions. Its complexity derives from the intelligent examination of the thinking of the planners and their astute analysis of the media response. Both *Like a Prayer* and *Stop the Church* scrutinize the notorious demonstration at St. Patrick's Cathedral in December 1989; *Stop the Church* concentrates on the preparation for the demonstration, *Like a Prayer* on a critique of the church's response to AIDS. Employing a remarkable circular structure that heightens the tension and cinematography that plunges the viewer right into the protest, *The Ashes Action* conveys both the poignancy of carrying a loved one's ashes to fling on the White House lawn and the fury that arises from clashing with mounted police.

Acknowledgments

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At the Guggenheim Museum,

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A huge thanks and a big hug to James Wentzy, stalwart chronicler of the AIDS crisis, who, despite being a "successfully lazy" person, has shot over 700 hours of AIDS activism, created 150 half-hour AIDS Community Television shows and will remaster 1,000 hours of videotape for this project.

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