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Interviewee: **Cynthia Chris**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Cynthia Chris
January 3, 2014

SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay, so look at me. So we start, you just say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

CYNTHIA CHRIS: Okay. My name is Cynthia Chris, and I'm 52 years old. We are at my home, in Jersey City.

SS: And today's date.

CC: Oh, today is January 3rd, 2014.

SS: Okay, great.

CC: That's new to say.

SS: So where did you grow up?

CC: I grew up in Richmond, Indiana. Of course, we start with that. It's funny, because I was just there, over Christmas. Arlene, my partner, and I both went, which was kind of novel.

Richmond is a small town near the Ohio line in central Indiana, and about 30,000 people. I grew up there, with my father – he was a police officer, and he had worked on the railroad before. But when I was an infant, he started working for the police department. By the time I was in high school, he was the chief of police.

My mother was a bookkeeper, whose parents owned a farm.

SS: So how long had your family been in Richmond?

CC: My mother was born in a small town nearby called Kitchel, and had, for several generations, been in that area. My father, probably, his great-great-great grandparents had been German and Dutch — both of the families, the

background was German and Dutch — but neither of them — except for one uncle, who was Dutch — none of them had much recollection of their families' lives before coming to the United States. Both sides of my family had been there for, like I said, except for this one uncle, for several generations, in farmland. And all of them working on the railroad, or farmland around Richmond.

SS: So did you know everyone in Richmond?

CC: Ha ha! My parents certainly did, because of my father being police chief by the time I was in high school. Did I know everyone? My family did; I was just so, I was terribly, terribly shy. So I don't even think I knew everybody in my sixth-grade class at elementary school. But we knew a lot of other families who were involved in those kinds of jobs – captains on the police department, or the sheriff and his wife, who I think also went to our church. So it was a small city, yes.

JW: Can I interrupt for just a minute?

SS: This is off-topic. But if your father is a chief of police, does that mean that you can never smoke pot, or drink, or anything like that?

CC: I didn't do any of those things until I was in college. I didn't have much of an adolescence at all. And in Richmond, Indiana, right? I have an older sister, and I think that she did. But I don't know how she managed it. In my friendship circle in high school, definitely nobody would have smoked pot with me, or gone out for beers, driving around in cars – no, I didn't have that kind of adolescence, in any way, shape, or form.

SS: But if your father arrested someone's father, did they hate you in school, or something like that? Was there a stigma?

00:05:00 CC: I don't remember my father arresting anyone in a family that I went to school with. But – I do remember that sometimes that friends would call. Like if a friend was late getting home, the parents, instead of first calling the police department to ask for help looking for their child, would call my dad: What should I do? And he would say, wait for them to come home. They're a teenager; they'll be home soon. He's a kind of common-sense kind of guy. He always thought that was a curious thing. Because also, they shouldn't have been looking for me. They always knew where I was. My father was just telling Arlene I was no trouble at all as a kid. I don't know that I'm proud of that, exactly. But then I went off to art school, and I had my adolescence in Chicago, I think.

SS: Let's not get there yet. So in growing up – I mean, obviously, your family was community-oriented, because they were policing the community, right? And what church were you raised in?

CC: Lutheran Church.

SS: So was there a lot of volunteer or – no.

CC: No. I don't remember much of that. There was definitely a kind of life built around my father's job, especially as he was promoted, rose up through the ranks to detective, captain, and eventually the position of chief – that really was about being a public figure and there were certainly social events. Oh, all these kinds of community organizations – the Masonic Lodge, and Rotary Club; things that my

father belonged to, and would go to those meetings. Then other things like Lions Club, and so on, that my dad would go to their luncheons and speak. He was an officer — not president, I don't think — but in some leadership position for the State of Indiana Chief of Police Association — I think I would get the acronym wrong — and he was really active in that.

My mother would accompany him on things like the chief-of-police conventions and civic functions. She would do other things. Like she would bake this enormous number of Christmas cookies for the guys who were working on Christmas eve, and take them to the station. Or pies on Thanksgiving – things like that.

But I don't remember a lot of volunteerism, even around the schools. I don't remember my parents being particularly active in PTA or in other kinds of activities. My mother was really oriented towards her neighbors and workmates. She really had very solid friendships with some of the women whose husbands my father worked with. It was some neighbors of ours who ran a plumbing company that she was an accountant for. She was really, really tight with them, and I think they were great support for one another. But this was more based on who you were neighbors with, and not people that you had other kinds of affiliations with.

The church that we attended – my parents had both grown up in that church. And I remember going to Sunday school, asking unpopular questions in Sunday school.

SS: Like what? What's an unpopular question?

CC: Like, why, if there's only one goat left – because these people are starving, why does God want them to sacrifice the goat? Shouldn't they milk the goat, or do something practical like that? I didn't understand these kinds of things.

God just seemed mean at certain points. It didn't make any sense to me, a lot of the stories that we were told. But I was confirmed in the Lutheran Church. I guess I was 12 when we'd go through that little ceremony. Our attendance really slacked off after that. I don't remember us going much when I was in junior high or high school.

But I don't remember a lot of being involved in church councils. We went; we made appearances. Volunteerism? I don't remember much of that.

SS: So when did you realize – well, which came first; this realization that there is this world of art out there; people making art; and this world of politics out there? I don't know if either of these things came to you through the radio, the TV, or –

CC: Well –

SS: – classrooms?

CC: – it came through the classroom, I think, which was that there was a certain point in which — I guess my elementary school — the junior high school that it fed into, there were kids from other elementary schools. Some of those kids had parents who were professors at Earlham College, which is a small, about twelve-hundred-student, I think, liberal arts school in Richmond.

SS: It's a Quaker school?

00:10:00 CC: Yes, Quaker school. It always seemed to me that if you drew a map – this probably isn't still true — but when I was a kid, if you drew a map of voter registration, you would probably have an entirely Republican town, with some Democrats registered right around – or, as my father would say, the Democrat Party, right around Earlham. And when I met those kids who went to Earlham College, things changed for me. This was a Nixon stronghold. Our representative to Congress was this guy named David W. Dennis. I was thinking of him recently, because of being there over Christmas, and we drove by his house. I always thought it was this scary old Addams Family–type mansion. I mentioned him to my father. And he said, my recollection was right; that he was really the last representative who remained in support of Richard Nixon, and wasn't for impeachment.

But this was a Republican stronghold. These kids had very different perspectives. They wore those POW-MIA bracelets. They knew that there were non-Republican candidates for president, and things like that. They opened my eyes. They had books in their houses. We had books in our house, I don't want to exaggerate. We had Encyclopedia Britannica, and my mother was a voracious reader, and she and I spent loads of time together at the local public library. She read Pearl Buck novels. She read *Gone With the Wind* once a year, and that was her favorite. But she got me into the library, and I'll always really appreciate that. We may not have ended up with the same tastes, but she was a voracious reader, and really encouraged me to be a bookworm.

SS: Which came first; understanding about what art was, or knowing that there were political movements out there?

CC: I think my connections with the kids who had parents who taught at Earlham – many of them, of course, hadn't grown up in Richmond, their parents hadn't grown up in Richmond – they came from all over. That gave me some insight that there was a world outside, with people who had different political perspectives and allegiances and ideas, and it was really eye-opening to me.

Art came a little bit later, when I started getting recognition, I guess, for drawing. I had some drawing skill, and I was very interested in art. I loved the introspective part of it, the part that you could hide away for hours in your room, and draw. This was just, this was as good as reading, to me. I loved the activity. When I seemed pretty good at it, and got support for doing it in school, I didn't understand where that could get a person. I looked at my high school art teachers' lives, and I thought, I don't know that that's what I want to do. I couldn't see beyond that point. But I had a couple of very supportive teachers. They, for whatever reason, encouraged me to pursue applying to art school, to the Art Institute of Chicago. It took a great deal of their negotiating. I remember some very mysterious parent-teacher conferences, where my father and mother would be dressed, and my father would be in a suit and tie, and he'd go off and meet with my teachers, and come home. Finally, my father decided that whatever – this momentum was unstoppable. I think that the Art Institute was actually the only college I ended up applying to, which

seems completely illogical. Now, in the current climate of applying to colleges, no one would ever do. My grades were good; I could have had a number of choices.

I've always thought that maybe those teachers – I think that maybe they knew before I did that I was queer, and that a lot of it was less about aiming me towards a promising art career than it was getting me into a big city that was going to be more nourishing for me socially.

I didn't know.

SS: So then you arrive in Chicago.

CC: One generation off the farm, right?

SS: What year did you come to Chicago?

CC: 1979.

SS: Okay.

CC: The only job I ever had in high school was the summer before.

Now I might be going off in tangent, but it paints the scene, right? Again, I was just thinking of this because of being there. It was the year before major census. So basically, I drove my mother's Pontiac Catalina around neighboring counties, checking maps, and a little drawing wherever there was a farmhouse. You'd just check to make sure that there was still a house there. If a house had been built, you drew it into the map. I loved this job, just driving around, all by myself, listening to the radio. And that was my farewell to Indiana.

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I went to Chicago; my parents were very concerned about me moving to the big city, and they stationed me in the dorms downtown at Roosevelt University

– which was probably the most party-central and cockroach-infested place I ever lived in my entire life. It was everything that they wanted to protect me from. But they didn't know. They thought the dorms sounded better than other options. I think I just lived there for a semester, and then found some roommates and moved out to near the Wrigley Field area.

But I loved it. It was a great experience. I'm not sure I had that great of an undergraduate liberal-arts education. But it was a really amazing, amazing time, and I wouldn't trade it for anything.

SS: Now did you get exposed to video there?

CC: Oh yes.

SS: And who was your teacher?

CC: Well, actually, I took one class with Barbara Latham, who, along with John Manning, Dan Sandin, Ed Rankus; these are people who did video that had a lot of image processing in it. They were part of the crew that had been involved in developing image processors, so there were all kinds of wild, abstract effects in their videos. I didn't go that way. The piece or two that I made on my own when I was a student used still images – they were kind of very primitive animation, using drawn images. I'm sure I don't have copies of those anymore. I don't know whatever happened to them.

But mostly I studied painting and drawing. Then I stayed on, and got a master's degree in 20th century art history theory and criticism. And I worked there –

SS: At the Art Institute.

CC: – for four years, yes. But it was an amazing experience. Other teachers I had – there was a woman named Carol Becker, who was teaching English there. She later went on to become a dean, and now she’s dean of the School of the Arts at Columbia. I took several literature classes with her, women’s studies–type classes. That was very influential and eye-opening. I had an art history teacher named Judith Kirshner, who went on to the University of Illinois at Chicago, who was amazingly supportive to me as well in developing writing skills, and taking that part of my education really seriously. I was in classes with mostly art students, some of whom were really interested in history and criticism and in writing, and a lot of whom, it wasn’t their forte. They may have known a lot about art, but they weren’t that interested in writing as a practice itself. I remember Judith being very supportive. There were just amazing people there. I remember an art historian named Bob Loescher, who was hilarious and just took, I think, especially young queer students kind of under his wing, and really made me feel at home.

I didn’t take classes with Kate Horsfield or Lyn Blumenthal; they did occasionally teach. I remember them doing guest stints, coming into art history classes and showing interviews from the *On Art and Artists* series that was part of their project, the Video Data Bank, at the Art Institute. And I got to know them, like I said, when I was employed at the school for several years after I graduated.

SS: So were you aware of all this queer and feminist video?

CC: Yes. It didn’t take much, after arriving there, to get exposed to that. Partly, really, I want to give Lyn and Kate a lot of credit for that, because the

On Art and Artists collection had started with their interviews of women artists and women professionals in the art world: with Marcia Tucker, from the New Museum, and Lucy Lippard. I'm going to forget some of the other people who they interviewed first. Joan Mitchell. I want to say the painter, the Chicago painter Hollis Sigler, was an early interview of theirs, but she could have come later. But they started out interviewing women, and those tapes were such an important part of 20th century art history curricula at the Art Institute. They were such a ready resource. And also to just seek them out. To just go in there, to their screening room, and watch both the video artworks that they distributed, but also these tapes that were so available. Eventually it was everybody who passed through, right? Laurie Anderson, or Barbara Kruger, Nancy Spiro, Yvonne Rainer. It was really an amazing resource. And I really do think that their presence, and that body of work, made a whole world make sense to me.

So artists like Vanalyne Green, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger; other people who were working more in video; really became part of the day-to-day conversation. This was a time, this was, I don't know, all those folks from Buffalo that became – the Pictures Generation, right, the appropriation artists. This was all very new and exciting. That was what we all thought about a great deal.

SS: I was in Chicago in 1979, and there was a huge lesbian community there.

CC: Um hm.

SS: But what you're talking about is this other kind of sector. So where did that all intersect? What was the connection between the community and this new video work?

CC: Well, I'm not sure that I can explain this, but my lesbian community was not so much at the Art Institute. There were certainly – I mean, as I slowly, and then not so slowly — I think it took me a little while — but by my sophomore year, I was almost exclusively dating other women – not a hundred percent, but mostly dating women. And knew gay men and lesbians at the Art Institute. Somehow, through a roommate, I think that my first roommates were not from the Art Institute. They were people that I moved out of that Roosevelt University dorm with. And so they were either at Roosevelt or at some other area school that didn't have its own dorms. The Art Institute didn't have its own then, and they do now. I met other people through them.

SS: So where did you go? Did you go to Marilyn's?

CC: No, I didn't know that place. I went to – oh, shoot. What was the name of this place on –

SS: His and Hers?

CC: The Swan Club.

SS: Oh, the Swan Club.

CC: I remember His and Hers. But I went to the Swan Club. And I went to Augie & C.K.'s.

SS: Oh yes.

CC: Yes, that was fun. I remember going dancing there, late nights, lots of times. Eventually a place called Paris Dance opened, on the North Side. It was really a very different style than Swan Club or Augie & C.K.'s. Those were places with pool tables; racially and socioeconomically mixed groups, I would say. Paris was more, I don't know, suburban. My crowd, we never went on the weekends; we never went on Saturday night, when it was full of girls from the suburbs. We went there on weeknights. And it had glass block, and tasteful pastel lighting. But I knew this crowd of people who were law students, and others who went there, and I hung out with them.

Maybe it was nice to have another circle. And some of them were more politically active than people that I knew at the Art Institute. I don't recall people that I knew at the Art Institute being wildly politically active. There were certainly things that happened. There were exhibitions, say, fundraisers for groups that were against U.S. intervention in Central America and so on. People would give work to those kinds of benefits, exhibitions and things. Like I remember being involved in things like that.

Oh, but I forgot something. In, I think, 1980 — so the first summer I think that I was in Chicago — Judy Chicago's Dinner Party was displayed, in a warehouse or something, in the South Loop. There were all these exhibitions of young women artists. I think I had some drawings in one of those shows. That was probably the first time anything I had done was publicly exhibited. And that was just really exciting to see. Now I laugh about it — you know, Judy Chicago's Dinner Party

– which I think we can make all kinds of critical arguments with. But it was a piece that certainly had – it was a historical phenomenon, right? And it was a little nexus for other things. I do remember now, looking back at that; I remember meeting other women, and other queer women, at the Art Institute who were involved in that. I think that that helped me feel at home there; that this idea of being an art student – not necessarily an artist, right? I didn't really come out with much of a career myself. It was fine for me. But it really helped me envision that I was in an art community and participating as an art student during that time.

SS: So when did you move to New York?

CC: 1987.

SS: Okay. So you were in Chicago until 1987.

CC: Yes, my job at the Art Institute during those years; I ran the visiting artists program, the first two years, in a big office of public information and programming. And then the person who led that office left, and they divided us all up, and I ended up as director, at like age 24, or 3, or something, of this visiting artists program. Which I was really proud of. We did a lot. We wrote grants to the Illinois Arts Council; whatever the Municipal Arts Council was called in Chicago, I forget. And really enhanced it, in terms of funding. We ended up with – it may not sound like much now, but a budget well over a hundred thousand dollars, to spend on bringing people in. And that was loads of fun. So I spent my last couple of years in Chicago taking people out to dinner. We would invite artists from New York.

Or I'd come to New York, a couple, three times a year, and usually stay at Lyn and Kate's loft; and do studio visits, meet people that we wanted to bring to Chicago to do either just lectures, or participate in conferences, or do short-term residencies.

I think one of the most influential things that happened to me there was we did a short-term kind of residency with Craig Owens. And he came several times throughout a semester, and held these long, intensive classes. And I took the class, but having arranged his visit, I also got to have that kind of contact with him, and –

Oh, Tom Kalin was a graduate student while I had this job. And he was actually my graduate assistant. I remember interviewing him for that post, he told me he was the youngest of 11 children. I was just so impressed with how quick he was, and how he was such a great talker. And like I said, I was always pretty shy in the social part of all of this was a little bit difficult to me, and I thought, this is the guy I need to work with.

So Tom and I just had a great time, taking to dinner, taking to lunch, going to several lectures every week in the visiting artists program.

Tom moved to New York a little bit before me, in '87, to go to the Whitney Independent Study Program. And he stayed. I moved – I want to say, in the fall of '87. And I worked freelance, as a consultant, I guess they paid me as, but as a personal assistant to Lyn Blumenthal, working on the publicity for the Video Data Bank's home video series, Women – I can't think of the name of the – *What Does She*

Want. It was called *What Does She Want*. It was a series of six VHS tapes that compiled feminist video art. Then there was one volume of it that was interviews with Christine Choy, Nancy Spero, Yvonne Rainer – and I think Martha Rosler – I might be getting that right.

SS: Can we turn on any heat?

CC: It's gotten cold in here, hasn't it?

SS: It's really cold, yeah.

JH: Either I can do it or I can just unhook —

CC: Maybe you should unhook me

SS: Don't do it up there. Don't do it up there. You can just unplug there.

CC: It was so warm in here earlier, I turned it down. It seems like it's either one or off.

JH: What? You want another one?

CC: Okay, that should go on.

SS: Okay. Sorry I'm not a farm girl.

JH: It looks fine. Okay.

SS: Now I remember their loft – Lyn and Kate's loft, yes. So when you were in Chicago, did you become aware of AIDS on a personal level? Or did that happen when you came to New York?

CC: In Chicago. I don't remember exactly. I have one recollection, that doesn't quite make sense to me, which is there being a blood drive at the Art

00:30:00

Institute. I can remember the location like it was yesterday — second floor, cafeteria, loft — and going to donate blood. And reading the criteria – the staff were encouraged to – and reading the criteria, and thinking: I may not be eligible; and leaving the room.

Now, yesterday, in thinking about you all coming here, and having this memory, I was trying to look up online what the rules had been for the Red Cross. Everything that I found said there were never any prohibitions in the United States on lesbians donating blood.

SS: That's not true.

CC: And I couldn't believe it. I'm positive there were.

SS: We absolutely were not allowed to give blood, in the very, very earliest moment. It might be before AIDS; it might GRID to AIDS.

CC: Mm.

SS: But I remember also not being able to give blood.

CC: So there was definitely an era of that. And it wasn't that I had never heard of GRID, or AIDS, or if it was called that yet at that time. But I remember, it was startling, in a way. It was still an eye-opener about proximity of this new crisis that I'm sure I had read about in the newspaper. There were also –

The first loss that I remember experiencing is about 1986, so I was still in Chicago. And a man named Eric O'Bryant, who had worked at the School of the Art Institute as an administrator of some sort, in the dean's office, died of AIDS. I remember — I didn't know him well. But he was friends with Lyn and Kate and that

crowd, and I do remember that he was really sweet, very vivacious, a man who just brought tons of energy into a room. Suddenly, he was on leave, and wasn't at work anymore. I don't think it was very long until he died.

There were other HIV-positive people. There were friends of mine, I'm thinking of the performance artist Larry Steger especially, who I knew were HIV-positive before I left. So it was in my consciousness.

SS: What about Craig Owens? Were you –

CC: Craig, for sure. Yes. It was something that he really quite openly talked about. He was just very open in talking about it. I guess I'll tell this story.

There was a place in Chicago that he loved going to – I can't remember the name of this place, Italian place. He would always order carpaccio. And he would say, my doctor would hate, he said, I can't do this in New York, because I'm always afraid my doctor's going to walk into the same restaurant. To eat raw meat – there might be some risk of – whatever one is at risk for, eating sushi or other raw meat. And he would say, but here, I am safe, I can do what I want; I have no regrets. And that was always funny to me, that he had this kind of gallows humor, and an appetite for all kinds of things. He wanted to – he took care of himself. I don't know if I believe that – did he take care of himself? I don't know. He still smoked. He was really a wonderful and brilliant man. I didn't keep in touch with him very well once I moved to New York, and I always felt that that was really my loss. He was always very open and very friendly whenever I would see him. I think

00:35:00 the last time I saw him was at Lyn Blumenthal's memorial service. I think he was pretty sick by then.

SS: Okay, so you're in New York; Lyn is dying.

CC: Well, Lyn died very suddenly. It was really very unexpected. I had worked for her for six or eight months, and then I went to work at Printed Matter, the nonprofit artists' bookstore. She had a heart attack. She wasn't in great health. But there was no sign of something happening like that.

SS: She didn't have cancer?

CC: No, she didn't.

SS: Oh, okay, I didn't realize that.

CC: No.

SS: Okay.

CC: No, she died suddenly. So I'm sorry, I interrupted you.

SS: So how did you first hear about ACT UP? Because you come right at the time when ACT UP is founded.

CC: Yes. Tom Kalin, I think, had gotten involved very soon after coming here. Because being at the Whitney program, I think, he immediately met a lot of other people who were in overlapping circle there. I'm pretty sure that Tom is the one who told me about ACT UP. When I moved to New York, there were people that I knew, like Lyn and Kate — maybe a few other people — but I think that there was a lot of that period that was also, for me, about like making a new social circle,

and new alliances, and meeting new people. The woman that I was living with at the time, I moved to New York with, Bea Hanson. Do you remember her?

SS: Sure, of course.

CC: She works in Washington now. I think for both of us, that that was a time about meeting new people. She was doing tenant organizing in the North Bronx, and she went on to work at the Gay and Lesbian Antiviolence Project. And we met, right off the bat, we met Hilery Kipnis and Christine Rico. I forget who the connection to them was. But Hilery was in Testing the Limits Collective; and Gregg Bordowitz was too, and through them, I think, I met Jean Carlomusto, who became a very close friend of mine. I think it was through – maybe even through Jean, more than Tom, that I decided that I would go to a Monday-night ACT UP meeting at the Center, and see what that was all about.

SS: So what happened?

CC: Well – uh –

SS: When was that? When did you come to ACT UP?

CC: I really don't remember. But – I can't say that I can distinguish the first time that I went. I wish I had a story. It was just the way that you asked the question, because it is – it really was a phenomenal experience, going into that room, of, what, three, four hundred people, crowded into that common room on the first floor of the Center. The physical warmth of it, I remember that. It didn't matter what season it was, right, it was always warm in there. The energy in that room was very seductive, in many ways.

I remember often feeling like a kind of fly at the wall, at those meetings; but really loving the take-charge power of so many people who were there. I think, by the time that I walked into it, there was already a kind of established group there who were frequently at the front of the room, speaking. There were a lot of affinity groups that had already taken shape. I remember just kind of hanging back, sort of lurking, for awhile.

There were other things that I had tried to do to find something that was my own, to get involved with people. One of those funny things also involved the Center. I remember someone recommended volunteering for some lesbian hotline. It had a little room, a little teeny closet, back on the first floor of the Center. And I volunteered, and got training. It was really not a great experience, I didn't keep doing it. Ninety-nine percent of the — in evening, several hours of volunteering, and you'd get maybe three phone calls. All three of which were pranks of various kinds. It didn't seem like the greatest use of my volunteer time, shall I say.

And ACT UP was a complete opposite of that, right? Because there were just hundreds of people there, and there was such incredible dynamism and this excess of leadership. But I also remember feeling very lost in that room. At first, I would go in, and maybe say hello to a few people that I knew who were there — Jean, Tom, those people — or maybe it'd be too crowded, and I would stay over by the doorway, and I think I'd leave without doing much.

00:40:00

And I slowly got to know more of the women, probably through Jean's crowd. I remember going to the teach-in, Women and AIDS teach-in, just as a

spectator. I wasn't involved in planning that. And that was what the ACT UP women's caucus had created this Women and AIDS handbook for — this says, March 1989. My name's not on this list; I wasn't involved then. But I went. And I remember, at the end of the day, people saying, we'd like to turn this into more of a publication, we'd like to continue working with this material. But that some people were going to be moving out of that caucus, or working on other issues. And if there were people there who wanted to work on this, to come on up. And I remember going up, and introducing myself to some people, some of the women who were there, because I thought, this is something that I can do. If they need writing skills and editing skills and organizing skills on this, I can do.

I had never written a book or edited a book, but I'd been writing art criticism for *Afterimage*. I'd written for *High Performance*, and a few other things. I felt confident that this was something that I could do. I think I'd been doing some proofreading on the side for money, freelance. This was very manageable to me. Whereas I think some of the ACT UP activities were intimidating to me.

I went to big demonstrations. I remember going to the Stop the Church demonstration, and I went to Target City Hall. There were others; I would always go to the big demonstrations, and march. But we can get back to the police chief's daughter story here, I guess. I was never comfortable getting arrested. I felt like that was a difficult thing for me to face doing. As much as I felt that civil disobedience was a really important part of ACT UP's practice in that time, it was hard for me to find a way in to that practice. We can talk more about that if you want.

But this was doable for me! I could easily visualize this, and it was a manageable number of people. I understood what they wanted and what it was about so I started attending those meetings.

SS: Okay, so who were the people that you were working with on this project?

CC: Monica Pearl was, in many ways, a central force, and partly because we held almost all of the meetings at her apartment. She lived really close to the Center — I forget if her place was on 12th or 13th Street — I remember the interior of it really well. It was a small place, but because it was so centrally located, we frequently met there.

Polly Thistlethwaite was not, maybe, one of the core people, but she did research for us and with us, and actually, I think, did write or cowrite a chapter or two; I could look at the table of contents again. She and I became great friends. And moving back to New York several years ago, then she and I are very close.

So Monica, Alexis Danzig, Kim Christensen, Risa Denenberg, Marion Banzhof, Rachel Lurie, now Sam Lurie, Amy Bauer — Jamie — Zoe Leonard.

SS: Who's Jamie?

CC: I heard that Amy goes by Jamie now.

SS: Really? Okay, I didn't know that. Sorry. Okay.

CC: That just what's — Who else? Kim Christensen, I said. Kim was someone who I think had gone to Earlham College, so there was another Richmond connection. Zoe Leonard; Catherine Saalfield-Gund. That was more of

the core. Oh, Gerri Wells, and Brigitte [Weil] — who was her partner at the time; what was her name? She baked for Dean & DeLuca. I'd have to put on my glasses. We'll think of her name.

SS: Okay.

CC: That's a lot of the core group.

SS: We've interviewed every one of those people except Brigitte, so we have to get to Brigitte.

CC: Okay, ha ha.

SS: So there was no one who was HIV-positive in the group. So how did you deal with that?

00:45:00 CC: There were a lot of people invited to contribute to the book. In fact, in looking at it again this week, I was really pleased with that. I had forgotten how many people were invited to come in. Kat Doud; Iris de la Cruz; Cynthia Acevedo; who else is in here? Some of the women at ACE, the AIDS Counseling and Education Group at Bedford Hills Correctional. There were HIV-positive women among the people who contributed.

I don't know that we saw that as a problem. There were many ways in which the core group was not a very diverse group. That's a fact.

SS: So can you explain for the modern audience, since this is before the Internet; how did you do the research?

CC: It's unfathomable, isn't it? I was thinking about that, even in looking over some of these other things that I pulled out yesterday to look at; things

that I had written. Thinking about the writing that I had done kind of around this period about, like before *Afterimage*, about Gregg's film *Fast Track Long Drop*, and so on. And thinking: where did I get this information? How did I do that?

Now, so many of the statistics — CDC statistics, New York City Health Department statistics — these are the things that we would look up online. But there was a lot of time spent at libraries, I believe.

SS: So what did you do? How did you do your research?

CC: A lot of the work that I did was, I would say that a lot of the work that I did was editing. And part of the work that I did was, I remember working on, say, the transmission issues chapter. For that chapter, there had been a core version of it in the initial handbook. And a lot of the work in the finished product of the book was adapted from it, and updated. And I believe that we went, we gathered information, there were lots of brochures being put out by GMHC, by a lot of other groups, and we would gather that information and talk to people in those groups. And so a lot of it was first-hand, talking to people who seemed like the most knowledgeable in the areas. And there was library research and there was finding stuff in newspapers, looking at microfilm. And the thought is nauseating, right? Spinning through those old microfilm viewers for newspaper articles that helped us track changing statistics as they were covered in the news.

That's what comes to mind, offhand. But there was a lot of talking to other individuals.

SS: Well, let's talk it through. Okay, so the book is called *Women*

—

CC: AIDS and Activism.

SS: *Women, AIDS and Activism.* So let's look at the table of contents. So what were the pressing issues for women with HIV at the time?

CC: Well, one of the most pressing issues, I think, you know, one of the things that I recall, and from skimming the book this morning again remembered as being really pivotal issues, was underdiagnosis, misdiagnosis, and late diagnosis, for women, because of official designations of what constituted ARC or what constituted AIDS, as involving opportunistic infections that primarily affected men; that dis-included gynecological issues that obviously wouldn't have affected men, but that were rampant among women with HIV, and could be debilitating, but just weren't qualifying them for the kinds of diagnosis that they needed to get treatment or other kinds of benefits.

So the definition of AIDS, and how that definition excluded so many women for whom diagnoses seemed like a really big issue; I think that that was one of the most important things; discussions of that.

Now, that eventually did change, and I don't remember what year that the CDC's definition changed gradually, so that more women were counted.

There was also I think that one of the issues was to write about transmission issues in a sex-positive way; to be a counter-voice, counter-discourse, to

00:50:00 all of the pro-abstinence discourse that was rampant, coming out of more-

conservative organizations, or from governmental health sources, or community-based organizations. This was a group that didn't want to buy into an idea that long-term, monogamous partnering was going to save you from worrying about transmission.

It's funny; I just saw somewhere about a float in the Rose Bowl parade, with a gay-marriage theme. I'm not sure who sponsored this – gay-rights organization? The banner on it was something like, "Love Keeps You Safe." Implying – and that a couple got married on this float, two men got married on this float, during the Rose Bowl. And implying that you would be safe from HIV, I presume. The sentence wasn't finished, right? Safe from what, right? If you were married.

This just seemed – in 2014, it's just annoying to see how pervasive that is; or maybe even has resurged, with the warm embrace that is rolling out for same-sex marriage.

I think part of the sex-positive tone; the idea of, embracing the idea that you could, you didn't have to be monogamous; you didn't have to practice abstinence; you could be sexually active; you could be sexually active with known HIV-positive partners; you could be sexually active with anonymous partners, and do so safely.

So that rhetoric was really important to this group.

SS: Now what year was this book published?

CC: 1990.

SS: Okay, now, one of the issues that I recall from that era was that women were being positioned as vectors of infection.

CC: To children.

SS: To everybody. Female sex workers were considered dangerous to male johns, even though there was actually very little female-to-male transmission at the time.

CC: Um hm.

SS: So there was this crackdown on prostitution, which was an inversion of what the actual reality was.

CC: Um hm.

SS: Then there was, yes, women as vectors of infection towards children, born and unborn –

CC: Yes.

SS: – instead of being seen as people with AIDS who had needs. So I think that this book was one of the first – was probably the only book that actually challenged that whole conceptualization of women as people who gave AIDS to men.

CC: Yes, I think that the idea of emphasizing the fact that women who had HIV needed rights and treatment, and care of all kinds, and legal protections, unto themselves, right, that they were subjects that counted; that it wasn't just their unborn or potential unborn children that needed thinking about. So that that was absolutely very important, because the only way – you're right, Sarah, that women

appeared in so many, say, mainstream news articles about AIDS was as a vector, either to children – and exactly, the idea that in mainstream discourse about HIV at the time, that when it suited the agenda of whoever was speaking, to say that prostitutes were dangerous because they would be transmitting HIV to otherwise-innocent males who then would be bringing it home to their innocent wives; that there was this kind of evil emanating from prostitutes in that way.

But when it served the agenda, those same sources would say; oh, women can't get AIDS, and women are very unlikely to get AIDS. It was so messed up. It was so agenda-driven, it was so ideological, it was so non-fact-based – so much of what was appearing. I think that this was an attempt to sort that out, and just to treat women as subjects that deserved to be spoken about in their own right, without –

SS: That's ironic, because when we interviewed Marion, she gave us a really detailed history of how people like herself, who had come from the feminist women's healthcare movement literally taught men in ACT UP this idea of the patient as the person who should be controlling the treatment. But that had come from feminist healthcare. But then, the women who were infected or who were at risk for infection or were at risk for persecution — because they were in a social sector where that ideology was not present, or they didn't have access to power. And then you had certain leaders, like Iris de la Cruz, who you mentioned earlier, who was a sex worker and came from PONY, Prostitutes of New York; who was trying to turn around that paradigm –

CC: Yes.

SS: – only the problem that we’re in now is that every woman with HIV in ACT UP, with the exception of Marina Alvarez, are dead.

CC: Yes.

SS: So here we are, and we can’t interview them. And their role as leaders, in trying to turn around these paradigms, is really only if we tell the story. Because they’re not here to tell the story.

CC: Yes.

SS: And in terms of the people from ACE, we’ve tried to get into Bedford Hills to interview Judy Clark, and we can’t get in. So any stories that you have about working with the people who contributed to this volume: did you edit anybody’s work who was HIV-positive?

CC: I remember, yes, working on those articles, but not having an enormous amount of contact with those women. A lot of those pieces came to us – first of all, in pretty good shape, as I recall, and didn’t need a lot of work, and there wasn’t a lot of back-and-forth.

SS: Because Iris wrote that column for PWA Newsline, “Iris With the Virus.” So she was writing quite a bit.

CC: Yes.

SS: What is her piece in the book?

CC: Her piece here – oh, it’s an excerpt; excerpt from “Sex, Drugs, Rock and Roll, and AIDS.” With this great picture of her, by Zoe. So this is an

excerpt – a kind of memoirish excerpt, about her experiences as a prostitute, going right up to her AIDS diagnosis. What I recall is her basically just giving it to us. And that there wasn't a lot of back-and-forth, there wasn't a lot of her being present in the group.

The contribution that came from the women at Bedford Hills; again, I remember it being Kim Christenson, but I could be wrong about that.

SS: Maybe Debbie Levine; I'm not sure.

CC: And maybe Debbie. I wanted to say Marion, but I think it's more Kim and Debbie, who had some connection to them, maybe went up there once. They mailed the piece. And there was very little other contact.

SS: And who are the names of the people from ACE?

CC: I don't think that there are names given.

SS: Okay.

CC: Actually, there are, in the essay, now that I think about it, [page] 143. The authors of this essay are: Kathy Boudin, Judy Clark, Dee (obviously not a real name), Katrina Haslip. I remember her.

SS: Yes, she died.

CC: I know. Maria D.L. Hernandez, Suzanne Kessler, Sonia Perez, Deborah Plunkett, Aida Rivera, Doris Romeo, Carmen Royster — I remember her, too — Cathy Salce, Renee Scott, Jenny Serrano, and Pearl Ward.

SS: Okay, so we can look for some of those people, and see if they're around to be interviewed.

01:00:00 CC: Yes. I wonder if Jean knows the whereabouts of any of them. It seems like in some of the work that she's done subsequently – but when you talk to her. But there wasn't a lot of back-and-forth. When I say that this is a problem in that group — now I'm asking questions myself — I don't know. On one hand I think that that group — in the finished product, that there is a kind of inclusion of a multiplicity of voices — not disagreeing voices; I don't mean a debate-style cacophony — but that there's the invitation from people to participate in this project; that there was a strong sense that that group that we had, of the eight, dozen, 15 or so, evolving, core people who would meet at Monica's apartment, was not a complete group — I think that there was total awareness of that — and that for this book to be useful, even as a snapshot of its time — as the statistics would go out of date and the treatment protocols would change, and new problems would arise — that even for it to be a great record of that moment, that we needed all of those other voices.

SS: You know, it's interesting. Because even when we interview men from the Latino caucus, they never mention any of those women, even though they were in the Latino caucus. There's something about those women that they were ethereal presences in ACT UP, to everybody.

CC: It seems like there's a few. Like in reading some of the transcripts, which are just wonderful; not so much from the Latino caucus. But there are a few women who get mentioned. But it's Maria Maggenti, maybe Deb Levine, or a few white women who were very active over a long period of time who get mentioned; but that women who were active in particular caucuses and women who

were active in caucuses that were defined by racial and ethnic identity were – I don't see their names a lot. It's true.

This has been a criticism of the larger group forever, right? The marginalization of most people of color. I don't have a problem saying that it happened again in this group.

Maybe, in a way, it speaks to me — talk about a snapshot of a moment in history — about a certain kind of privilege that those of us who could do this kind of work had. I don't necessarily mean economic privilege; most of us, not all of us, but most of us were living pretty paycheck to paycheck at not-for-profit jobs, right? But we had leisure time that we could devote to doing these kinds of things. We were young; and we had jobs –

SS: Plus it was a different economy.

CC: It was a very different economy. I was trying to remember whether it was '87 or '88 that I moved to New York, and I actually found my lease from that time. Bea and I paid under \$700 a month for a two-bedroom apartment in Williamsburg.

SS: And that was a gentrification rent.

CC: Yes.

SS: That was a high rent.

CC: That was a high rent.

SS: Yes, that's right.

CC: Yes, that was a fixed-up place; it was a beautiful apartment. And I paid \$550 for an apartment on Clinton Street, just south of Houston, then in 1992, I think. And it seemed like so much money.

SS: Well the only thing about this group is that at that time, all of those people were lesbians, I think; almost everybody.

CC: Um hm.

SS: So there was a whole social element, right, and a whole social bonding and all of that.

CC: Yes.

SS: So in a way, you situated yourself within the lesbian subculture of ACT UP.

CC: Yes, yes.

SS: Can you tell us a little bit about that? What was that like?

CC: Well, was a lot of fun. The kind of magnetic pull of a social scene was really part of why people were there. I don't think that that contradicts the agenda of wanting to work on something that was meaningful politically. And that's what I was trying to say a minute ago about the kind of privilege that we had.

We had these little jobs – maybe I didn't have health insurance for many years, or a pension plan, or anything like that; but I made enough money that I could pay rent and that I had time. I didn't have to work a second job. None of us had kids to support, right? We could spend our evenings doing projects like this, and going to meetings, and we could go to demonstrations, and the getting-arrested thing.

People felt very safe getting arrested, that this wouldn't forestall future plans that they had for their lives. They didn't have previous criminal records that they were concerned about adding on to, for any reason. That takes a little bit of privilege, I think. Whereas a lot of the women, some of the women, I think, the HIV-positive women, had direct health concerns; they had children to support; they were involved
01:05:00 in many organizations, caring for other people.

So I think there are real material reasons why it was easy for us to do this.

SS: Well, ACT UP was a coalition.

CC: Yes.

SS: So there were all different kinds of people –

CC: Yes.

SS: – doing all different kinds of activities at the same time.

CC: But there weren't necessarily all kinds of people doing this activity, and all kinds of people doing that activity, right? There were many splinters.

So what was that scene like?

Well, I think that part of what this group, for me, served was this great social network, or access to this great social network. You learned a lot about a topic; time was meaningfully spent, productively spent, doing something that we hoped would be helpful to people; and we got to be really good friends, and we had a lot of fun together.

It was — ask me another question about the social scene.

SS: We'll get back to it, because I want to ask you something else.

So when did AIDS actually enter your life? I mean, here you are; you were in this female sector — HIV-negative female sector — but you're surrounded by all these guys, many of whom have HIV. So when did it really become like something present in your personal life?

CC: Well, as I said, there were gay men that I had known at the Art Institute, one of whom I remember dying when I was there; and others who knew that they were HIV-positive. So it was present. And increasingly then, after I came to New York. And there were – well, Craig Owens died in 1990, I believe. That seemed very early to me. That was a huge loss. Like I said, I hadn't kept in good touch with him after I had come to New York.

SS: But what about inside ACT UP?

CC: Inside ACT UP?

The first death that I remember inside ACT UP was David Kirschenbaum, who had worked at the Gay and Lesbian Antiviolence Project. I didn't know David super-well; but Bea worked with him at the Antiviolence Project. And Robert Vasquez-Pacheco. They were all very close. I remember David getting sick very, very suddenly. He was at work, and suddenly, they were all just really, really shaken. He had actually, if I remember the story correctly, had been tested. I don't know if there were – there are false positives in those kinds of tests, are there false negatives? He had been told that he was HIV-negative and it was wrong.

I remember one story, that maybe even his test results were later discovered to have been mixed up with someone – something horrible like that happened. And so he had gone, and maybe he could have gotten earlier intervention in his healthcare. But that he just suddenly became very, very sick. I remember he had KS. We went to visit him in the hospital. He was a different person, over a matter of weeks. That was shocking. I think it was '93 when he died.

So there was a gap between him and Craig, and there must have been other people that I knew. But I didn't know them well. I mostly was very close with these women, who, as you said, were HIV-negative.

SS: Can we pause for a second?

CC: Sure.

[Shot of cover of *Women, AIDs and Activism* and picture of Iris De La Cruz]

SS: Robert Hilferty and I visited her in NYU. So now I want to go into your role as a scholar.

CC: Okay.

SS: I know that your main specialization is not AIDS video. But early on, you wrote a great deal about AIDS video.

CC: Yes.

01:10:00

SS: So when you look back, in hindsight, I mean – it's really hard to explain to people now, where there's too much video in the world –

SS: – and it's too easy to make –

CC: Yes.

SS: – what the emergence of that work was like. Is there a way that you can help people understand it historically?

CC: Part of it is – Well, sometimes when I teach the history of television class, I try to do a couple of units on experimental work, and non-network television, non-commercial television work. It is very difficult for students to understand what they consider to be very low production values. For example, if you show some William Wegman videos, figuring, oh, you know, everybody loves the Weimaraners, the dog, everybody loves that, right? It's so hard for them to fathom, because they can achieve higher production values, in a certain way, with their cell-phone cameras. And the kind of gravity of experimental work in video is frequently lost on them.

When I teach that class, for example, I try to talk about the hugeness of equipment and the size of tape; that magnetic tape hasn't always been with us, right? And the shrinking formats, and the Portapak being something that weighed, you know, 35, 40 pounds, and multiple pieces of equipment that you'd have to carry around.

One of the things that I've used that I think has been pretty effective is TVTV's *Four More Years*. That collective's work at the Republican National Convention in '72; they also did a tape at the Super Bowl one year. That, where they go in and they interview not just delegates — Nixon delegates and so on — but they also interview journalists. You can see them carrying the equipment around. You know that their equipment is considered portable and inexpensive, relative to the

cameras that are there from the networks. And it makes really visible, I think, what we're talking about.

But also, it's difficult for them to take in because it's ancient history, right? This is so long ago, and this is what they would see as a problem that's been solved, right, through the ubiquity, the too-muchness now, of video.

When I've done that unit, I've used something like the Top Value Television, TVTV work; and *Target City Hall*, which I've always found – the rhythm of it, to be really accessible to a group that doesn't know much about ACT UP, that doesn't know much about AIDS activism. And partially because it shows people about, say, the decision-making process of committing an act of civil disobedience; that you get those kind of beautiful moments where the affinity groups are voting on whether it's time to take the street or not, and there's discussion about what they're doing. There's this joy in that morning, of being out on the street. It shows how these things were planned; that those acts are not chaotic or accidental; and how people worked together. You can see how much people in the affinity groups care about each other and are having fun with each other and really love each other, and are excited to be there. Then it goes into the street and the footage becomes appropriately more chaotic and physical. There's a lot of intentional and unintentional camera movement as then people start to be arrested. And then there's the discussion afterwards, about what happened when people were taken to be processed.

01:15:00 So I like that one because it's sort of an insider's view that just seems very successful. And in fact always, when that Melanie song comes on – I've burst into tears so many times in classes when I have used that. I don't know why; just the conflation of the energy of that moment – how certain songs that you could hear, I don't know, anywhere, and they wouldn't mean anything; but in that context, I always find it just exceedingly emotional. That tape stands up really, really well to that kind of audience, to the ones that I have in school.

SS: Can I ask you a question about the technology?

CC: Um hm.

SS: You brought up this really interesting point about the Portapaks, and how heavy they were. And there was something about all that technology that required people to work together.

CC: Yes, good point.

SS: Because they needed people to carry things.

CC: Yes.

SS: And now, everyone works alone.

CC: Yes.

SS: Now, does that change the meaning of what's produced?

CC: Well, I think it does. On one hand, though, I want to say, you guys aren't alone. I don't think that the cell phone video is our, is that developed of a genre yet. It might be ubiquitous, but I don't know that we've seen that many examples of people doing that much with it. I don't know, just off the top of my

head. I think that a lot of the best work that's being done, from student work to other kinds of independent work, is still done in teams. But just the bulk of that equipment – I like that image. I think that the ease at which people can work solo is a problem, in a certain kind of way; this belief in doing everything yourself. I hear, from my colleagues who teach production, that lighting is something that's very frustrating to students. I think it's hard for them to learn; they have to devote themselves to it in particular kinds of ways; and it's something that they think they can avoid learning, by always shooting in daylight, by finding perfect conditions, instead of making good lighting conditions for their work. Because they expect to be able to work on their own, right? Rather than, bring in enough equipment to do a shoot in a professional way.

So there's an insistence on – I see that, I guess, that people think they should be able to do everything on their own, and they sacrifice a lot, and I think that it probably shows in the work.

But just think of all of those collectives: Testing the Limits; the way that Jean and Gregg worked together and worked with other people — Alex Juhasz and other people, to do the *Living with AIDS* public access series — other collectives of that – the Video Freaks, the TVTV people. We could go on forever about that. But that kind of collective; I don't know; are people still working in that manner? Not that I'm observing. There must be, somewhere in the world, people working in those kinds of collectives, in terms of decision-making and authorship and vision. I don't see that as being quite so pervasive. I see solo-credited authorial claims, by

people who are writer/directors of independent pieces. I don't see collectives as being a primary mode. Maybe that's a snapshot-in-history kind of thing.

SS: Well, let me ask you another one of those questions. So an ACT UP video; they were able to feed video to networks.

CC: Yes.

SS: Right? So because they were using this early technology well, they were able to infiltrate mainstream media. Now, with millions of people having access, unless you've got something really exceptional that caught on your cell phone, you really cannot penetrate mainstream media.

CC: Right.

SS: Because there are so many people trying to, or there are so many different feeders.

CC: Yes. There's a glut –

SS: Yes, that's what I mean –

CC: – there's a glut of footage. And while CNN.com or whatever are always asking, send us your really great cell phone footage; where does it appear? Usually in things like floods, tornados. So you've got people tempted, through the promise of getting your footage on the air –

SS: But also revolution.

CC: Yes. Well, this is the other example, right, of hanging out near tornados. But I don't know. In the case of something like the Arab Spring events; the footage – yes, some of that footage makes it. I don't know, I guess I'm assuming

that a lot of that stuff is not so much somebody who's just standing there and then happened to send it to a network; but people who went out to shoot video in order to send it. So maybe – I don't know, that would be interesting to know more about. I don't know enough about that.

SS: Okay.

CC: But those are places – yes, the incidents of Arab Spring, or any kind of demonstration; I mean, now, it's so commonplace it just seems absolutely typical. Things like the antiwar demonstrations of several years, that you've got to have your own media there, right, to document, in case there are cases of police brutality. I mean, this was well established, I'm sure, long before ACT UP, and it was part of the ACT UP tradition, it was part of why cameras were there, right? Not simply to create a document that could be used later in educating people about civil disobedience, bringing people into AIDS activism, creating a historical record; but also having a camera there to document in case there were incidents of police brutality.

But this is really commonplace. I'm losing my train of thought on this. Let's go back.

SS: Okay. So I guess let's go back to ACT UP for a minute. So after you worked on this project — and do you remember how South End Press became the publisher of the book?

CC: I think that Kim Christenson knew someone there, and talked to them about it. It was very easy for them to take it on, in part because ACT UP

partially financed this project. I remember the vote on the ACT UP floor. People presented about the project, and an allocation was made.

SS: How much money? Do you remember?

CC: It was at least 10; it might have been 15,000 dollars. And a lot of that money went directly to South End to pay printing costs. It was seen as keeping the cost down. The book retailed for seven dollars, which even then was considered quite heavily subsidized. It maybe should have been a 15-dollar book. Because ACT UP paid for it and didn't expect royalties and compensation or anything, they made it very cheap.

SS: Do you know how many copies were in circulation?

CC: I want to say 3,000 they printed. In the little bit of paperwork that I have left – I think that when I left New York in 1996 that I gave a stack of a few files to Lesbian Herstory Archives. So there may be an actual number there, but I want to say 3,000.

SS: It's interesting, because the official ACT UP collection is at the New York Public Library.

CC: Yes.

SS: However, there is an enormous amount of ACT UP material at the Lesbian Herstory Archives. So I hope if anyone is out there studying ACT UP, they know to go to the Lesbian Herstory Archives, and not just the library.

CC: Yes.

SS: So after this project, what else did you work on?

CC: Mostly just going to big demos. I didn't do another big project. I wasn't a member of another affinity group. This was really my ACT UP project.

SS: What was it like to be in ACT UP and be in a couple?

CC: Back to the social scene. We had fun. I remember going to lots of parties, and going to the Clit Club, with Bea. It was a great place. Those were great places for us to hang out.

I don't think that that was a problem, in a way. I remember some people talking about how they felt that this was supposed to be this place where it was very easy to, in the current vernacular, hook up. And they didn't always find that. But you know, I think those things are so individually driven. People had all different kinds of experiences. There were women that I knew who had lots of sexual encounters, lots of new lovers that they met during that time period, in ACT UP and in other groups around it, both men and women; and there were people who were in couples, and there were people who weren't so sexually active. It was mixed.

SS: What was the difference between the women who wanted to work with other women primarily and women who wanted to work with men, or who worked with men? How did you understand that? How did you understand that then – how do you think about it now?

01:25:00

CC: At the time, it seemed very logical to me that there was a group of women in ACT UP that was interested in making sure that ACT UP had an expanded agenda; that while the theme of those people say, "drugs into bodies," and working on hastening approval protocols, access to experimental drugs; that that was a really

important part of what ACT UP did, no question. But a lot of the women that I knew — maybe, Risa and Marion, I'm thinking of; people who came with history in feminist health — that they brought a kind of skepticism about working directly with the NIH and the CDC, and thinking that big pharmaceutical companies and the mainstream medical establishment were here to help us; they were very suspicious of that.

It seemed to me that the women in ACT UP that I was learning from and getting to know that their agenda was to make sure that there was a kind of broad-spectrum discussion about the institutions that we were going to the table with; that we, meaning ACT UP largely, were going to the table with. That there was a place to talk about alternative treatments, and about problems like the definition of AIDS excluding women's opportunistic infections. So that they worked very hard, and sometimes from the margins, to make sure that ACT UP was not solely focused on questions that were articulated in a way that they only served middle-class white gay men.

SS: Okay. So that was how it was viewed then.

CC: Yes.

SS: So let me say something, and you can disagree with me.

There's also a protection from the suffering functioning in that way inside ACT UP. Which is not bad or good. Right? Because it's like bringing Lesbian Nation into the middle of ACT UP, and staying there –

CC: Um hm.

SS: – and a lot of T&D, although there were women in it, was primarily a boys’ club, and there was a lot more suffering in that circle. I don’t think that was a motive, but it was an insulated experience.

CC: It was a more academic experience. It was – service-oriented, in a way. I can see that, that the kind of insulation, and – even the way that I’m describing this group; it feels very much like I’m describing a service project, right? Not a, we’re-fighting-for-our-own-lives project. And again, it was a coalition; there were people there for all kinds of reasons, who were impacted directly and indirectly, in all kinds of different ways and all kinds of different degrees. But I think it was a different emotional experience.

In 1992, I think, my friend Larry, in Chicago, and I proposed co-teaching a class about AIDS and representation at the Art Institute of Chicago. It didn’t happen. I found the course proposal yesterday. It looked great. Big bibliography. I think we had a good idea. He and I had all these conversations about how would we teach such a class. He was, at the time, running one of the student galleries. He had put together a show — I want to say 1989, but I’m not really sure — called Public/Private, which was – like a lot of places: Artist Space, maybe White Columns, had done shows about AIDS and AIDS activism. But Larry did a show that was all HIV-positive artists. I think that his interest in teaching that class really came out of that experience. We put this thing together and like I said, it didn’t happen. It was funny, because we had clearly communicated by fax. I had these photocopies of faxes and in one of my notes to him, I said, sorry I missed your phone call, I was at an

01:30:00 ACT UP meeting tonight. It was announced on the floor that Bob Rafsky died and it was super-intense. I go on, and write several sentences to Larry about the trauma in the room that night.

I don't remember this night at all. I know who Bob Rafsky was; I can visualize him easily. I remember maybe having a few exchanges with him. He was not a close friend or anything.

But talk about emotionally insulating, right? Something happened in my mind — I'm happy to admit this — that something happened that was so intense that night that I was writing about it in a fax to my friend about this collaborative project. And yet, I don't remember that evening at all.

I think that we do that sometimes when emotion is too great; that we step back, in all kinds of different ways. I think that around that time — so '93 — there were, a lot of people who had been involved stepped back in various ways.

Do you remember what year ACT UP moved from the Center to Cooper Union?

JAMES WENTZY: Probably '91.

JIM HUBBARB: Yes, it was '91,'92.

CC: Okay. I think that there were people who felt less involved at that time. I remember, I went, but my attendance became much more sporadic. And even though I wasn't a mover and shaker, I wasn't a leader, I found it enormously valuable to go to those meetings. I always assumed that if I kept going, that even though this project was done, and this group had dispersed in many ways, that I would find

another group that I could jump in with, that I would feel comfortable, that I felt suited my temperament and my skill set. I would find another place to set in. There was something about the Cooper Union setting that dispersed that, right?

The heat of that crowded room at the Center gave way to this room that we never felt at Cooper Union. That room seats, what 800, close to a thousand. And there was a lot more side conversations. People would go off to different corners of the room and have their own conversations. And I always felt like an audience member there, not like a participant, or a potential participant. And it felt much less likely to me that I was going to find a place, a new place to be involved there.

SS: But also, The Split was happening. Were you aware of that?

CC: At the time – it would be hard for me to tell the story now, I think. But I think that what I recall is that a split between people with various agendas, who were working very directly with the NIH and the CDC – the Treatment Action Group and the Drugs Into Bodies people; and people who wanted to have much broader agendas, that weren't all directly related to healthcare, or were interested in all kinds of socioeconomic disadvantage, and we get all these splinters. Queer Nation comes out of that, right? Like a group that says, our primary interest is really visibility, is queer visibility. And a lot of stuff came out of that. I think people got diffused in all kinds of different ways.

I witnessed people dropping out because of grief, because it was too much for them. But I think that there was a social upheaval that was part of the same kind of – sloshing bathtub, like tablecloth being pulled out, and the dishes all getting

rearranged on the table; those kind of climate changes at the time. And lots of couples – couple that I was in broke up. People moving to different cities. And by '94, '95, a lot of people that I knew were leaving New York; people that I was close to were leaving. And eventually, by '96, by that time I was living with Suzie Silver, who had been best friends, roommates, collaborators, with Larry, in Chicago. We moved to San Diego, for me to go to graduate school, and she taught, in San Diego. And Robert Blanchon, another artist, who we had all known from Chicago, from the Art Institute, who had lived in New York; and Suzie and I were close with here – he moved to Los Angeles. And some other friends of ours, who hadn't been so active in ACT UP moved to San Francisco. But there was a lot of diffusion around that time. Monica went to England, to go to graduate school. A lot of diffusion. Zoe moved to Alaska, right, for some time?

SS: That's right.

CC: – for some time. Nancy Brooks-Brody became a firefighter in the National Parks or something.

There were people who left out of grief. There were people whose social circles were changing for other reasons. It all seemed part and parcel of the same phenomenon. But I would not exaggerate and say that I was one of those people who was experiencing burnout from grief. Yes, there was a lot of illness and death happening around me. But it was – I didn't have so many close friends.

Now later, that changed. Larry died in 1999. That was huge.

SS: What's Larry last name?

CC: Steger, S-T-E-G-E-R. Suzie and I went to Chicago several times during his illness, and spent time with him. We would stay either – my friend Joyce Fernandez, who is another lesbian that I knew at the Art Institute; we would stay with her, or we would stay at Kate Horsfield, who had a building on the same block as Joyce, actually, and hang out with Larry. His death was a huge loss to his circle in Chicago, and to us. He was someone who had been really important to me as an artist, and as just a thinker. Like I said, we had tried to propose that class together – a very close friend.

And then Robert Blanchon, he had been close with, a year later, in 2000, in Los Angeles. We were living in San Diego by that time.

And except for them – my experience at UCSD was not primarily of a queer community.

SS: It's funny; once you step out of that, AIDS becomes an idea.

CC: Yes.

SS: Yes.

CC: It was much more – and part of intellectual discussions. There were several of us in that department — I was in Communication at UCSD — and there were several of us who had some background in AIDS activism. In fact, the story that I was told is there were people on the Admissions Committee the year that I got in who had some background in AIDS activism, and they knew of the book, and saw it on my C.V., and I think that that helped me get into that graduate program. I

had a great experience there, and we had great conversations with individuals, but it wasn't, it was a very different world; a very different world.

SS: So I only have one more question. Is there anything that you think we haven't covered?

CC: Hm. Not off the top of my head. I thought that you would ask me about – I thought that you would look back to the arrest or no arrest.

SS: Oh, okay, yes. What do you want to say about that?

CC: Well, it was something that I thought about, I always thought about a lot, right? Because there was a way in which, I think, it was seen as – maybe that there was a hierarchy of ways of participating in a group like ACT UP. And I don't want to say that ACT UP was the only group like this; but that that was genuine participation. That if you were willing to get arrested – committing an act of civil disobedience was the highest form of participation, and that was very glamorized, in a certain way. And I don't –

SS: How did you get that message?

CC: How'd I get that message? Partly, I think, through expectation. I remember frequently being asked: are you going to get arrested with us? Well, why not? And kind of being coaxed, like to take the next step, you know, as if it were hierarchical. I felt like – and I guess that one of the things that I hope I've said today, or that I can clarify now, is that I believe then, and I believe now, that there are lots of different ways of participating in these kinds of groups, and that we come to them with different skill sets. I hope that, and I feel like I did, make a contribution. But we

01:40:00

don't all do the same thing, right? At the time, I guess, I always felt like one of the reasons that I was a – maybe always felt not a primetime player, right, was my fear of getting arrested. Now, looking back, I don't see that. I see these videos. Like if I watch, if I use DIVA TV, or one of the other tapes, in a class, or if I run across them for some other reason — I see these masses of people marching, in circles, or up and down the block in front of St. Patrick's Cathedral; and holding signs, and chanting. And I feel how real that was, and is; and all those bodies needed to be there. Not everybody could do every step, you know.

It's funny, because I have enormous respect for my father. He's a very conservative guy; our politics don't match up much. He – but I have an enormous amount of respect for him, in certain kinds of ways. I always felt like he was someone who didn't tolerate unprofessional behavior on the part of his police force. He was never a gun fetishist. This was some of the equipment of his work, and he wasn't in love with that aspect of the job. I never saw him be violent to anyone. And yet, I didn't trust the police.

Sometimes at demonstrations, I would think: this is so beautifully choreographed. The police know their role, right? And other times, I really felt like these were very dangerous situations. They varied; some fit one description and others just don't. I remember a few spontaneous events that seemed very, very dangerous to me, and I was always very hesitant to throw my arms into the – to throw myself into the waiting arms of a New York City police officer. And for a lot of the women in the demonstration where a lot of them were strip-searched; for some of

them, that was a very traumatizing experience. For others, not so much. It was unfortunate for everyone, right?

Some of those women — actually, I should say this, too — we talked about money designated from the floor of ACT UP to go to South End Press. There were also women who got money in the lawsuit against the city resulting from the strip search who gave money that supported —

SS: Do you remember who they were?

CC: — the book. No, not offhand. Those notes, I think I have. But I don't know. Catherine Saalfield-Gund, I'm pretty sure did. And Zoe, I think. And a couple of others. Sometimes I regret now, not having had that experience. But I knew that at the time, that it was the right decision for me. I'm glad for me personally that I wasn't one of the women strip-searched. That would have been an enormously difficult situation for me. And I understand the aftermath of that. I would have loved to have seen that become a class-action lawsuit. It didn't. And I think that's unfortunate in its own ways. But it may not have been winnable if it had been. It made a certain kind of statement anyway.

01:45:00 But I feel like — yes, sometimes I regret that; I regret that I didn't have the — that it didn't suit me, at that moment, right? I didn't have the tools, maybe the psychological tools, the chutzpah, to make that happen. But I know now, when I look back at that work, that people participated in this in all kinds of different ways.

Sometimes I want to minimize my involvement. I want to say, oh, well, you know, I feel like I was a facilitator on this project. There were people there

who knew this material. Somebody like Risa, who had all this medical knowledge, hands-on, from all the clinics that she worked in. Somebody like her; I felt like to work with someone like that, and facilitate, to assist, getting their knowledge disseminated further; that was a contribution, and I am proud of that, for all its flaws. But I also, I wouldn't trade, for anything, the experience just of having been in that room. Just having been at the Center, in that room. The energy in that room really made you feel like direct action was really important, and that groups of people could act collectively, and make real change in the world. I have to say I've had precious few experiences of that nature. But being in that room, even as a fly on the wall, made me believe that there would be times that that could happen.

SS: Great. Let me ask you my last question. So looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

CC: To me, I guess that the greatest achievement really has to be twofold. I think that the concrete work that was done towards official business like access to experimental drugs and changing the definition of AIDS so that it didn't exclude so many women, these were real concrete things that were achieved, not just with ACT UP, but with a lot of work on the part of ACT UP. And there is no way that we can look back at that history and minimize those real achievements. But I also think that the kind of visibility that ACT UP brought to the phenomenon of HIV generally and queerness generally, that there was a kind of queer visibility that grew out of that. For better or for worse, right? I mean, in some ways, problematically.

But the kind of visibility, that participating. Getting pictures of queer people marching, queer people fighting for their lives, queer people helping and caring for one another and supporting one another, on the front page of newspapers and on the Six O'Clock News. We don't even think about that anymore, do we, that there's news on at six o'clock, right? It's just all news, all the time.

I think that the visibility, that then fed into other groups — like Queer Nation, and other kinds of more mainstream things — was just absolutely essential to things like what I think now — the fact that my father welcomed — like I said at the beginning here; I'm 52, you know. My father welcomed Arlene home this year. My mother died in '94, of lung cancer, but my family has never welcomed, has never made peace with me being queer. And I really attribute daytime talk shows and other kinds of creeping visibility in the media with helping soften my dad on these issues through the years. And I really see that period of time, and ACT UP's very visible work — through the brilliant Silence = Death graphics; Gran Fury's work; other kind of stuff like that — with really, really helping create a community of people who felt empowered and motivated to come out of the closet, and a media that represented us — not always positively, but represented us.

SS: Great. Thank you.

CC: Thank you. I'm pleased to have this opportunity to revisit these issues, and have you guys march out to Jersey City on the day after this huge snowstorm, and sit around and —

01:50:00

SS: Well, thanks for being part of the record.

CC: – and think about some of these things again.

SS: I mean, a lot of people look at these, and they're using them – every book, every Ph.D. dissertation, so many classrooms are using this material.

CC: Yes.

SS: Yes.

CC: Yes, a lot. I mean –