

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

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Interviewee: **Peter Cramer**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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**ACT UP Oral History Project**

Interview of Peter Cramer

October 26, 2002

**SARAH SCHULMAN: So let's start by you saying your name, the date, how old you are, and the address of where we are.**

PETER CRAMER: How old I am? I'm not telling you how old I am.

**SS: Approximately.**

PC: I'm Peter Cramer and it is October 26, 2002. I am thirty-nine – no, it's eighteen and many, many months. I can thank Antonioni for that. And what else?

**SS: Where are we?**

PC: We are here, in my apartment, at 245 East 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, in the East Village.

**SS: So my first question, Peter, is do you remember the first time you heard the word AIDS?**

PC: I think I was more aware of GRID, first, from like *The Native*, or something. Then it quickly became AIDS, because it was too sexually implicit against homosexuals to have it a Gay-Related Immune Deficiency, as opposed to an acquired one.

**SS: So the first time you heard about it was by reading a gay newspaper?**

PC: Yes, I think so.

**SS: Do you remember who you were at that moment, what you were doing in your life?**

PC: Oh, God. Let's see, I was studying dance here in New York. Let's see, it's got to be – I was working as a baker, maybe. I can't remember when I actually first was aware of it, or when I may actually have read it. I'm not sure what year that would have been. But primarily studying dance and performing, working in nightclubs, working at the Pyramid. I worked at Area. That's a little bit later, actually.

**SS: So did you identify as gay, at that time?**

PC: Well, actually I always said I was a homosexual. But you are only a homosexual when you are engaged in sex with another person. So I don't think I had a gay identity, particularly. I think that is something that comes with age.

**SS: So when you first found out about AIDS, did you feel personally implicated by it?**

SS: Well, not implicated. I was more kind of alarmed that something so close to the way I was living was going to be something much more serious than any sort of venereal disease that one would have to have dealt with already. It is not like we were living in – it was a promiscuous time, and I was being as experimental and as open as I wanted. I had come to New York, I think in '78 or '79. I did come with a lover, but we never had that kind of monogamous situation. So it was more alarming as to how quickly it could – it wasn't something that was going to be able to be managed with a shot, or with taking some solution that you would drink. But implicated? No, I didn't feel like it was something that I suddenly had to – like I was going to be put up against a wall and attacked, yet. I think that came later.

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**SS: Well, how did that start to change?**

PC: I think it changed more with my awareness of the whole Reagan years. I would say, when you talk about gay-identified, I would say it is like a political identity. There is a sexual aspect to it, but it's a political identity. I was much more kind of galvanized around the anti-nuclear issue, and the U.S. out of Central America, and more geopolitical situations, rather than my backyard, or back end.

**SS: Were you working in organizations on those issues? Or was it just in terms of your personal interests?**

PC: More as just like a participant. I wasn't part of an organization for any of them. I mean, in 1983 when I was the co-director at ABC No Rio, there were a lot of shows there. There was the "Art Against Apartheid" show. There was "U.S. Out of Central America." That all happened there, and throughout the city. So that was how I was involved. I wasn't like an organizer, in that sense.

**SS: Can you just explain what ABC No Rio was?**

PC: ABC No Rio is, and continues to be, an artists-run art place, as they like to refer to it, on the Lower East Side, on Rivington Street. It has been there since 1979 and has gone through various generations of people.

**SS: And when did you get involved?**

PC: I got involved in – I think it was 1983. In 1983, we did a show called "The Seven Days of Creation." Our friends Brad Taylor and Carl George had gone there because they had heard about it. They knew Edgar Oliver, and they I think went there for a reading and they saw the whole way that the space was being run. They had open meetings. Like on a Monday you could come and propose something, and they would say yes or no, or, "When do you want to do it?" We did that and that was a weeklong event. Every day there were different curators that came in and did different performances, and environments, and music, art. Soon thereafter, Collaborative Projects was the artists' organization that set up No Rio. They had done it for three years, and they were now kind of moving back into their own kind of personal careers as artists. So that kind of political activism was shifting away from the space itself.

So they were looking for new directors and we were asked – Jack Waters, my partner – we were asked to become the directors. We lived in the basement, which was a

perfect hellhole, with Manny, our pit bull, among one of the most serious drug epidemics of my lifetime and probably New York's. The Lower East Side was just rampant with heroin. It was the tail end of the bankruptcy of New York City, so it was pretty desolate. We were really in a no-man's land down there. It was a kind of scary situation, but we were adventurous. It was free rent. It was a chance to really get involved in what we wanted to do, and that was being involved in art in whatever particular way that might be.

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**SS: So how was it to be an openly gay couple in that art community?**

PC: Well, I never really thought of it that way. I never saw us as being identified that way. We were who we were. We weren't really making those distinctions. That may have been what we were, but certainly a lot of our friends were not all gay in all the milieu that we were in. It was just about being artists, and being at the edge of the city and all that implies in terms of an economic state and an aesthetic state. I just didn't really think of that until there was some crack by some group that had done a show there. I think they had gone to Europe, or something. They said something about – they didn't use the word "gay Mafioso." "Art fags" I think was the term. Then I was suddenly like, "Oh." And it wasn't like we were promoting particularly gay artists or having that kind of focus for the gallery. But because I guess that is how they saw the two of us, or maybe just because the people that we were part of were so different that they may have assumed that they were gay – just the differently-abled.

**SS: So when did AIDS come off the page and into your life?**

PC: Let's see. It must have been probably about 1984 or '85, I think. Our good friend, Gordon Kurtti was the first person that we knew that was HIV-positive. He was also the first to die, but also one of our primary collaborators with the performance group

that we had – POOL [Performance on One Leg]. Brian Taylor, four years after, I think, he died. So 1986, I think, was when Gordon died, and 1990 was when Brian died. With Gordon it was interesting, because that was really the first time that I had a sense of ACT UP. I knew about ACT UP and I knew about what they were doing. I think I had been – I mean, I am sure I had been to some of the actions that they had done. But that was the first time I had ever been to a meeting. The reason we went there – we were doing a benefit at No Rio for HEAL (Health Education AIDS Liaison).

**SS: What was that?**

PC: That was a group that was really into exploring alternative medicines for the treatment of HIV. So they were doing like urine therapy. It was a whole shift to like macrobiotics and trying to do it naturally and – people were living pretty wildly – just like clean the toxins out. Let's just start with cleaning the toxins out, and then maybe the body can fight – have a better chance. They organized dinners. They had dinners at various community centers. I think they were a part of the Gay and Lesbian Center. They had meetings there. Gene Fedorko came to us and asked if we would do the benefit for HEAL. We said, "Of course." So I made up a flyer. The graphic lead was like you could see ACT UP was big; Guerrilla Girls was big; and Artists for Jackson was big. So now we are actually talking probably about 1988, because that's when [Jesse] Jackson was running. But it said, "You can ACT UP, or behave like Guerilla Girls, or party with Artists for Jackson, and still help HEAL."

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I went with Jack, and I think maybe Carl may have been there. I can't remember who else – maybe Brad or something. We went to one of the meetings. It was essentially just to let people know that this was happening and to invite them, if they wanted to be a

part of it, to come down and participate. Well, suddenly someone stood up and said, “We have to do something about safeguarding our name. We need to trademark this name. We have got to make sure – we can’t have people doing things like this, like using our name for things that aren’t what we are going to represent.” I was like, “This is Health Education AIDS Liaison. OK, maybe it’s not whatever you see as an answer for the AIDS crisis, but it is at least a response. And it is certainly as valid.” So I was really kind of taken aback by that kind of response. I don’t think that I ever went back to another meeting after that.

**SS: Can you describe the meeting, aside from that?**

PC: The meeting was at the Lesbian and Gay Center. It was wall-to-wall people – people standing, people sitting.

**SS: Do you remember who you saw there?**

PC: I didn’t know a lot of the names of the people that were really like sort of focused as the facilitators or leaders. I mean, I certainly probably would say Maria Maggenti and – help me here what’s her name? – Maxine [Wolfe]. I just remember the faces of some of the cute guys.

**SS: So it wasn’t people that you already knew.**

PC: I didn’t know. I was living here on the East Side. I lived on Rivington Street. I would go from Rivington Street to North Moore to work at Area, or to work at – oh, I think that point I was working at DANSPACE on and off. I mean, we didn’t have to pay rent. The economics of the city were so different that we could live on basically nothing. So I didn’t really go to the West Village. The West Village was always kind of like the West Village clone. I was always a little bit intimidated by that scene.

**SS: What about it?**

PC: I don't know. It just seemed so, so singular, like you had a particular type of person, or a particular look. If you didn't fit into that, or not just a look, but I think economics really played –

**SS: Can you describe the West Village gay look?**

PC: I think it still exists. It was like blue jeans, plaid shirts, revolving around bars. It is not like I didn't go to some of the bars, but the bars I would go to were more like dance clubs. I was much more interested in dance and dancing. So it wasn't like I was going there for a pick-up scene. It wasn't that, for me.

**SS: When Gordon got sick, how involved were you in his care decisions and his process?**

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PC: Aside from supporting him with the idea of macrobiotics – because I had been a vegetarian for awhile, and I worked at Arnold's Turtle in the West Village, which was one of the first health food restaurants maybe in the city, except for maybe Brownie's or something. And that was an interesting scene in and of itself. There were quite some interesting people – Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth used to work there. We had people who were involved in the movie industry and their friends that were working on *Ragtime* when I was there. But just encouraging him to get into the macrobiotics. I would say I wasn't really – I mean, Gordon was like the first really flamboyant, hysterical gay person that I was really close to and saw on a regular basis, not that I feel like I'm so straight, or something. He just had a sense of humor – like his gestures and his voice. Even I still couldn't process all of that. I still had so many things to work out. That's what I mean when I say that to have a gay identity really comes with age. It

comes with acceptance. It comes with working through a lot of homophobia – self-imposed and societal. I was not one of his closest friends. Carl was certainly one of his better friends, and I think Jack probably felt closer to him.

**SS: Did you expect him to get better?**

PC: Well, yeah I did. I didn't know how serious the disease was taking people. I mean, I was aware that people were dying, of course. But when it just comes as a headline, you don't really have any sense of that until it really strikes home. But it was really like almost too fast to even comprehend. He was kind of there, and suddenly he was gone.

**SS: Did he come and tell you personally that he was HIV-positive, or that he had AIDS? How did he describe it?**

PC: I don't know. I think I may have been told by someone else. I don't know if he told me.

**SS: What was his care like? Do you remember?**

PC: I don't know his care. I think I was scared. I think I was frightened. We were also involved in our art-making, and I think I felt like that was something that would resolve itself – in the same way that if you want to give up drinking and you're really serious you can do that – that maybe that's how it would transpire. You would get better and go on to live your life. But it was really very sudden.

**SS: Was his family involved?**

PC: There was some involvement. He had a brother and a sister. I think I had only met them once or twice. I was not really that close. You would really have to ask

Carl, or Jack, or even Kembra [Pfahler]. They were really good buddies – Kembra and Gordon.

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**SS: So you said Gordon died in 1986, and then the next person in your life with AIDS was Brian Taylor.**

PC: Right, the closest person.

**SS: So how was that when he told you he was sick? Do you remember?**

PC: Well, I don't remember those situations. I don't remember being told directly, saying, "I'm HIV-positive." It was more like, "I'm going back to Texas," or something. "I'm going to move away." People were dealing with their disease on their own terms. I just don't really feel like I was all that aware. I really just didn't want to – I didn't get tested until, I think it was 1991. So it took me that long from even Gordon's death to go ahead and get tested. So you can see the level of denial. I'm thinking, "All those trips to the bathhouse. Hmm, I'm sure I was practicing safe sex."

**SS: Which bathhouse did you go to?**

PC: St. Mark's Bathhouse.

**SS: When did "safe sex" first come into your reality?**

PC: Safe sex, well.

**SS: The idea of it.**

PC: The idea of safe sex. Oh, I don't know. Sometime probably in the 1990s, something that was being promulgated on us by the media: "We don't want this disease to go any further, so everybody's got to come on board and start protecting other people." Mostly other people – not themselves, but other people.

**SS: Do you remember the first time that safe sex came up between you and another person?**

PC: Being with Jack for so long, I sort of had that blessing of being with him. But still, even with that, we were – or really I should say “I” never felt that I should have to be monogamous. But in terms of safe sex, well certainly not until I was told I was HIV-positive. I mean, safe sex has always been there in terms of like venereal diseases. I knew that you were supposed to behave in a particular way, back in the early ’80s when I had to take care of being stricken with gonorrhea or whatever and going over to the health center on 28<sup>th</sup> Street, the Chelsea Health Center.

**SS: So no one ever insisted that you use a condom until you tested HIV-positive?**

PC: Yeah, probably. Jack and I were doing that for awhile. We became more monogamous the longer that we were together. But more recently, I would say, there has been this – what would you call it – a resurgence of the summer of love, with a whole bunch of younger people that are much more informed and aware. I would say that was almost like the first time that I really was like concerned about, that of course I would have to have a condom if I was going to have sex with someone anally, if I was going to penetrate them. I would be doing that. But it’s not like that’s something that’s really happening a lot. Or even when it was, it was like so like a very hands-off type of thing, where there was a reluctance. You want it so much, but at the same time you feel like the other person is having – well, first of all, I don’t think they were even aware of it until like the next day and they saw the yoga exercises. There were all of these exercises that we do for restorative, to help keep the immune system and the organs going. I guess I

assumed that everyone knew this because of the work we were doing for the last ten years, I would say – that we were involved enough in the AIDS crisis that anybody that knew us, but these were all people that were new to us and didn't know us. But we were being safe on that occasion.

**SS: So in between the disastrous first visit to ACT UP in 1986 and getting tested and finding out you were HIV-positive in 1991 – in that interim period, what was your interaction with AIDS and with AIDS activism?**

PC: Well, with AIDS activism, it was mostly hearing about various actions to participate.

**SS: Do you remember any that you were in?**

PC: Let's see, there was the one up at St. Patrick's. What year was that?

**JIM HUBBARD: 1989.**

PC: That was 1989.

**SS: Can you describe that? First of all, how did you find out about it?**

PC: Well, Carl George was much more – that's why, when you go to speak to other people, Carl will probably have a better memory for this. I hope he will speak to you. But we were kept informed with that. It's not like we weren't paying attention with what was going on. So we would hear about it, either from leaflets or – mostly from leaflets, because the computer phenomenon hadn't really happened yet.

**SS: So where would you see the leaflets?**

PC: At the [Lesbian and Gay Community] Center, or at – mostly probably at the Center.

**SS: So you went to the Center a lot.**

PC: Later. Once I was tested, I was going more often to Community Health Project (CHP), because they had their set-up there. That's now Callen-Lorde. They are no longer at the Center. But I think it was mostly Carl was very involved in it. So I think it was mostly Carl saying this, or just being well enough aware of people dropping stuff off at No Rio.

**SS: So tell me about St. Patrick's Cathedral. What was it like?**

PC: Well, I was on the outskirts of that demonstration. Was that action actually called "Stop the Church," or is that just the title of –

**SS: It was called "Stop the Church."**

PC: All the demonstrations that I ever went to – well, that one in particular was very massive, because it seemed really well-organized. It had a really defined enemy – a real defined adversary. Rather than "enemy" I should say "adversary." The Church – Cardinal O'Connor was making just the most outrageous statements. The Church was, of course, against the distribution of condoms. Monogamy or abstinence was the only way. So I just remember there being hordes of people on the street, and just crushes of people with signs. I was there photographing. It's one of the things that I do, so I have some records of some of those demonstrations. But that was one. I guess another one would have been a march on City Hall, I think the New Year's of 1990, the first day of the year. People, I think, may have crossed the Brooklyn Bridge, come down into City Hall, and were marching around City Hall for hours with signs.

**SS: Let's go back to St. Patrick's for a second, because that was such a well-known event. Do you remember what the purpose of the demonstration was?**

PC: Well, other than just to say that the Church has to be more responsible to reality in terms of people engaging in sex, particularly youth, because the Catholic diocese is in charge of education in this city, and in terms of social service they have a lot of contracts. It was just the refusal to even allow that discussion of condom use. It wasn't just condom use – it had to do with abortion and everything else. But the fact that you couldn't even go to like a counselor and have it be discussed was just ludicrous.

**SS: What was the feeling of the demonstration? What was the tone of it?**

PC: Just fed up, just sick and tired of being used as scapegoats. The gay community was going to be the whipping boy for this disease and we would be flogged from here to eternity for our sins, for our abominations. It was like enough is enough. We are going to come into your place of worship and say that you have no right to treat us this way. You are supposed to be Christians. You are supposed to have some sort of sense of mercy, and what are the other contrivances of the Church?

**SS: Did you go into the Church?**

PC: I did not go into the Church. I was on the outside. That is what I mean in terms of being part of ACT UP. I was just there as part of the masses. I was not in with, “we’re going to do this,” and all of the maneuverings and all of the very particular things that you didn’t really want a lot of people to know about in the first, just because they were very specific actions that really required that kind of secrecy and planning. I mean, I was not offended by what happened there. I didn’t think that it was the most horrible thing that ever happened. I think that they could have done a lot worse things. They would have still had the same reaction, even if people had just laid down on the ass of the church, or whatever – the altar or something.

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**SS: Do you remember anyone who you saw at St. Patrick's?**

PC: Oh God, let's see. Well, Robert Hilferty would be one. Probably Esther Kaplan, Carl, Jack. It really comes back to short memory here. Thinking about that as an idea, sometimes it's not so much about memory. It's more about where one's focus is at the time. Like if you're taking pictures, you're really kind of like zooming in on something. And if you're getting a poster or something, that's going to be your graphic. You're just more aware of the people being there. But those would be some of the people.

**SS: What were some of the graphic images that attracted you, or that interested you?**

PC: There was one poster, I think, of Jesus, sort of a crucifixion thing – kind of a very highly erotic shot of him. I can't remember what the slogan was, but other things about condoms. Cardinal O'Connor himself – putting a condom over him was another one. Slogans? I can't think of some of the slogans.

**SS: So when you marched across the bridge and went to City Hall, what did those kinds of demonstrations feel like?**

PC: Well, galvanizing. The sense that one was part of a community that was really struggling to deal with this disease, not so much as a physical disease itself but as a reaction to how the disease was being depicted in the media. The media had such a short-sighted view, and such a skewed view, that you just had to present something else, that there was a political voice out there that was powerful, that was willing to do anything in order to draw attention to the fact that this disease was being inadequately funded in terms of research, or for even social services. For the boogie man quality of how the gay

community was depicted. Not just the gay community, the Haitians. So you have the gays, and you have the blacks, and you have the foreigners. It's like the same old shit that happens all the time when you're dealing with like war time situations.

You could look back to any war and there is always someone that's going to be ostracized and demonized, so that the rest of the population can be swayed in their prejudices to support nefarious political agendas that don't really – that are not just what modern society should be all about at this day and age. Do you know what I mean? That's kind of the collective memory thing. Did you see that *New Yorker* cartoon? The tone is like, "Don't worry, the cultural amnesia is going to set in. If we could just wait out a little bit longer, the cultural amnesia will be there and they won't realize that this is something that is going on time and time again." They can pull the same nonsense and propaganda, and pull the wool over peoples' eyes.

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**SS: But thinking back, why do you think that happened? Why was there such –**

PC: I think that's the a politic of war. I think that's the way war is conducted. You have the enemy that is far off, and then you also create an enemy at home so that there is a disruption in the social fabric. You separate people. It's the divide-and-conquer kind of thing. And the people that are usually the ones that are targeted are minorities – people with little resources, no political voice. There was a response to apartheid at the beginning of the 1980s. There was a huge outcry that finally brought about the change in South Africa. There was a big outcry on the U.S. in Central America. So the fact that the people that were active in that and having that point of view

had to be lumped into a group that was going to be demonized in some form or another. I think it's obvious why they do it. One doesn't have to ask why.

**SS: So before you were tested, in that interim period, you would go to ACT UP demonstrations sometimes. Or would you say regularly?**

PC: Sometimes. I may have gone to the larger marches. That was not specifically an ACT UP march or something, but I did not do the big actions at the FDA or in Bethesda at the –

**SS: CDC [NIH]. But were you socializing in ACT UP circles? Did you find that more and more people that you knew were part of ACT UP?**

PC: Yes, but they were in the milieu of being artists. They were not in the milieu of being just activists. They were like-minded people. As you will discover, and as you already know, within ACT UP there were very particular groups of people that were in charge and, I think, in a particular bracket that were maybe more savvy because of that education –

**SS: Could you be more explicit? Who was in charge, and what were they like?**

PC: Let's start at the top with Larry Kramer, I suppose. You have a well-known screenwriter who has had some successes, who has written books about the gay community, particularly about their gay lifestyles, that had a savvy and a connection to the media, and a sense of how the media could be used in order to make the message known that there was a crisis out there. I couldn't really speak to that much more than that. I think he is really like the penultimate figure for me.

**SS: How did you feel about him? Did you ever interact with him?**

PC: No. I just knew he was someone that was completely vocal. He didn't care what he looked like. He didn't care if he came off as a loudmouth, or whatever, or irrational in terms of how he was expressing himself – not that his ideas were irrational.

**SS: How did you feel about Larry?**

PC: I think I had mixed feelings about his behavior, I suppose. I have a certain reserve. I come from a political background that is already part and parcel to dealing within the system.

**SS: You mean from No Rio?**

PC: Well, even a further history. My family – my father was a state senator. He was in the state government for a long time, so he had that sense of that position and how you maneuver yourself through that. You are doing your job. You are not rocking the boat or something. I was, as a child, having to go out and pamphleteer for him. I always felt so weird. Even that sort of always came up later when I was involved handing out fliers. I was always like, “OK, politics. It's a nefarious business. What are we really doing here? Who's zoomin' who?” But I don't know if there could have been any other way. I think you needed that kind of equal response. Violence requires such a thoughtful response when it's being promulgated on other people, and yourself, and you feel that identified. Maybe that's why I didn't feel so identified with ACT UP, because of the way the media was depicting. You could make yourself other. You could feel like you were not in that group. You weren't an IV drug user. You weren't black. You weren't – OK, I was a homosexual. I was a white male. We have all the resources at our fingertips, right? Presumably. I don't think that's true for all.

**SS: When did you start to suspect that you might be HIV-positive?**

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PC: I don't think it was really a matter of suspecting. I think it was more a matter of let's face up to the fact that you engaged in what is known as risky behavior. So you really should have yourself checked out, because you don't want to not know. If you don't know, then you are not going to ever really make the change, or you'll never feel like you're going to get whatever treatment might be available to you.

**SS: But why did you decide in 1991 this was the moment to get tested?**

PC: I think the death tolls were escalating. It was obvious that this disease was not something that was going to go away. It was something that was going to have immediate and dire effects on you if you didn't have something. If you didn't take something for it, you would be suddenly caught up in the syndrome and not be able to fight it at that point because it would be too late.

**SS: Did you have symptoms before you got tested?**

PC: No, not particularly. There may have been – it was just one year, the culmination of probably living in the basement and like working in the clubs and just the whole East Village lifestyle or however you want to define it, since I'm not going to define it completely. I had like a relapse – not a relapse, but I went to my sister's for Thanksgiving and literally could not get out of bed.

**SS: What year was it?**

PC: I don't remember exactly. It could have been maybe around the same that Gordon died. So it may have been an emotional thing. Or maybe it was like in 1985, because we moved here in 1985. So living in the basement where there was no heat, it was just the living conditions were not as wonderful as they are now, where I can just have this on me and not feel like I am going to catch pneumonia. But that was sort of

like a signal that maybe something's up. If I still waited another five years, I think it was really just the seriousness of Gordon has died, and Brian is now afflicted. There are many other people that I didn't know personally, but knew of. And it just seemed to be getting closer and closer. So it wasn't like you could really avoid it any further.

**SS: So did you and Jack go together?**

PC: No, I think actually Jack went first. Jack's always been much more kind of at the forefront of this.

**SS: So Jack came home and said, "I have HIV"?**

PC: Well, that he went and got tested. I don't know whether he came back with positive results and then I went, or how exactly. I'm not quite sure how far apart it was. It was a so-called anonymous testing.

**SS: Where did you go?**

PC: On the Upper East Side. I think it was one of the first offices, I think of Quest Diagnostics, actually, which was where I still go. I don't go to the one on the Upper East Side, but in the West Village. I go for all my blood work – filling out a form and having to fill out your name for an “anonymous” test. It's like, “I thought this was anonymous.” Well, you just get a number and everything is identified by this bar code, or whatever. And then finding out, calling up, or actually having to go back because they wanted to tell you in person. Or you could get the results over the telephone.

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**SS: So what was the counselor like, and what did they say to you?**

PC: Just that there was help available, that there were things that could be done. There was help. There were medicines. People were responding. It was a very kind of positive thing.

**SS: Was it a man, do you remember?**

PC: It was a man, yes.

**SS: So then what did you do when you found out?**

PC: Well, I don't think I did anything for a little while. I was just like, "OK." But pretty soon thereafter, I went to Community Health Project and enrolled there for their services and was taken on as a client. I had some terrific doctors, I felt, like Stephen Dillon who was the one that I remember the most. You know, just feeling like I was at least now going to be monitored and whatever they were going to give me was going to be something that might be effective. I think at that point we were well enough aware of what was going on with medicines. AZT – when it came out I'm not exactly sure – but that was pretty much regarded and well-known as just pure poison, given the doses that were being given to people. I did not do AZT until probably three years ago, I think, and had a horrible anemic reaction to it. I never wanted to do it, but it was like these are the drugs that are there. You have got to sort of mix and match and make your own little cocktail and figure that out. I thought, "OK, well let's try it."

**SS: So in 1991, the marker was T-cells, right?**

PC: T-cells, yes. Anything above –

**SS: Do you remember how many T-cells you had at first?**

PC: I think probably around 500.

**SS: So what was your first medication? Did you wait until you had a symptom before you medicated, or did you medicate before symptoms?**

PC: Well, I had a horrible outbreak of shingles. So I was on acyclovir. Let's see, what else did I do? I'm trying to remember. I think my first sets of drugs were 3TC, d4T. I'm not sure what else.

**SS: How did you experience them?**

PC: The reason that I was so not really wanting to do medication was all of the side effects. After hearing the horror stories of AZT, it was like, "This is our bitter medicine? This is what's going to keep us alive?" So I tolerated it reasonably well. There may have been headaches, and nausea, and diarrhea, but the body responded to it pretty well. I have never gone below 200, which is the official designation of AIDS by the CDC. I don't know if that's changed.

**SS: And what drugs are you taking now?**

PC: Now I am on Viread, Sustiva, acyclovir, and 3TC, again. So I am off the protease inhibitors. I was on Norvir and Fortavase until last November. Last November I had the honor of being at Yaddo. So I thought, well, the big thing in the medical community – well, a side of the medical community – is pulsing, which means that you are on your drugs and you're off your drugs. So I thought, "I am going to be away from New York. I am going to be away from the stress of the city. I'll be on a lovely natural setting. I won't be drinking. I won't be partying in the garden [Le Petit Versailles]. I won't be engaging in all kinds of things. OK, I've been on these drugs for a while. Let's let the body work on its own." So I went off for November. The levels were pretty stable, so I just stayed off them. I stayed off them for six months. When I started again, I started again on the Norvir. But we were getting the genotype resistance tests and they

Tape II  
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were not really indicating that that was going to continue to really be effective. So it was time to change. So at this point, I am not on a protease inhibitor.

**SS: How do you feel about your medication?**

PC: Well, if I had ever been an acidhead, which I never really was – the Sustiva is really trippy. Especially the first few you times you take it. It's a known hallucinogenic, so your balance is a little bit off. The reason I never wanted to do that was because it is very – if you're prone to depression, or paranoia, or anything like that, you shouldn't be on it. I've had two really, like, "Oh my God. I've got to start looking around. What do I give away?" It's sooner than later that even being on the drug that it sort of hits you. It comes at you like a rush, and you're suddenly like, "Oh, my God. Time is limited." Then it subsides. It sort of goes away. You sort of go back to your normal life. But that is exacerbated by stress and exhaustion. I don't know, if I stay away from exhausting myself, would I get into that?

But it makes you really sort of like look around and look at your surroundings. You really kind of do a double take. I have never done double takes. I don't do double takes. I have never really had a sense of that kind of introspection on my life. I'm just kind of living it, and realizing that, "OK, these are the decisions I've made and this is the way I'm living." Maybe things do need to change, but I feel like I'm so used to living the way I am that I cannot. I am having difficulty making that change. You know, that means like a more kind of focused sense of even being an artist, whereas before it was just about making the work. Now it's like making the work and having it have some sort of impact and resonance.

It's that whole thing of your legacy: "What have I really done with my life?" That's kind of a shock, I think. I think a lot of people think about it more than I have. I think I've been really blessed. I don't know when I was infected. I can only guess, maybe. At the moment – I was with the Garden events that we've been doing. It's three flights up and three flights down – up and down, on and off. My weight dropped. I wasn't that concerned about it, because I thought, "Why, I feel so thin." But when it starts to show in my face and I look at my legs. As a dancer, you're kind of preoccupied with your body. But I'm not really dancing, like I aspired to be.

So when I see the changes, it's a little bit alarming. I am concerned about it. I wasn't that concerned. Jack was really more concerned. But there doesn't seem to be – there's nothing to really indicate why. I mean, it's not that much weight. It's only like fifteen pounds or something. But enough that you're – I had a CAT scan last week. I'm still waiting to find out if they've seen anything, whether there might be some sort of tumor or something inside. I have a kind of a high metabolism anyway. I don't think it's that unusual. I think it's really just kind of being very active.

**SS: Are you still with the same doctor, Steven Dillon**

PC: No. When I left CHP, I finally was able to get health care. I was finally able to afford it.

**SS: So you didn't have insurance?**

PC: I did not have insurance when I was with Community Health Project. That was like a saving grace. I never had health insurance.

**SS: Why didn't you have health insurance?**

PC: Why didn't I? Because I didn't have any kind of a job that would ever give it to me. I was self-employed, or whatever you call it, an independent contractor for all of the years that I worked at DANSPACE PROJECT [at St. Mark's Church]. So you don't get any benefits. They don't even take anything out of it, so it's all self-employed. The amount of money I was making was such a pittance that one couldn't afford a good health plan, one where you were one step out of a clinic.

**SS: So how did CHP work for people who didn't have insurance? What was the system?**

PC: Well, I think they were federally funded. They had government monies. They were supporting the services that they were providing.

**SS: But when you went in, did you have to pay anything?**

PC: No.

**SS: Completely free.**

PC: It was completely free. It was a great clinic. I always felt like really well-cared-for. The doctors knew what they were doing, given the amount of information that was available. They were also gay, and you could not feel like there was some sort of implied moral judgment going on. You were in the Center, so you were part of the gay community in the first place. So it wasn't like you were having to go to St. Vincent's, which was a Catholic organization where you might encounter a less hospitable view.

**SS: So do you think that getting diagnosed changed your relationship to the gay community?**

PC: Well, to the AIDS community, sure. And more to the fact that the gay community was the one that really was responsible for saving people, as far as I'm concerned.

**SS: So did you ever go back to ACT UP once you were diagnosed?**

PC: I was still involved in actions, but as I said, I never really got into the meetings. I felt I was already into the collective at No Rio. It was already like a collectivist thing. I really was haphazard at my approach to an art career. That's what I was concerned about. Wherever I could get involved and be vocal that I would do that. But in terms of sitting through a meeting where who knows how many people may really have had a say in what was going to happen in the first place, and sit through a meeting – I would much rather just know when the action was and I'd get to it.

**SS: Did you ever go to there for treatment information?**

PC: ACT UP?

**SS: Yes.**

PC: Not that I recollect. I know that there was an information service, that that was a component of ACT UP. If I did, it was through other people.

**SS: So where did you go for treatment information?**

PC: I would go to CHP. I would go to magazines, like POZ magazine. There were enough people involved in ACT UP that I was getting the information from them. You know, Jack was – I think he may have been like a board secretary for CRIA – Community Research Initiative something [on AIDS]. They added an "a" for some governmental reason, I'm sure, after they kicked out Joe Sonnabend.

**SS: Was he your doctor, also?**

PC: He was not. He was Jack's doctor. Joe was a researcher, and there are very few AIDS doctors that – I mean, my doctor now I don't believe is an AIDS researcher. I think his title is internal medicine. I don't think it's infectious diseases. That's another title.

**SS: And who is your doctor?**

PC: Dr. Bill Shea.

**SS: How do you pay for him?**

PC: I have Oxford.

**SS: So you were able to get insurance, even though you were HIV-positive?**

PC: Well, yes. There is a non-discrimination clause in New York State about pre-existing conditions. So yes, one can. I don't know if that's still the case as HMOs are constantly contracting. You are constantly feeling like, "Whoops, I thought I was in this plan." You go from the Freedom Plan to the Liberty Plan.

**SS: I just have one last question, Peter. Looking back on ACT UP, because that's what this project is about, what is your general feeling when you think back?**

PC: I think about really incredible energy. I think about devotion to a cause. I think about it giving a voice, not only to me, in the most vocal sense of yelling and screaming at injustices, but to other people in terms of how much control they could take over their lives, where one doesn't have to be the passive recipient of things. You can make a difference and you can make changes to the way society functions. That, to me, will be the legacy of ACT UP.

**SS: Thank you, Peter.**

PC: You're welcome.

**JAMES WENTZY: Now we're into the tape. It wasn't the best way to end it.**

PC: I don't know how you guys are going to do this.

**SS: So many things that you said are so important. As you were talking, I was just, "Nobody knows that. Nobody knows that. Nobody knows that." It's like crucial.**

PC: Well, there are so many gaps, too. I really feel – I think you sort of put the blinders on and you just move. It's because you've got like that – **[Tape ends]**.