

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

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Interviewee: Sandra Elgear

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Sandra Elgear
July 22, 2008

SS: Tell us your name, your age, where we are, and today's date.

SE: Oh, my god. My age? Are you kidding?

SS: Everyone else is the same age. {LAUGHTER}

SE: I know we're all old. My name is Sandra Elgear. I'm fifty-one. And what was the last question?

SS: Today's date and where we are.

SE: It's July 22 [2008], and we're in a lovely loft in North Chelsea, I guess is what it is.

SS: I know you're Canadian.

SE: Yes.

SS: Where were you born in Canada?

SE: I was born in a small town outside of Ottawa on the Quebec side, called Elmer.

SS: In that community, how were global politics processed as you were growing up?

SE: Oh, wow. Well, I grew up in the sixties in Quebec, which was at a time of incredible social unrest because of the Quebec separatist movement, so that was the politics that I think sort of had the most influence on me. It was a very homogenous community in terms of color, but in terms of culture, it was very different. The town that I grew up in was in Quebec, was predominantly French, but the sort of power dynamics was English. So, growing up, if there was one English person in the room in a group of French people, they would defer to the English person, so English was spoken. So that was kind of my first introduction to sort of radical politics, really, because there was a lot

of – remember, we didn't go and mail letters at the – you would put it in the mailbox. We weren't allowed to because there were all those mailbox bombings and stuff, and so we were afraid of that.

Probably my friends were sort of half and half, half English-speaking, half French-speaking. But it was very clear on that social injustices were a part of the world. But globally, I don't know, as a young child, I don't think I had that much awareness of global politics, but I think that as I got older — Canada's far more aware of what is going on outside its borders, I think, than the average American teenager growing up. I remember the first time I traveled in Europe. I traveled in Europe before I ever came to the United States, and meeting college students from the United States, and I was shocked at how insular their lives were and how completely unaware they were of what was going on outside of United States.

SS: Did you and your parents share the same views vis-à-vis Quebec's separatism?

SE: No. My parents are both from Saskatchewan, which is kind of like being from Montana, so it's quite conservative. They were farm folk, kind of simple folk. That sounds terrible, but not very sophisticated. They had no problem with bilingualism. That's absolutely fine. But as Quebec being separated from the rest of the country, they just thought that was just absurd. Or it was kind of the attitude, "Well, fine, let them go, see how they do on their own," sort of thing. But, yes, my parents were pretty conservative.

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SS: Were they religious?

SE: No. My mom was a Sunday school teacher, actually, but it was in a kind of progressive church, and my father an atheist.

SS: So even though they were conservative, your community values and your future as an activist, do you see that as a continuation of your family values or in response to your family values?

SE: Oh, interesting. I think my parents have always taught me a sense of justice and fairness, like very, very basic humanitarian qualities of, if you see an injustice, you should respond to that injustice. I was never taught to just turn the other cheek. It was more you should speak out if you think that there's a problem and that there's something wrong.

SS: Did you ever see them do that?

SE: Did I ever see my parents do that? I grew up with this story. My mom grew up in Saskatchewan, as I said, and she's quite old, and there were a lot of Chinese workers that were brought in and they literally were working on the railroad. This was in probably the twenties, early thirties. My mom tells me this story of her friends teasing this Chinese person. I guess they had come earlier and then the Chinese — this family was still in their community, and them being teased. My mom, I can't remember exactly what she did, but she knew that that was really wrong. Her father was the carpenter; he was also the town mortician, because he would build the coffins. So in order to get back at her friends for teasing them, I guess, this little Chinese boy that was her friend, she had him go in a coffin and they scared the friends or something like that, and she said she was getting back at them for it. So this is sort of a story of her seeing

that there was an injustice and, in a child's way, kind of showing her friends that it wasn't okay, or getting back at them or something. Clearly, I never saw that.

I had friends whose parents were very active in the NDP, which was the New Democratic Party, which was the sort of "socialist" party, so we would go with their parents. We would go and do a lot of work and do community service and stuff like that. But not my parents so much, no.

SS: What were their attitudes about homosexuality?

SE: It wasn't even they had "love the sinner, hate the sins." They kind of didn't care. It wasn't really an issue with them. I remember growing up when I was at college, and I didn't have a boyfriend and my mom was like, "You know, Sandra, if you're a lesbian, you can tell me," and stuff like that, which the irony was, I wasn't a lesbian. But it was like, "Okay, Mom, that's really nice." So it's never really been an issue for them.

SS: When you were in high school, did you ever observe or experience gay kids getting victimized? I'm asking this because when we get to ACT UP, you made a stand with this disenfranchised group of people that very few straight people really made a stand with, and I'm wondering if that was a theme in your life.

SE: I don't know. I honestly don't even know if I knew any out kids. It's funny, though, because I was friends with twins, a brother and a sister, and they were both gay. This was probably throughout high school, so starting fourteen, fifteen, whatever. It was kind of like we knew they were gay, but she didn't have any girlfriends and didn't talk about crushes, and he didn't have boyfriends and talk about crushes, that I can recall, anyway, and it just had to do more with she was the star of the basketball team

and the volleyball team and she was the jock, so that's how it manifested itself, and he was just really smart. So I don't even know how it came into my consciousness. You know what I mean? It's just something that, I don't know, I guess maybe because I had a lot of gay friends, and so it didn't make sense. I don't know, really.

SS: When did you first think that you were going to become an artist?

SE: Oh, wow. Well, I think in high school I had a really great art teacher. I had a really wonderful art teacher who was really quirky and was very inspirational. So when I went to college, I studied art and art history and stuff like that, and then came to New York to go to the Whitney program.

SS: So when you were in art college, which art college did you go to?

SE: Well, I went to Trent University, well I went to a lot of universities, but, anyway, in university I took some art courses, but studied more art history and history and cultural studies, actually is what it was called. Then I went to the Ontario College of Art, which is in Toronto.

SS: So at what point in your evolution as an artist or as an art student did political practice start to get integrated into your work?

SE: I would have to say in art college, so this was after university, in art college, with Robyn Hutt, who you interviewed as well. We started doing installation performance pieces, and they were more around feminism but also very, very much about politics, but sort of war, anti-war, that kind of stuff.

But then it's interesting, we got a grant from the Ontario College of Art, and Robyn and this friend of ours, he was gay, we took a trip. We drove across the United States, and we went to – somebody called it we did the Gay Triangle. We went to

San Francisco, Key West, and Provincetown, which just happened to be that's what we did. We were writing a script called "Sexual Economics," and it was on the economics of how we present ourselves, how the mainstream expects – there's a certain economics involved in the nuclear family and all that sort of stuff. So I think that was probably our first one that was specifically around sexuality.

Of course, coming into it, we were looking at, as a woman, how we place ourselves in society, and then clearly, because what we did was we took a lot of snippets of conversations from our travels across and put them all together and created this one performance. This was at a time when AIDS – this was '81, so it was still this like, oh, there's this illness that men are getting, and so that was just the first rumblings that we had heard about what was going on, especially when we got to San Francisco, because there were a lot of people becoming infected at that point.

SS: What attracted you to working collectively as an artist? It sounds like from the beginning you were working with those other two.

Tape I
00:15:00

SE: Yeah. I probably just don't have a big enough ego to do it on my own. No, really, I think that's a big part of it. I like the process of having a discussion with other people and making decisions, so I like that. I like that a lot. I think the whole collective, to consciously make it be a collective, was when we started working with David Meieran and Gregg Bordowitz.

SS: But you guys were already collaborating for years before that.

SE: Robyn and I were, yes, we had been collaborating for years, but women don't have to put labels on it. You know what I mean? This is just what we did.

SS: So you didn't have a name for your collaboration?

SE: No, we didn't have a name for it. It was just what we did. It wasn't a conscious effort. It was, "This works. It's a good combination. Let's do it." So it's not like we set out to work that way. But it's interesting, because we got into the Whitney Museum Studies Program, and I remember there were some people going, "Oh, man, I wish I'd thought of that scam. Of course they picked you guys. Nobody had a collective." So it was quite funny.

SS: What made you want to go to the Whitney Program?

SE: We knew somebody who went there. We were living in Toronto at the time, and I think, for me, I've always liked to have a reason to go to a place, rather than just – I'm not that brave. So rather than just going somewhere and saying, "Yeah, let's see what happens," I like to have a little plan. And we had heard it's great. You come to New York and you get a studio. You get all these famous artists coming and talking to you. It sounded like a pretty good plan.

SS: Did you have any teachers that you felt were very influential in the development of your later work?

SE: Well, Martha Rosler was one who we talked to a lot. For some reason I remember her more than a lot of the other ones, I think, because we were reading all of that very high-end theory. But I think, for me, I think Martha Rosler has stuck just because there's something very honest and very straightforward about her politics, how her politics was in her work, I think. It seemed easy. It seemed to make sense.

SS: So how did you hook up with the other folks?

SE: That's very funny, actually. We were doing an installation that was technical, had a lot of technical stuff involved. Neither Robyn nor I are technical, so

David was at the Whitney program with us and he helped us out. Actually, it was funny because part of it was we were doing a sound installation that we needed the recording of a telephone sex worker. We wanted a sex tape, so we needed a man to make the call. Right? So we asked David. He was kind of like, "I think I'm the wrong guy to be making that call." But he had a friend, and his friend did the call, so we became friends through that.

Then I had done a lot of the grant writing for the other stuff that we had done, and David was trying to get funding for a project that he and Gregg were working on. I was like, "That's a good cause. I'll help you guys out. I'll help you write a grant." Then from there it was like, "Oh, yeah, we'll help you do it." Then it was like, "Yeah, let's just work together." It just grew.

SS: So you started working together before you went to ACT UP?

The relationships were formed before?

SE: What was I saying? David and Gregg were – I can't remember what the action was. There was some protest that they were shooting, but it was pre-ACT UP, just very pre-ACT UP. Then our first shoot together as a group was ACT UP's first demonstration.

Tape I
00:20:00

SS: How did you choose that?

SE: David and Gregg had become involved in ACT UP, and then that's how it first started.

SS: So you hadn't gone to any meetings. This was your first ACT UP experience?

SE: You know, I can't really remember. I think I must have gone to some before, maybe leading up to the demonstration or something, I think. I can't really remember that. But I do remember that there were really two women or something at the time. Somebody came up to me, I forget who it was, saying, "Hey, how's it going?" Just kind of like, "Wow, a woman is here. This is great," because in the early days it was all pretty much all men, I think. I forget who was there early on.

SS: Was it Rebecca Cole, maybe?

SE: I don't know. Rebecca wasn't even there yet. It was Maxine Wolfe and another woman. I forget her name.

SS: Rachel?

SE: She was tall. She was a nurse. I can't remember her name.

SS: So just from a video maker's point of view, can you describe arriving at this demonstration and what kind of decisions you had to make in terms of your methodology about how to approach?

SE: Clearly, it developed over the demonstrations and stuff, and got more and more sophisticated, but we just showed up with a camera and followed the action.

SS: What kind of camera did you have?

SE: We had a big, David had a camera, I think, from this organization. He had started this electronics kind of company with a bunch of other electronics, like recording and all that sort of stuff. So I think we used that camera, big old clunkers. But then we started using the GMHC equipment very early on, and then Jean Carlomusto got involved early on as well. She was at GMHC. So I think what happened was we saw her shooting—that's what it was—at the same demonstration. It was probably first one.

Then we just hooked up and said, “Well, we’re kind of doing the same thing. Let’s work together.”

SS: So who was behind the camera? Did you all take turns?

SE: I rarely was behind the camera. I did sound a lot, or more coordinating stuff. David often was behind the camera. Jean [Carlomusto] was behind the camera. Hilery [Kipnis] sometimes. Robyn [Hutt] sometimes. I, rarely. I’m too short. Yeah, I’m too short. When we started doing shoots with a lot of cameras and then there were the smaller cameras, then I would sometimes do the camera work as well.

SS: Was media there? Were there commercial media at these events?

SE: If the demonstrations were big enough, like City Hall, and those ones, then, yes, there were. That oftentimes would become, especially when we went down to D.C. and very big national stuff, that got really hard, because we felt we should be here. We should get the best shots. We should have the — Of course, the big bruisers with their big cameras, with their passes and stuff, would always get the prime spots, or else they’d be right up there in front and you couldn’t barge by them. And they’re very aggressive. Of course, we would be so pissed off, because we’d be like, “We want all of this, and you’re going to show ten seconds, max, of this.” So, at the main events, there were—

SS: But you were ACT UP, and they were not.

SE: Yes.

SS: So how did you deal with that issue? I mean, did you always have to stay behind the police barricades?

SE: Unless we were willing to get arrested, which at the time I wasn't here legally, so I was never willing to get arrested. But, yeah, we would definitely go.

Tape I
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Dependent on the action, most of the demonstrations, we were there in the fray. We were there with the people. Of course, all of the people who were there, for the most part, except for when it was national stuff, although even then we were amazingly organized, if you think about the activist movement. It was remarkably organized where all the media would have meetings beforehand and discuss strategies and how best to — But being known and being known as part of the group, people would talk to our camera very readily. They knew, and they knew what to say, and they also help us get into a position where we could shoot stuff. But the only place where it was difficult was when, as I said, it was big demonstrations and there was police cordons and you couldn't get through and stuff like that.

SS: So did you have to get press passes even though you were ACT UP?

SE: Yeah, we did. We eventually did get press passes. I don't know if you remember, but for a while we had bogus press passes that we used. But we eventually would get press passes for a lot of things, which was good.

SS: How did you build the relationship with the activists in terms of you filming them? There's a history in Jim Hubbard's part of that of the early gay movement, people being afraid to be filmed. Did you run into that at the beginning?

SE: I don't think so. No, I think that ACT UP was unique in its incredible savviness when it came to media. I think that Ann Northrop was really helpful in that where it's like, "Look, use the media. Use it for everything it's worth."

We went to the Monday night meetings, we went to the meetings before the demonstrations, we were involved in different – Robyn and I were in the women’s group and David was in another group. So we were a part of ACT UP. We were involved in the day-to-day, so we had a relationship with these people outside of ourselves as filmmakers. So that never was an issue. Even early on. Maybe early on there was some skepticism, “Why are you here? What’s going on?” But it was very short-lived.

SS: So can you describe a pre-action media meeting, like who would be there and what would be the things you would discuss?

SE: Oh, wow. With the media itself?

SS: You guys. You said that you would meet before.

SE: Well, I’m thinking more of the ones when we went down and did the NIH and the CDC. I just remember we would meet in a church or in a community center or something like that, and get the logistics of how the day was going to progress, what groups were going to be where. “There’s a quiet action that nobody knows about, but you should be around it.” More logistics than anything else, getting to know each other, handing out press passes, just that kind of stuff would be what would go on.

But, also, the people in ACT UP would meet as well beforehand, and in a way they’re like pep rallies, some of them. “We’re going to go out tomorrow and we’re going to do this.” There’d be different people getting up and speaking, explaining how things were going to happen or just that kind of stuff.

SS: So afterwards, what would you guys do with the footage? After an action, what would happen? Would you look at it?

SE: Yeah, and sometimes when actions were over a few days, we would even look at it that night. We'd go over it and say, "Oh, we didn't get this," or, "We need some of that." All the tapes would be labeled as we were shooting, and that was a pretty logistical nightmare sometimes, when there were batteries and making sure you didn't run out, especially in cold actions, and tapes getting put in wrong cases and that sort of thing.

But, anyway, so then we'd bring them back and everything would get logged. We would just log everything, and we'd burn a copy, a work copy, and log everything. Depending on what the project was, sometimes even large projects we'd edit little portions of it and stuff like that.

Tape I
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SS: So where was your headquarters?

SE: When we first started, we were down on – I guess it was Walker Street, which was where, remember I said David had started this company with these other people. So they had an editing suite and all that stuff, so that's where we were first headquartered.

I was living in a loft. Robyn and I and Robyn's boyfriend were living in a loft in Greenpoint, and we actually did our first edit of our first documentary all on paper. It was like this paper edit, and we had this long, long roll, so we would do that in our loft in Greenpoint. Remember it was like –.

SS: What film was that?

SE: This was for the first – it was a thirty-minute documentary that we did, just called "Testing the Limits, New York City," sort of our first foray into this, and that was all done on paper edit on the floor in ninety-degree heat, no air conditioning.

But then we moved to 26th or 28th — maybe it was 28th Street, just down here, and it was in the building that the — I'm going to forget what the — the People With AIDS Coalition. They gave the drugs out and stuff they provided the drugs.

SS: The Buyers group?

SE: Yeah, the Buyers group.

SS: The health group. What was it called?

JIM HUBBARD: PWA Health Group.

SS: Health group.

SE: Yeah. So there, which I think was when we met Robert Vasquez, because I think he was involved with that early on. So we were there for a while, and that's when we did our first documentary, and then we moved down to 14th Street from there.

SS: There were plenty of other activists shooting also at these same events. What was your system for sharing footage with them, or how did that work out?

SE: It was all just did you get it? — I mean, honestly, I think Testing the Limits was the most organized of the groups. It was the best funded of the groups. We had funding, and I think a lot of other people were more just guys with cameras, people with cameras, and then there was DIVA TV. Some people from Testing the Limits were involved in DIVA TV. It was all just really organic, and I think that everybody just shared footage. It was all pretty relaxed, really, to the point of where we've got footage and it's kind of like, "Do we really have the rights to this?" And it gets a bit gray areas where there were people, and we'd say, "Can you come down and shoot footage for us

for our documentary?” Obviously we didn’t have money to pay people, but it was explicitly for the documentary that we’re doing it. Then other people, they would just be down there shooting. It’s like, “You got that. Could we use your footage in the documentary?”

SS: Where was your funding from?

SE: All over the place. Just private progressive foundations, for the most part, and then the NYSCA, New York State Council on the Arts. Never got NEA. But the Robert Wood Johnson – no, I don’t think we ever got them.

SS: What were some of your moral discussions about shooting? Did you ever feel like, “We can’t use that,” or, “That’s exploitative”?

SE: Oh, yeah, yeah, god, we had those debates all the time. It was very much – I’m trying to think. Knowing all the people, it definitely felt less exploitative because you have a relationship with somebody, whereas if you’re just a person from a network, coming in and shooting somebody who’s being arrested and being humiliated or whatever, there’s a certain voyeurism involved in that, whereas when it’s your friend and you’re there and you’re wanting to help them, and you’re shooting it, there’s a different connection. But at the same time, sometimes it can read the same. So those were more of the questions that we would come up with, and being careful not to, okay, well, we don’t want to put the token woman in there now or that kind of stuff.

SS: I remember in ACT UP, I think this was back in your era, when ACT UP picketed MOMA because of that guy. What was his name, Nixon?

JH: Nicholas Nixon.

SS: Yes, Nicholas Nixon, who did these kind of wasted PWA photos. What was your discussion about showing people who look sick? Because a lot of people in ACT UP looked very sick.

SE: A lot of the people speaking looked sick, but they weren't lying in a bed not having a voice, being an anonymous skeletal person. They were angry people, yelling and screaming, who happened to be thin or with lesions or whatever. It was like that's who they are. So I think that that's a big difference.

We had a huge debate, because at the end of *Voices from the Front* we do a memorial, because it took so long to make it, that a lot of the voices in *Voices from the Front* had died by the time it was finished. And we talked for a really long – because, of course, the message of it is, we have to fight this. It's not about people dying; it's about people fighting an illness, and making it so they're not going to die. You know what I mean? That's part of our message. And then to end it with, okay, well, that guy's dead, with a whole slew of people who were dead, seemed wrong. It seemed counter to what our message was.

So we debated this back and forth, and we ended up deciding that it was a reality. These people did die. You got to know it. As much as you fight, they did as much as they could and we're doing as much as we could, but it's not enough. People are dying. So we ended up including it, and I think it was the right decision. I have to tell you, every time I see it, tears would come to my eyes every time, because it's like, god, these incredible, incredible people. God, I feel like I'm crying now.

SS: Are you thinking about anyone in particular?

SE: No, just everybody, just all of these amazing people, and then it wasn't enough.

SS: Let's go through your films, each one, and talk about some of its intention. You said that you and Robyn started out with a thirty-minute tape.

SE: No, it wasn't just Robyn and I. No.

SS: Oh, it was the whole "Testing the Limits" collective.

SE: Yes.

SS: Who was in the collective? You guys, David Meieran.

SE: I'm so bad. The first one was – I don't think Jean was involved in the first one, and, god, if I'm wrong, that's bad. I think it was just Hilery Kipnis, David Meieran, Gregg Bordowitz, Robyn Hutt, and myself. But Jean was very much involved because she was using the footage. That was just a thirty-minute documentary on early AIDS activism, and from that, using even some of the same footage, we made *Voices from the Front*, and that Jean was involved in.

SS: Let's talk about the first one, "Testing the Limits."

SS: You were saying, "When we were editing—."

Tape II
00:00:00

SE: When we were editing *Voices from the Front*, it was all analog editing. It was all rewinding and getting – and we had a problem because we were doing it at night, this editing house gave us their editing suite and an editor for free, because the owners of the company supported what we were doing, but it meant we were getting sort of beginner editors, and we were having problems and it was going on forever and ever. But you don't feel you can complain. Anyway, so we had a meeting and then the owner was like, "Well, we're doing this new digital editing, and maybe we can try doing it on

that.”

We’re like, “Oh, okay.” It’s this new technology.

SS: That’s also interesting that it shows the whole network of ACT UP. ACT UP includes the people who own this editing house who are giving it to you for free. It’s this very big network. So in the first piece, I know this is very hard to recreate, but can you remember what your hope or intention was in creating that work?

SE: We wanted it to be used as an activist tool. That was absolutely what it was for. It’s a tape to show, to get people thinking and get people out there and get people angry. So it was absolutely an activist tool. It wasn’t to be shown in festivals, although it was, but that wasn’t really its goal. Its goal was we’re creating an activist tool.

SS: It’s interesting you brought up the word “festival,” because something about AIDS activism, about video activism, of which you are a pioneer, actually transformed some of those festivals into activist events in a way, that they were not just high-art showcases. So it’s interesting that the work itself changed the venue.

SE: Yeah, it’s true. It’s true. Because at festivals, you have forums where people talk and it’s not just the screening of the tape itself. A lot of times it starts discussion; you have discussion groups and stuff like that. So yeah, it was. We showed at the Berlin Film Festival, and it was so exciting because it was ACT UP/Germany. It was right at the time when AIDS activism and ACT UP was starting to become global, so there was this little German contingent and they had a tape there showing. So then we

had a special screening and all, and that was really exciting to then network with all of these people.

SS: So when you're first making your first tape and your intention was to create activist video, what kind of footage would you choose versus footage that you wouldn't choose?

SE: To be included in it or to shoot?

SS: When you looked at what you had and you wanted to make an AIDS activist video, what kind of footage would make it an activist video?

SE: We just followed along what ACT UP was doing, in a way. It's like these are the issues that they're dealing with, so these are the issues we'll deal with in the tape. This is the type of activism they did; this is the type of activism we'll show. It wasn't so cut and dried as that, but it was kind of like it made sense. That's what it is. I don't even think it was as, "Let's put something in that'll make people angry." It wasn't even that kind of stuff. It was just if you tell the truth, if you show it like it is, people have to see it for what it is, people have to respond to this.

Tape II
00:05:00

And as I said, at the time, all of us – well, I mean Hilery and Jean weren't, but David, Robyn, Gregg and I were all Whitney alumni, and we were all reading sort of post-structural theory and cultural politics and all that sort of stuff. So we knew that we were all coming from a similar, I guess you should call it aesthetic, although it was political aesthetics or something, philosophy. Our philosophy was all similar because we all were, in a way, products of a certain school of thought, which was to eschew traditional documentary style. As part of deconstructive theory, you don't have a truth. You don't have one side of the story. It's not just one presentation. So we didn't want to

have the voiceover telling you, “This is what is happening. This is the truth. This is the story.” We wanted to say, “There it is. You tell us what it means to you.”

SS: Correct me if I’m wrong, but would you say that the difference between activist video versus traditional documentary is that you are not commenting on ACT UP, you are not observing ACT UP; you are part of ACT UP?

SE: Yeah, and as was the tape part of ACT UP.

SS: But that’s different than the theory that you just expressed. So you evolved it?

SE: No, it is and it isn’t, you see, because part of creating a product that was from within was also not creating a sort of given set of ways to view it. I’m not really clearly stating what – we didn’t want a hierarchical presentation of the facts. We wanted a more evolving set of presentation: “This is how it is now. This is where we are. You watch it and you make your own decision” sort of thing. I think it was like that, although, obviously we were, and we had no problem stating our point of view. It wasn’t an objective presentation.

SS: It was truthful, but it wasn’t objective.

SE: Yeah. It was just kind of like we were just putting it out there.

SS: So what changed in your methodology between the first thirty-minute tape and *Voices from the Front*?

SE: We became much more concerned with how things were shot, being a little more sophisticated. We did interviews with people. Did we do it for the first one? We did for the first one too. But it really was a progression. As we got more experienced, we figured out what worked, what didn’t work. And ACT UP was growing.

ACT UP was growing phenomenally, so that changed it as well. It became national. It was no longer just a local movement, which is why we called the first one *Testing the Limits: New York City*. Our group became more – the first one was pretty haphazard, sort of like, “Well, you do this. Okay, how about we do this?” It was more like a group of people getting together and working on it and making it happen. I think that in the next one, as we became more experienced, we came to realize, well, you do have to have a structure. There needs to be a structure in how you work. Again, there was never any hierarchy. It was all we worked together and argued and did all that, even though we would break off in groups. We hired an editor. That was another difference, I mean somebody to help us edit together the rough ones.

SS: Who was that, by the way?

SE: Lisa [Guido]. What was her name? Gosh, she was great. We really liked her. I think it was Lisa something. I forget what her last name was. She would just sort of put things together and then we would come and comment and say, “Well, you need to change this. Could you do that?”

Then sometimes David would go in and edit a little section, or I’d go in and edit a little. We would each take turns doing stuff like that.

SS: One of the big differences that I observed between the two tapes is that *Voices from the Front* situates ACT UP within the history of AIDS activism. It shows the pre-ACT UP history, or acknowledges it. And at the beginning, I think a lot of people in ACT UP didn’t even know what that history was. So it presents AIDS activism as a more sophisticated movement, with its own legacy, which is really wonderful and interesting, and very valuable to have now.

Before we move on from that, I just want to ask Jim, do you have anything about the first two tapes that you want to ask?

JIM HUBBARD: Where did the name “Testing The Limits” come from?

SE: David and Gregg came up with that. It was at a time when there was discussion of people had to be tested. It was when testing for HIV was a big issue. So that was how the word “testing” seemed appropriate. Then “Testing the Limits” because that’s what was happening to all of us. Our limits were being tested.

SS: When Gregg tested positive, did that affect the way decisions were made in the collective?

SE: No. No, I don’t think so. It’s funny now to think about it because it’s odd that it didn’t have more of an effect than it did, to be perfectly honest. My thinking, thinking back, reflecting back, maybe it was just there were so many people with AIDS. You know what I mean? It was so predominant. It was so prevalent that you just kind of like, “Well, yeah.” You know what I mean? Maybe it was almost like that. I honestly can’t consciously say I was, in my mind — maybe unconsciously I did think, “Well, maybe his opinion matters a little more.” I think that just that so many people involved in the project, because as I said, clearly it was our project, but in a way, it was still all ACT UP. So it was just yet another person, unfortunately. So, I don’t think so. Certainly not consciously.

SS: That’s interesting, because on some level it was normative.

SE: In a way.

SS: Because of the world we were all living in.

JH: Do you remember when he did seroconvert? Was it during

Testing Limits?

SE: It was pretty early on. I believe it was during *Voices*. It's terrible, my memory is awful. But it seemed relatively early on to me, although that may not be true. You know how memory is a — I can't remember. Had he started working at GMHC before he — no, I don't think he had, because he ended up working at GMHC with Jean, and they, while we were still doing *Voices from the Front*, then they started doing their tapes for GMHC.

SS: How did you distribute *Voices from the Front*?

SE: Through Frameline, which is a San Francisco distributor, and internationally through a distributor based in London.

SS: Do you remember their name?

SE: Jane Balfour. I don't even know if they exist anymore.

SS: I want to ask you a couple of other questions. Do you remember when ACT UP media people started feeding footage to networks?

SE: What do you mean, feeding?

SS: The networks would never have the good footage.

SE: They started contacting us quite early on, and that was a debate. Do we give them this footage? How will they use it? I remember thinking, can we control how they present us? Is this the best? And that's a dodgy area, boy. So we definitely did provide them with footage, absolutely, and we charged them for it, if we could. "You've got to pay. You want it, you have to pay if you want the shots," and then that money would then go into funding our doing that.

SS: Do you remember any specific examples of that? Did you ever feel that the footage was misused?

SE: No, it was just underused. We didn't sell that much in that way. What we did a lot was more when they were doing reports, like *60 Minutes* was doing a report on something or other and they wanted to show some AIDS activism. We would show that. I might be wrong. It's like was this my story or somebody else's story? Because I do remember a story of thinking that it would be controlled. No, I know what it was, and again, I don't even know if it was my story. How horrible is that? I can't think of what it was, but it had to do with the fact that they wanted some footage of — I think it was Vito Russo, maybe. The reason was because the people, the union people or something, didn't want to touch him and put the mic and stuff on him or something. It was just like, "Oh, my god, are you serious?" So they didn't want to have to do the interview because they didn't want to have to be in a studio with him. But I can't remember if it was our story. {LAUGHS}

SS: You said earlier that you didn't have enough ego to be the solo artist, but at the same time that you guys through doing this, there was this whole other thing going on in ACT UP, which was the New Queer Cinema, which was creating media stars who are now some of the most famous people in American cinema. Do you remember thinking about that at the time or having a relationship to that phenomenon?

SE: Oh, I loved it. I loved that that was going on. I'm not being artificially modest or humble or anything. I loved going to the festivals, talking about the work, having people say, "This is great. I'm so happy you're doing it." Clearly, being

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recognized for all your hard work is great. It's fabulous, it really, really is. But that just kind of wasn't what motivated me in a way, although I have to say, interestingly, when Robyn and I tried to put together a script to do a fiction story, it died. It didn't happen. It was exciting. I think that whole time was really exciting, although I do remember being at a festival and a friend of ours having a fiction film there and getting the distributor attention. And like, "Well, this could be one of the new stars. Yeah, let's go and talk to this person." So there was a certain consideration because our distributor was the same, and we were kind of like, "Hey, wait a minute." Even though it was a friend of ours and we didn't begrudge him this, but it was like, "You need to—." But no, I think it was a really exciting time. It was wonderful.

SS: But what about the fact that all your work is anonymous? You didn't sign it.

SE: Well, our names were on it.

SS: Doesn't bother you.

SE: No, no.

SS: Great. Fantastic.

SE: It got the attention of the right people, I think.

SS: You mention that you were in the Women's Committee at one point. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

SE: Eventually more and more women became involved in ACT UP, a lot of whom were caregivers or sisters, family of men who had AIDS, less so women who had AIDS, although that definitely was. So it became clear that issues were changing within the AIDS discussion, because primarily ACT UP was white men. It was white

gay men getting together and getting to organize. So around the same time as the People of Color Coalition, and then there was a Women's Coalition, and there was one dealing with people in prisons. So it became clear that it was a bigger picture than white gay men dying. And ACT UP responded. The women got together, and oftentimes it was just at somebody's house, and you'd have dinner and you'd talk and you'd discuss issues and stuff. Or with protests, we would organize what our signs were going to say or what our demonstration was going to be or where. There was one at *Cosmopolitan* magazine because of an article that came out. So it addressed AIDS as it affected women. That's what it was formed for.

SS: Do you have anything else about video activism?

JH: Did you film the Cosmo demonstration?

SE: Yes. The footage was terrible. I think our color balance was off or something. I think it's in *Voices from the Front*, isn't it? Did it not make it in?

JH: No, it's not in there.

SE: Oh, it's not in? I think maybe the footage was really bad and we had other women's stuff in there.

JH: I just wanted to be clear about the editing process, the difference in the editing process from *Testing the Limits* to *Voices from the Front*. So *Testing the Limits*, that was done completely collectively.

SE: Yes, and so was *Voices*.

JH: The editing, but then—

SE: So was *Voices from the Front*. *Voices from the Front*, because it was a bigger project, we all had jobs, or some of us had jobs. By that time, the actions were

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happening all the time, and in addition to the actions, we had interviews that we were doing. So by this time, we were cataloguing hours and hours and hours and hours of footage, so we couldn't physically all be together. What we would do was we'd break it down. We'd take those hours, hours, hours, and make a selects reel and break it down to like a couple of hours. So we would log them all, and we would go through the logs and say, "Oh, yeah, that was a good— Remember she said that. Oh, yeah, that was great." You'd sort of circle all of those, and they all had the time codes. It was very laborious as you, I'm sure, know. Then you'd go to that tape, find the time, put it on a Selects reel. They ended up being several selects reels, and we would say, "This selects reel is all this person. It's all interviews from this person's interview." Or, "This is all the CDC demonstration," or something like that.

Then from there we would start making a cut, a real rough cut. So you'd put in, say, five examples of the person saying XYZ, then you'd pick up the best one from that. So you may have one person doing that, but then on Saturday night, say, we'd all get together and look at that cut, that rough cut, and say, "No, no, no, you can't have them saying that, because that makes it seem like this." So then we'd say, "Oh, yeah, but, what you could put in there would be that." So you'd take out another reel and you'd put that in, and then we'd discuss whether that worked or not. "Well, let's try it and see what happens." So as much as we would break off and make edits on our own, and as I said, we hired somebody to make sort of a rough edit, it was absolutely decided upon by everybody, through lots of arguments, which I think, in a way, is kind of great, because it's definitely thoughtful. There's a lot of different heads coming together to make a decision. And then we would have other people look at it and say, "What do you think of

this?”

SS: So you just said, “We’d all come together on Saturday night.”

SE: It wasn’t Saturday night. Probably never Saturday night, but anyway—

SS: That’s what I was going to ask you then. Did you have a life besides ACT UP?

SE: No, no, no. Not at all. Not at all. I worked. I worked at a bakery. So I had an exhausting job. Then I would leave work and go to the office. We’d all meet and do stuff and then you’d go home. And then you’d start your day again. Because it happened pretty much every single day. None of us had lives outside of what we were doing.

SS: Did that alienate you from people who were not involved with the movement?

SE: This is sort of an interesting story. I’m trying to think of the timeline here of when it would have been. No, we hadn’t finished doing *Voices from the Front*, not at all. I had a boyfriend, but he lived in London, so that was perfect, right? Long-distance relationship. But I was mugged and was hospitalized and had a fractured skull. I remember being in the hospital and reflecting on my life, and sort of thinking, “I need to take stock of what I’m doing. I’m not having a life, and I’m cutting off a lot of—.” So I had a few months of reflective – and then, of course, went right back to it. {LAUGHS}

It’s hard when you’re driven, I think, and you’re driven by — I know that some people are driven even if their project is a fiction story. You’re driven because you really – but I think it was doubly intensive because we had become friends and co-

workers or whatever with so many people and so many people who were getting sick. At the time, I was caregiver for a friend. I was a co-caregiver for a friend who was getting sicker and sicker. You kind of don't even think about it in a way. It's just what you do. So, yeah, we didn't have a life.

SS: Was that a care group inside ACT UP or was it a separate friend?

SE: Oh, no. It was a personal friend.

SS: So what made you leave ACT UP?

SE: I think – God, what did make me leave ACT UP? I think I got really tired. I think I just burned out, because we continued doing work. We did a series, a four-part series on lesbian and gay civil rights after *Voices from the Front*, and that took us out of the ACT UP circle. It was changing, also, and it was getting fractionalized. There was a lot of infighting and it wasn't as cohesive. I really think, though, the answer is I got burned out. I needed to start having a bit of a life, anyway.

SS: So I'm at my last question. Is there anything that you think that we haven't covered?

SE: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. No.

SS: So here's my last question. Looking back, what would you say is ACT UP's greatest achievement and what was its biggest disappointment?

SE: Oh, wow. ACT UP's greatest achievement. I think it can be likened to the civil rights movement or the Vietnam War protests, honestly. I think that it reminded people that civil disobedience works. I'm a parent now and I take my daughter, since the beginning, she's gone to anti-war protests. It's something I really want to instill in her, that if you see an injustice, speak out. If you see that there's something wrong,

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don't hesitate. Don't ever, ever be afraid to put yourself on the line for something you believe in strongly. And I think that that was ACT UP's real— it's like, yeah, you can scream and yell. Changes were made because of ACT UP. Policy changes were made. The political scene right now is so horrendous. It's so awful, that I'm like, why isn't there more ACT UPs for healthcare and all of these other things?

And its greatest disappointment? I don't know how to answer that. I don't know how to answer that. It's disappointing that things have a natural end and a natural sort of — I'm sure there's a scientific term for when something just sort of collapses upon itself. But I think that's the way things happen a lot.

No, I guess maybe my disappointment was is it didn't expand to more. Because I remember at the same time there was healthcare. It's too bad it didn't branch out. But that's being overly optimistic, I think, of an activist movement where people are dying. What can you expect?

SS: Thank you. You gave us really incredible information that we really needed. So thank you. It was really helpful.

SE: I did? Amazing. It's probably all false. {LAUGHTER} It's lies. It's lies.