

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

**A PROGRAM OF
MIX – THE NEW YORK LESBIAN &
GAY EXPERIMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**

Interviewee: **Dale Peck**

Interview Number: **113**

Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

Date of Interview: **March 17, 2010**

**ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Dale Peck
March 17, 2010**

SARAH SCHULMAN: The way we start is you say your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

DALE PECK: My name is Dale Peck. I am 42 years old. Today's date is, I believe, March 17th, 2010. And we are in my living room.

SS: Yes, in the beautiful East Village.

DP: Yes.

SS: You and I are like the last two artists who live here.

DP: Yeah, yeah –

SS: And yet we're here.

DP: – I don't know what's left in this building anymore.

SS: So where were you born?

DP: I was born on Long Island, in Bay Shore.

SS: And where did you grow up?

DP: I moved a lot. So I was on Long Island till I was three. Then we moved upstate, and we lived there for a year. My mother died. Then we moved back to the same house on Long Island. Two more quick marriages, and when the second one ended in divorce, we then moved, first to Colorado, for a little while; and then to far-western Kansas for a couple of years, where my father met his fourth wife. And then we moved to a town in central Kansas, called Hutchinson, where we stayed, albeit with several more moves through several more school districts, until I graduated from high school. So, everywhere.

SS: So with all that moving around, how did you start to conceptualize what community was?

DP: Oh, gosh. I think, as with a lot of people, I think my first real conception of community came from a sense of dislocation. Which is to say, when we moved from Long Island to western Kansas when I was seven, we moved to a kinda little town called Tribune. It had about a thousand people in it. And people made us acutely conscious of our accents. And the kids in school, for example, would pretend that they couldn't understand us when we would speak. They would act like we were speaking some foreign language, or something like that.

And one of the interesting things about that town is that it had a very large Spanish population; so large, in fact, that Spanish was mandatory at the grade school. Which, in xenophobic Kansas, in and of itself is pretty amazing. But yet still, my older sister and I were just the weirdos there, because we had, we said "Fauther"; all those other Long Island things. I can't even do it anymore.

So I became aware then, for the first time, that I was no longer among my own kind, when we first moved there. And in that way that I think young children do as a survival mechanism, I worked very hard to assimilate. And within a matter of months, if not weeks, I had lost my accent, for example; I developed this affectation for pointy-toed cowboy boots, which are excruciatingly uncomfortable, especially when you have very wide feet like mine; and yoke-back shirts and everything. I mean, I really wanted to fit in there. To such a degree that when we went back to Long Island for the first time, when I was 13, then

suddenly Long Island was this extraordinarily strange place, which I had mythologized in my head as a kind of a cultural melting pot, and civilized and everything. And suddenly, I met all these people who seemed equally as provincial as Kansans, and everything was filthy and overcrowded, and even the ocean was dirty, and so on and so forth.

So I don't know. Community then came to me to seem really arbitrary and mythologized, and belonging.

I can't say that I had a very stable sense of family either, what with all those marriages and stuff. Neither my father nor my mother were particularly close to older generations, either. So we were dislocated from all of them.

So I think for me it became very much about the elective affinities. And you just, you picked your friends, you picked your family, you picked your community, such that by the time I went to college, and I fell in with the – I went to college as a Young Republican, and within about three weeks, I was completely radicalized. I was a vegetarian and I was a member of the anti-apartheid group, and I was part of the antiwar group, and everything else. And I was president of the Gay and Lesbian Student Alliance before I even came out, and all that kind of stuff.

And I think within just the space of a year or two, it just became very clear to me that community was something that you should chose based on a belief system, rather than simply on the basis of some kind of identity, and all that. And you're about to have your hair played with –

Tape I
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SS: That's okay.

DP: – behind you.

SS: That's okay. But the values you embraced in college are values of accountability and group responsibility. Where do you think you got those from?

DP: Honestly, I think I got them from the people that I knew in college. I went to what was essentially a segregated high school, in Kansas. There was a city of about 35,000 people that even by Kansas standards was relatively white. They had a nonwhite population of I think 4 percent. I could be misremembering this. This includes both African Americans and Hispanics. Virtually no Asians whatsoever.

In like 1925 or so, there was a famous incident, when salt was discovered underneath the edge of town. And within a matter of years, the largest single salt mine in the United States was drilled underneath this town. It's now actually, weirdly enough, the largest depository of old Hollywood films, because it's a mile underground and it's completely moisture-free, so celluloid doesn't deteriorate under there.

But the guy who owned it, Mr. Carey, basically imported a lot of black and Latino laborers to town, and it caused this huge white flight in the town. And among other things, there was a small, just an itty bitty little town of about three or four hundred people to the northeast of the city. And they built a second high school there, and they created this insane C-shaped school district, that stretched around the whole town; such that students who lived 10 minutes away from the main high school in town, where the black and Latino students went,

would be bussed an hour and a half to this other school, so that they would go to a school that remained all white.

And it was a school that, I won't say that it was proud of being all white. But it certainly, it didn't do anything to challenge its assumptions, or anything like that. It was very Republican; it was very Libertarian; it was very America, right or wrong; it was very Christian; all those sorts of things. And like I said, when I went to college, I was a Young Republican. The last year that I was in high school, when I was old enough to work, I spent all of my money buying Polo by Ralph Lauren and Lacoste shirts, so that I would look like everyone else, because my dad was a plumber and made no money, but I wanted to fit in, and all that kind of stuff. I worked on the school paper, but – I didn't even really have an analytical brain at that point. I was so much more concerned with fitting in, passing, everything else. And of course, the kind of early sexual crises were starting; stuff like that.

So it was really, just not till I went to college, not till I was kind of freed of that oppressive burden of family and family expectations and all that; and confronted with a genuine diversity. And this is the diversity at a very small, very private, liberal arts institution in New Jersey, so big quotation marks around "diversity." But still, compared to what I had been exposed to before that, it was just amazing, and it was eye-opening. I still remember the very first friend that I made at college was a black woman, simply because I'd never known a black woman before in my life, and it was so, just the perspective was so completely different. Like everything she said was revelatory to me. And I look back, and I

realize now that I was very fortunate, because she was that type of black woman who could put up with a naive white boy, and not take that attitude, like I'm not here to educate you. But in fact, she was perfectly content to point out my ignorances and stuff, and put up with things. It was great.

There were a couple of women. Both of them, for whatever reason, were Irish — Colleen Dubie and Jo Ellen Monahan — and they took me under their wing, and they taught me that Top 40 music sucked, and that I should be listening to New Wave and alternative and Indie Pop and everything like that, and that the political spectrum was somewhat broader than Ronald Reagan and Michael Dukakis. And it was just down the road from there.

But honestly, I do think that it came from there. Tolerance; examination; analysis; skepticism – none of these things were virtues that were taught to me, either at home or at school. These were things I picked up much later.

SS: So when you were head of the gay student organization in college, when is that? Like 19–

DP: I went to college in 1985. So '85 to '89.

SS: Okay. So you came out after AIDS was already a fact.

DP: Yeah, yeah.

SS: Do you remember your first – was coming out coupled with an awareness that AIDS existed?

Tape I
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DP: Oh, huge, hugely so. I had an awareness of homosexual inclinations as early as 11, 12, 13, and all that. So I'm born in '67. So we're

moving into 1980 now, or something like that. And I had a high school biology teacher, Mr. Best. And looking back, I don't think that he was prejudicial. At the time, everything he said struck fear in my heart, but I think it was simply because I was so afraid. And we were sent to these crazy fundamentalist Christian churches that my own family didn't particularly believe in; they just believed that a child should go to church, and these were the churches that were handy. But they were the kinds of churches where everyone is going to Hell, unless they completely abided by all the rules and stuff. And I was skeptical, but I was also afraid at the same time. At that point, I did not have any real detachment.

But Mr. Best — I think this would have been like Junior biology class — talked about HIV and AIDS. I'm not even sure if it was GRID at that point, what the name that they were using. But he talked about it in very straightforward terms. He did present it as a disease of homosexuals, and I think maybe he mentioned Haitians at that point. But to the best of my memory, he did so in a very straightforward way. At that point, it was a disease, in this country, of homosexuals and Haitians and hemophiliacs; people who'd received blood transfusions. Maybe IV drug users, although I don't think really that that had entered the public conversation that early. He was pretty straightforward about it. But as someone who was very much aware, in the middle of the night, every single night, that it was boys who were the object of my sexual fantasy; these things coupled together, and I did think that to be gay meant that I was going to get this disease. So it was very bound up in it for me.

And I'm not sure when – when is safe sex invented? Like, '86, '87, something like that?

JAMES WENTZY: '83.

DP: '83, that early? No, it didn't penetrate my consciousness until a little bit later on. And I remember going to college, and that's when the *Village Voice* was just a fantastic newspaper, and they did those amazing series of articles on the closing of the sex clubs. Which I read, at that point. They were half pornography, and they were half nightmare, and then they were half just incredibly straightforward reporting, of the kind that now, looking back, I really miss in the world.

But looking at all those kinds of things, and saying, well, okay, is it possible to be gay, and not get AIDS? How do you confront these sorts of issues? And it took me a few years to work it all out. I didn't actually come out, I think, till I was 19 or 20; kind of late sophomore, beginning of my junior year. Even though I had worked very, very hard, from the time I got to college, at finding a group of friends that would make it no problem for me to come out; extremely tolerant friends, to the degree that there were any out gays and lesbians. And twenty-some years ago, it was a very different landscape than it is today. There were far fewer than we would expect at this point.

And it was very much bound up with this fear that there was New York City, a half an hour away; every time people from my college went into the city, we always took the New Jersey Transit into Hoboken, we took the PATH

train, and we got off at Christopher Street. And when you got off at Christopher Street in 1985, '86, '87, '88; you saw AIDS the minute you got off the train.

Those were the days when men with wasting syndrome were walking up and down the street, all over the place; when you saw people with large KS lesions, and everything; when you saw places draped in mourning, and everything else. It was really inescapable.

And it took me a couple of years to kind of work out that there was this thing called safe sex, that safe sex really worked, and that essentially it was a question of being careful, and making choices, and all that. Which is a message I don't think I really fully was able to rationalize — or not rationalize; I was able to rationalize it, intellectualize it, very quickly — but to be comfortable with, I think, until after I joined ACT UP; until after I started getting crushes on men, some of whom were HIV-positive, and dating them, and realizing that safe sex really does work, and all that, and infection is only as scary as you let it be, in essence.

SS: Now what came first; your book, or ACT UP, in your life?

DP: Oh, ACT UP came so much firster; so much earlier. Yeah.

SS: So how did you get into ACT UP?

Tape I
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DP: When I was a senior in college, we worked really hard, because there was that kind of classic Balkanization among the left-wing groups on campus. At that point, one of the big movements on college campuses were anti-apartheid movements, and they were very much concerned with their own thing. There would be the anti-nuke groups, or the pro-left-wing groups, and all that. The big issues of the day, especially were Central America and El Salvador

and Nicaragua, were big touchpoints. There would be the Jewish Students Union, which could swing very conservative or very liberal, just depending upon who was running it. There was the black students group. I don't think there was any major Hispanic group on my campus, just because the population was really small. And there was the gay group and the women's group. And they tended to be very separate. And in my senior year, we made a big push to bring them all together and to say, realizing that we have interests in common, and that a lot of us kind of shared membership in these different groups.

And one of the things that we did put together was this big fair, in the springtime, where we kind of tried to bring all these issues together. And I invited ACT UP to come to campus. And two people came. There was one guy I don't remember, and then the other was Andy Velez. And I just thought Andy Velez was the greatest person I'd ever met in my whole life. He was so warm; he was so smart; he was so funny. He just demystified so much of adult gay life to me, which at this point was still very much a mystery. And I think that's just common for a lot of college kids, in general, that there's this , that bubble that you get when you're living on a college campus, and all that, and I didn't know what life was going to be like afterwards.

And so I just was like, I want to belong to a group where Andy is a member. And I also, I had been working so hard on all of these various lefty political issues in college, and I wanted to continue that. I didn't want to let that go. I didn't want it to be just something that was theoretical, and I wanted it to have a practical aspect. And again, now it's 1989, and god knows, in 1989, the

world needed ACT UP, the world needed AIDS activists. It was a terrible time, but also the beginning of something really amazing, and you could feel it.

And so I saw that, and I said, I'm joining ACT UP the minute I move to New York City.

Of course, I moved to New York City, and I was going to graduate school, and I was living on my own for the first time. In fact, I didn't join ACT UP until the week after Stop the Church, which I think is '90? Yeah. So, I remember –

SS: What year –

JIM HUBBARD: December '89.

DP: December '89. All right. So it was the week after Stop the Church. And I had heard about Stop the Church, and I was going to go to Stop the Church, and then the night before, I instead went out dancing, and I overslept, and I woke up, and there it was, on the front page of all the papers, and I'm like shit – I really wanted to go to that, because among the other churches that I had spent a lot of time in were terrible Catholic churches and all that. And so I was totally down with this demonstration, I really wanted to be a part of it. And I was like, ah well, I missed that one, and I went to the next ACT UP meeting, and then I was in ACT UP pretty much continually for the next three years or so after that.

SS: Now did you know any people with AIDS before you came to ACT UP?

DP: Not a soul. Not a one. At least not that I know of. And looking back still, 20 years, no one that I know of from my college campus was,

and – it was so isolated, in part because it was just, it's college and you're busy and you're at college, and in part because I didn't have a dime to my name, and – if I came to New York City once a semester, that was often. And usually it was as part of a class trip, where every ticket was paid for with tuition. I was lucky if I had ten dollars in the bank at any given time. I was so completely broke, going through college. And so I was just like living in that little bubble.

I remember, one of the things that we did as part of the gay group was organize a trip to get an HIV test. And for a lot of the people, it was a theoretical activity. There were people who, I think, were technically virgins going on this trip. It was just one of those things that we wanted to demystify, and for some reason, it seemed very important at that age to go do it.

But no; no one that I knew. It wasn't until ACT UP that I began meeting HIV-positive people. And also – I must have met some going out, at that point, because I was a big party hound. I loved to go dancing. I was out three, four, five nights a week, and I was working temp jobs, so I wasn't often working, so I had that luxury to do it. Plus, I was 21, and you have the energy when you're 21 to go out dancing every single night. And I'm sure I met people. But if there were any who were positive, I didn't make good friends with them, at that particular time – not because they were positive, just because I didn't make good friends with them. So I don't remember any, until ACT UP.

Tape I
00:20:00

SS: So when you came to ACT UP, we were at Cooper Union, or at the Center?

DP: At the Center, still.

SS: Okay. So how did you plug in to the organization?

DP: {SIGH} I can't remember my first meeting. I don't even know if I can remember my first several meetings. But I do remember that atmosphere, in the Center. And like a lot of people who remember the transition from the Center to Cooper Union – Cooper Union was really comfortable, and especially in the heyday, when there were virtually a thousand people in that room and all that, it was really exciting. But there was just nothing like the Center, right? You were just so packed in there; it was so hot. And of course, there would be all these other people going around to their other activities and stuff there, and so you never knew what was going to kind of come walk by; whether it was going to be the gay Scrabble club, or a group of black lesbians who were getting together to do who knew what. It was just always something like that. And it was one of those things where you just really felt a genuine meeting of diversity, even within a relatively insular community, and all that.

Plus, that was the Center before it was renovated. It was still relatively dingy, which, I've always preferred a dingy space to a fancy space, which is probably why I'm still in the East Village. And I just remember going in there. And there was this atmosphere of controlled chaos. And I don't remember if Ann Northrop was essentially running those meetings back then. But she's, to me, she is the face of, like, the Monday night meeting. It's Ann Northrop; that incredibly calm voice; that just authoritarian but yet completely gentle demeanor, keeping everyone in line. And I've always freely admitted; I grew up essentially without a mother, although I had a revolving coterie of stepmothers and all that.

Put a strong older woman in front of me, and I'm more or less in thrall; I'll do whatever they say. And Ann was one of my first heroes. And I just – go in there, and just absorbed things and all that. You pick up those stacks of flyers, and you'd be reading things from – what was the people who eventually splintered off and formed TAG – what was the name of their working group, that essentially focused on treatment issues?

SS: T & D.

DP: T & D, right. And reading these things, and basically learning about the virology and the epidemiology and the research parameters of AIDS through ACT UP, rather than through the newspapers or through any other textbook or something like that. And it was just – it was educational, it was empowering. I'm pretty sure meetings – they weren't run on consensus, but everything was put to a vote, and it was just – you really just felt this spirit of cooperation, even when people vociferously disagreed about things; and this sense that we could do this; it wasn't, looking back, I even think of an action called the Day of Desperation; but there was never was an air of actual desperation in ACT UP meetings. There was an air of ability and accomplishment and dedication and all that kind of stuff.

I talk to my students nowadays, especially students who are really active in MoveOn and groups like that, and who get so excited about the Obama election. And I'm like, I know Obama's black. But he's essential a middle-of-the-road politician, and all that. And you guys basically clicked a lot of buttons online to send a few dollars, and maybe went to a couple of demonstrations to

elect someone that I think it's really important that got elected. But when I was your age, we were taking to the streets, and we were having meetings, and we were changing policy in a way that hadn't been done since the '60s. And I don't want to take anything away from the kids nowadays, but that was just such a moment. And it's really spoiled me for anything else, I think. I'll listen to people who grew up in the '60s, and who stopped the Vietnam War and stuff with respect. But the kids who worked to get Obama elected and all that; I'm like, I'm pretty sure that George Bush and the Iraq War helped them get Obama elected as much as anything else. And MoveOn's a great organization, but it's not exactly radical activism. It's another version of checkbook activism, really.

SS: So where did you decide to first plug in? What action did you work on, or what affinity group did you join?

DP: I joined Action Tours –

SS: Uh huh.

DP: God bless Action Tours –

SS: Can you tell us what that was?

DP: – and Jim Wagner. Action Tours existed before I joined it.

Tape I
00:25:00

And I've always said to anyone who's ever asked me about my time in ACT UP: I was a rank-and-filer. That's all I was, and I knew it then. I was not someone who had a great mind for the science; science was never my strong subject. And I was not someone who had a great mind for radical tactics and all that. But I was someone who believed wholeheartedly in what we were doing. I was entirely willing to get arrested for it. And I just wanted to be there, and I just wanted to do

whatever I could. But really, I was there to take orders from people who I thought had a clearer vision of this thing than I did.

So Action Tours was, I think, the group that I joined first. And it was essentially run by Jim Wagner, I think just because he was the oldest member in the group. And I don't even remember the names of everyone who was involved. Jamie – what was Jamie's last name?

SS: Leo.

DP: Jamie what?

SS: Leo.

DP: Jamie Leo? Okay. And a bunch of other people. And of course, John Weir was in that particular group. And it was just by chance that we were getting ready for the Day of Desperation. And the day before the Day of Desperation were the raids on the news agencies, which also of course coincided with the beginning of the Iraqi War. And again, just simply by chance, I was part of the CBS action, and we were the most successful one. I'm not really sure why. But it was me and John Weir and Jim Wagner and one other person — I can't remember — he was the person who later turned out to be stealing from ACT UP's treasury; Dan somebody or other, I think.

SS: Yeah.

DP: But at the time, he seemed like a great guy. And so –

SS: So how did you plan it? Tell us what happened.

DP: It's one of those things that seemed really, really terribly easy, at the time. Someone who's name I don't want to say, just because – just in case

there's liability, or something like that — but a former CBS employee basically cut the lamination off of her identification card, which at that point had no magnetic strip on it. We took it to a high-quality photocopier, and just replaced our pictures with it. Re-xeroxed the cards. Which only had fronts. We couldn't really make the back; I think there was a watermark or something that we couldn't reproduce. So they only had fronts on them. And we worked up this story, based on what this woman told us about how the news broadcasts work.

The studio, we were told — imagine it's a U shape around my hand, with this tiny little — hi, Kitty — this tiny little green room, right in the center of it, or control room, or something like that. And it was very common for account executives from CBS's parent corporation to bring people from various advertising accounts into that little control room to watch the broadcast live. So in and of itself, it was not unusual to the literally dozens of techies and PAs and all that other kind of stuff to see strangers standing around there.

And so we all kind of dutifully tried to dress up in whatever our version of advertising people was. And this, again, this was at the time when I was a temp; when I had no money. I don't even think I owned a suit at that point. I remember that I had on this bright purple tie, which I don't know how it could have fooled anyone into thinking that I had any kind of corporate job, and all that. I did have a fairly dignified overcoat, and it was wintertime, so I was able to cover that up. I had some very late-eighties wedgie haircut. Possibly my hair was not its natural color. All these sorts of things. I took my earrings out, but the

holes would have been very visible, and I had four in each ear, and all that kind of stuff.

But there we were, this group of three homosexuals, kind of walking in together. And Jim went in separately. The whole idea was that Jim was going to pretend not to know us, and not to be with us, so that in case something went terribly awry, he wouldn't get arrested, and he could report back. So he's just floating around, and we're all there. And we kind of walk in. And I think it was John was pretending to be the person who was taking us there. And we just knew where we were going.

And we literally, we played it up. We gawked, and we were, oh, look at that, and this kind of stuff, because we were supposed to be tourists anyway, and all that.

And I remember, at one point, I was holding my sign underneath my arm. And I pointed with the arm, and the sign fell out on the floor. And I bent over and picked it up, and nobody noticed. It was just ridiculous.

And then Dan Rather came on, and said, Good evening, this is Dan Rather. And we were out there. And I think it was like seven seconds into the broadcast, and they were off the air for four seconds. Just hundreds of people seemed to jump on us. Nobody actually hit us. There was no violence, and all that. And in the adrenaline rush, everything gets very blurry. But there's a very funny shot. Only John's face got on the actual CBS News. And you can see him going like this, as he's being shuffled off the side of the stage. And then they kind of took us back out into the lobby. And people were really excited, because

Tape I
00:30:00

they thought that we were Islamic terrorists or something like that. And they're like, who do you work for, who put you up, all this kind of stuff. And we kind of let it be clear that we were with ACT UP, and all that. And after about 15 or 20 minutes, everyone settled down. The police came, and all that.

And the whole incident then kind of proved to be so mortifying to CBS that they actually didn't even press any charges, in the end, because it was just – that on the fourth day of the Gulf War, when in fact security was supposed to have been heightened, we didn't have to pass through a metal detector; we could have been carrying guns in. If we'd actually been terrorists, we could have shot Dan Rather, on the air, and all that. And I think they were just so completely mortified that they let the whole thing die. I never even had to go to court over the whole thing.

But again, I take no credit for it. There was just some fear that the charges could be fairly severe, and a lot of people didn't want to risk that. And I was 22; I had nothing to lose. So I'm like, eh, what's the worst that can happen, was the attitude. I don't know, maybe the worst that could happen would have been six months in jail, but it seemed really, really, really unlikely. So I was just one of the few people in the group who was willing to risk it. All the other real planning was done by other people.

So we did it, and we were the number-two news story for 36 hours. Which was exciting. We got the message out there. And in that kind of classic way, at the height of ACT UP, we controlled the message. The message – it was

not a protest against the war; the message was against the lack of serious AIDS coverage on the major news networks, and all that.

And so it was really successful. And we followed that up. The next day was the Day of Desperation, I believe, if I am remembering all this correctly. And the action at Grand Central, and then shutting down 42nd Street on a bitterly cold day, and lying down on that street, and then all getting arrested and stuff. And the classics of spending eight hours in a holding tank, when you have to pee and they won't let you out, and all that kind of stuff. And trying to do your homework, because I was still in school at the time. So on and so forth.

SS: What were the politics of the action? I mean, how did ACT UP relate AIDS to the Gulf War?

DP: Well, I don't think they did. We had been doing the planning for a long time. And I don't remember now which came first; whether it was the Day of Desperation or whether it emerged that we had this in into CBS, and that we were basically going to try to get on the air. But we were planning the action for a very long time. And I think eventually, they synched up so that we wanted to do it on the same day as the Day of Desperation. And it just so happened that for the two to three months that we were planning the action, was that horrible buildup, and the invasion of Kuwait, and then the threatened – well, I guess the invasion of Kuwait happened in the summer, but then there was that big talk from the first George Bush, that eventually culminated in the war. And it just happened to start four days before that.

And we seriously talked about calling off the action, because we did not want to get subsumed into that. I don't think that any of us were particularly for the war, but I also don't think that any of us thought that that particular kind of protest was the protest you would want to make against the war, at that moment. It was very different from the second Gulf War, which was clearly unprovoked. There was the invasion of Kuwait, and it was, to some degree, incumbent upon the international community to respond in some way. And even though the first George Bush's actions were suspect, it required actual discourse, rather than simply a protest.

But at the same time, the AIDS crisis had been going on for a decade at that point. And the news coverage hadn't been getting any better. And it was like, we need to do this, we need to effect that. And like I said, I think we were pretty effective in getting the message out there that this was not a protest against the war per se – although we also made it very clear – I think the first thing that we chanted was “Fight AIDS, not Arabs.” We made it clear that we were not for the war, but we made it clear also that we had different priorities.

That's essentially all we'd get – I think it was “Fight AIDS, not Arabs”; “Money for AIDS, not for war.” And then I don't even remember what the third thing was that we were going to say, because we didn't get to say it before we were tackled to the ground, and all that.

Tape I
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So it was that simple and that concise. And that was the beauty and the effectiveness of those early ACT UP messages. There were people who sat down with Tony Fauci, and sat down at the NIH, and had long, reasoned

conversations about why double-blind studies were essentially condemning thousands if not hundreds of thousands of people to death, and why things had to be sped up, and all that. But when you're dealing with the media, you have to deal in sound bites; you have to deal in very concrete, discrete messages, because anything larger just gets garbled. And we were good at staying on point that way.

So that was essentially the message, and I think that that's what was communicated.

SS: I want to ask about your work, in terms of ACT UP.

You're one of the pioneers of AIDS fiction, as were many people in ACT UP.

A lot of the pioneers of AIDS fiction were in ACT UP. So when you were writing your first novel, which has so much overt AIDS content and gay content; how did you make those decisions? I know that people don't really make decisions about what their books are about; I understand that. But nonetheless, many other people chose metaphor; and you decided not to.

DP: Part of the answer is, I don't know why it seemed so compelling to me. But it did seem to me, from well before I was fully out; well before I was really dating, having relationships with men, and all those other kinds of things; that AIDS was, it was something new on the horizon. It was the kind of thing that the world had never seen before. And it wasn't just that. It was so incredibly devastating to a culture, gay culture, that had been founded on the notion of sexual liberty and sexual freedom. But it seemed to me that it was devastating to just an American, a Western notion of personal liberty and action; that this was something that just impinged upon one's ability to do one of the

most basic of human acts, which is have sex. And it just made a profound impact on my consciousness and on my imagination. From just the earliest age, my very first short stories were always inflected by it.

And then I moved to New York City, and I saw how it was affecting these people that I didn't know before I came here — and when I say “these people,” I don't mean people with AIDS; I just mean the gay community — that came to be so important to me early on, in my life, politically, socially, artistically; all these sorts of things.

And it just seemed to me – it's always seemed to me that as important as metaphor is in fiction, at the same time, there are some things that you have to look at head on.

In a way, I could almost explain it more clearly by talking about another writer than myself. You know Rebecca Brown's work, of course.

SS: Um hm.

DP: And here is a writer who has one of the most unfettered imaginations in the whole world. She's just willing to go anyplace with her stories; into these surreal landscapes, tethered by just the thinnest bonds to reality, and just amazing. But she too saw AIDS as this incredibly important thing. And when she stopped to grapple with it, she – I won't say that she abandoned that method, but she put it to the side, and she adopted this incredibly brutal realism. I always say *The Gifts of the Body* and the stories – I guess it was before that; the story “A Good Man,” the novella “A Good Man,” in the previous collection, and *The Gifts of the Body*; I always say that that is the – in the best possible way, the

reductio ad absurdum of AIDS literature. It's just simply something that stares the epidemic in the face, in a couple of different manifestations and all that, as plainly as it possibly can. And I'd like to say that I was trying to do that in my own way, but I think I dressed it up a little bit more, because it's just too much my tendency, I think, to dress things up.

But it was important for me to grapple with it head on, and you know, when I – several things coincided around the time –

JW: I'm sorry, we have to change the tape –

SS: Okay?

Tape II
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DP: So several things happened around the time of my first book. One of them was, I had been working for the past year for *Outweek*. And they went out of business, and I was able to get unemployment, which was partly how I was able to finish my first book. So this is – my first book was '93, so this is probably late '91, early '92; I don't remember the exact chronology.

But *Outweek* went out of business. And my agent had been circulating my manuscript unfinished, and it had been rejected all over the place, and then suddenly, kind of out of the blue, it was purchased by FSG for literally, I think it was \$5,000 or something like that. But at the time a few thousand dollars was a big deal to me. So between unemployment and that check, and the fact that it had a publication, I was able to start working on the book.

But also, I think right around that time is when TAG splintered off from ACT UP. And I felt to some degree like the group had lost its brain, without a lot of those people. And at the same time, the media had grown very savvy to

ACT UP's demonstration techniques, and it wasn't getting the press that it used to, and people weren't coming up with new solutions for that.

And so I made the decision at that point that I was going to withdraw from ACT UP, at least to finish my first book, and that regardless of whether or not I went back to ACT UP, that I was going to make one of those vows that was very popular at the time: the vow that Diamanda Galás made, to sing "The Masque of the Red Death" until AIDS was cured; the vow that Larry Kramer made when he published *Reports from the Holocaust*, to make sure that AIDS always remained front and center in the national conversation until there was a cure; that I was going to make sure that AIDS stayed a focus of my work, regardless of the permutations it took, for the rest of my career.

And as it happened, after those three years in ACT UP or so, I never really went back to the organization. I took part in a couple of demonstrations and stuff like that. But it did seem to me – because ACT UP, I think, had been so effective in what it had done; because it had made genuine social change; it seemed to me that if I was going to call myself an artist and if I was going to make art that I would have to hold it to that standard. I don't think that art has to function in a political way, in exactly the same way that street activism does. I don't think it can function that way. But it had to be politically engaged; it had to be socially observant, in some way, shape, or form. And of course, in my case, it's fiction. Although there were essays that I wrote as well in that time. It comes through metaphor. But it had to be a part of my work forever.

And that's something that I have always felt conflicted about, and I'll feel conflicted about to this day, especially – Right now, I'm in my forties, and I'm working on a very commercial project, to make money, because there are bills to pay, and all that. And I will feel guilty about working on that kind of thing. I would rather be doing that than teaching four classes a semester, or something like that. But I want to get back to the real work, which is literature. And the literature is always, in some way, shape, or form, to me, about HIV and the AIDS epidemic. Which I think has changed psychologically, has changed culturally, has changed politically, since I first started writing, since I first became aware of it 20 years ago. And it's important that our literature reflect it.

And it's been difficult. I think that the great AIDS novels that we saw, and AIDS short stories, and AIDS plays and everything else that we saw in the late '80s and the early '90s, through '95, '96; they represented a real moment, and that moment kind of went away, as we developed this cultural amnesia slash cultural denial slash cultural fatigue about the whole epidemic, and we just decided that with the advent of protease inhibitors and the subsequent drugs that AIDS had become this chronic, manageable illness, and it was only really a problem in the Third World, and this thing.

Tape II
00:05:00 I don't accept that definition or evaluation of the epidemic, even though I'm sympathetic, and I understand where that impulse comes from. And so I've tried to continue to write about it in some way, shape, or form in my novels.

SS: And what are the obstacles to that? What are the artistic obstacles to continuing?

DP: The artistic obstacle is a couple of things. In fiction, as in anything else, there is a law of diminishing returns. And if you continue to write about something in the same way, it will become less and less effective; it will essentially become an aesthetic trope rather than an actual subject matter. And so those great AIDS novels that we saw — whether it's Allen Barnett's *The Body and its Dangers*, or *Eighty-Sixed*, or, pick your favorite AIDS novel, or AIDS book of short stories. My favorite AIDS book is one that isn't even that much about AIDS, which is Sam D'Allesandro's *The Zombie Pit* — it defines that whole text, and in return the text comments on it.

But those gave way to a kind of institutionalized AIDS novel, in which the tropes were so very much the same. So typically, there would be two persons with AIDS, one of whom would be the sacrificial lamb, and the other of whom would be ennobled, and appear to live on forever at the end of the text; in which there were easy political epiphanies, and this thing.

And in essence, I feel like what a book like that does — it doesn't so much document the ongoing reality of the epidemic as accommodate us to it. It makes it easier for us to accept the epidemic, to accept the disease. And that's not something that I ever wanted to do. To me, AIDS is not something that anyone should have to have, and we should always see it as something that we want to get rid of, that we want to cure; not something — I've always — this is a sidetrack — but I've always been ambivalent about finding a vaccine, because I've always felt like

the minute that we find a vaccine, that we're going to turn our backs on every person who actually has HIV. Because the classic formula with a vaccine is that you let all the infected population die out, and then, à la smallpox, à la polio, the disease ceases to exist, or something like that. And I'm not eager to have people I know, and people I don't know, die out for the sake of the end of an epidemic.

So I didn't want to write anything that was accommodationist. I wanted to continue to find out where AIDS was existing in the cultural subconscious, as it were, after people no longer were willing to confront it head on. And so I wrote a novel about a character who – he's very young, and he has a longish affair with an older man who believes that he infects the younger man with HIV. And he himself comes to think that he has HIV, but he refuses to get tested, because he can't grapple with the existential consequences of what it would mean. Because it's no longer the death sentence that it had been before, and there was a certainty in that, right? There was an almost militant/spiritual/exultational certainty in knowing that you were a victim of an accident of history, coupled with a grave political injustice, and that you could use that to speak a moral truth to the world. That went away after the new drugs came along. And now, it was like, is AIDS a death sentence, or is AIDS just an inconvenience? Is AIDS something that I need to be worried about, or is AIDS actually the end of the world?

There was that great phrase in *The Body and Its Dangers*, when Allen Barnett said, all the way back in 1990, that the world is going to be divided into the HIVs and the HIV-nots. But he never said what the HIVs and the HIV-

nots were, per se — obviously, the HIV-positive people and those who weren't — but what that divide meant is something that continues to mean different things, and ever-more-nebulous things.

And so this character simply couldn't confront it. But at the same time, it seemed very onerous. And so in kind of the climactic scene of the novel — he's not a particularly stable individual — and he decides to punish somebody by infecting him with HIV. And so he pokes holes in condoms; has sex with the guy; and then shows him what he's done.

And I really felt like I was on to something there, when I began circulating this novel, because in everything that I have written — and I've written some crazy, crazy scenes in my life; a guy who gets somebody to rape him with a shotgun, and begs him to pull the trigger, for example; the rape of a white woman by an albino black man with no thumbs, who ties up a gay man and forces him to watch, and then tries to frame him for it — but I have never had people freak out the way they freaked out at this scene, at the idea that somebody might try to infect someone else with HIV. And that told me that all of this talk about AIDS becoming a chronic, manageable illness; all of this talk about the HIV epidemic somehow receding in importance in this country; it was completely fake. That underneath, we have this incredible anxiety; both straight people and gay people. And surprisingly, straight people as much as gay people. Because many of the editors who read this text were straight. They just freaked out about this. And they said, how could you ever expect anyone to have any sympathy for this particular character, who goes around doing this?

Tape II
00:10:00

And I'm like, people have sympathy for psychotic murderers in fiction. People have sympathy for people who beat their wives, women who kill their children, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera. It's fiction; that what fiction is for. You find the humanness in the action. And there were, so many people just refused to see that. Which told me that yeah, there is still some anxiety there.

So to my satisfaction, I guess, or vindication, or something, I felt like I had succeeded somehow, in finding out where the epidemic was hiding in our life. That novel has had a particularly checkered history, in the sense that it's been purchased for publication twice, and in both instances, the companies have gone out of business –

SS: Right.

DP: – before it could be published. So one day, hopefully it will find its place in the larger world, and we'll see if it resonates beyond the relatively limited purview of publishing and the few editors and writers who have read it. But at least the early signs were that this was an AIDS story that hadn't been told yet; that this was something that reflected an ongoing anxiety about the epidemic in the world.

SS: But also, the larger question of how the experience of our generation is now unknown; and how it's affected us is unknown, and we don't articulate how it's affected us. So isn't that the new frontier for AIDS literature?

DP: To bring this back, you mean? To let people know?

SS: To understand who we are now, as a consequence of what we have lived. Which is not on the table as American subject matter.

DP: There's such a huge divide. And I'm not sure exactly what the age gap is. But for those of us in our forties, and certainly for people in their twenties, and it melts away somewhere in the thirties; there is this huge gap, of not just unknowing, but of a deep unwillingness to know about what that was like.

And I don't know if, on the one hand, that maybe is a sign of health. Because, for example, if you take the Holocaust: I find the ongoing fascination with Holocaust stories to be just a little bit sick, myself. Because it's become such a metaphor, and such an easy metaphor, for all kinds of representations of 20th-century oppression, discrimination; the sickness at the heart of mankind. But it's become, in many ways, virtually meaningless.

And I think *Inglourious Basterds* is a kind of prime example of that. It's the Holocaust reduced to comedy; to a vindicating comedy, or something like that.

And I think the fact that maybe that we haven't been, that the younger generation hasn't been willing to go there yet with AIDS: the fact that they haven't made it easy, haven't institutionalized it; maybe it says that at least they sense the horror; they sense the magnanimity of what was going on in that decade and a half or so, at the beginning of the AIDS epidemic. But at the same time, they're not closing with it; they're not understanding where things come from. And I think that's certainly one of the reasons why HIV infections haven't gone down nearly as much as they should have among younger generations,

because just the idea of AIDS, of its consequences, has receded so far from their consciousness, because they don't want to close with it.

In terms of reflecting my experience, from what I went through: I'm less concerned with looking back on that, and recreating it. As I'm a little sad that some of those great books aren't read anymore; that they've gone out of print, or that they sell five copies a year, or something like that. Because there was a record, and it was an incredible record, and it was filled with just incredible books.

Tape II
00:15:00

A few years ago, a British editor and I, Richard Canning, we tried to start a series, actually, with Carroll and Graf, in which we were going to bring a lot of these books back into print. And unfortunately, Carroll and Graf went out business before we could finalize that project.

But we did get one book out, which was Andrew Holleran's *Ground Zero*, which unfortunately, in a kind of classic instance of what you're describing; he elected to change the name, because he felt like Ground Zero had been subsumed by 9/11. And I pleaded with him not to do it. Because that was your ground zero, that was your title, and these were your essays that you wrote as things were happening. And they're one of the richest documents of that particular period; just beautiful and devastating and smart and so raw. He was writing these every month, for two or three years. But he elected to change the title. And I've actually put the new title out of my head, because I don't even – to me it's *Ground Zero*, it will always be *Ground Zero*.

But there are still – *The Body and Its Dangers, The Zombie Pit; Eighty-Sixed; The Gifts of the Body*. These, and a handful of other books — *The Irreversible Decline of Eddie Socket* — they need to have a wider readership out there. People should understand that these books are as important, both aesthetically and politically, as the books that were produced immediately after World War I, as the books that were produced immediately after World War II. These are an incredible artistic and political and historical response to an historical crisis the likes of which had never been seen before, and may never be seen again. And I'm much more concerned with seeing those books being brought back than trying to recreate the experience now. I'd rather do something like this. I think this oral history project is fantastic for that kind of thing. But I don't think I'd ever want to write a book about that period again. I think I feel like I would be faking it.

SS: To me, the most recent really great AIDS novel was *Veronica*, by Mary Gaitskill –

DP: Yeah.

SS: – which is a book that I really loved. And I asked her, what was it like to publish an AIDS novel in a world in which there is no AIDS literature and there is no context for it, and how do people respond? And she said, no one ever mentioned it. It was never mentioned. The word “AIDS” did not appear in any reviews. Everyone discussed it as a novel about a fashion model.

DP: Um hm.

SS: And I just found that astounding.

DP: She has, the fashion model has Hep C? Right? And it's her friends who have HIV? Or does she also have HIV?

SS: No, she dies of AIDS.

DP: She dies of AIDS?

SS: The friend.

DP: The friend of the model. Dies –

SS: Yeah.

DP: – yeah, right. Right, yes. God, yeah.

SS: Yeah.

DP: I read that book kind of back-to-back with a rereading of *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*. And so they blur a little bit in my head. I taught *Two Girls, Fat and Thin*.

SS: It's so interesting that somebody of that stature publishes an AIDS novel and no one will admit that that's what it is.

DP: It just doesn't resonate anymore. And I do think it's denial. And I just – I don't fully understand it. Because it's there; there are still, what, 2, 3 million people living with HIV in this country; there's still 40 million people living with HIV in Africa. It's a stunning part of the contemporary world landscape, and we don't want to know anything about it.

SS: Well it's interesting, looking back in ACT UP, where you have all these people writing AIDS novels — the two of us; Michael Cunningham; David Leavitt, David Feinberg, John Weir; I mean, all these

people — never did we discuss it with each other. It was so far away from what we were doing in ACT UP. It just was like a private matter.

DP: And I think that's one of the reasons why the books were so good — and I don't want to toot our horns — why they were so real. Because there were aesthetic choices, but they were private aesthetic choices. And I don't know how much of it is romanticization, looking back. But when you think about the Lost Generation writers; you get the feeling that they were all getting together, and trying to decide how to write about World War II, and we're going to invent the stream of consciousness, and we're going to specifically tailor it as a way of responding to this. When you look at all of the writers that you just named, there's some overlap in the narrative styles and all that, but there's a great amount of divergency as well.

Tape II
00:20:00

A few years earlier than the big heyday of the AIDS novel, you had the New Narrative novels. And those novels really are very united. But HIV is a very small part of that. Gay identity is a big part, and the enormous sense of political isolation that anyone with a brain felt during the Reagan years. They're very united. But when you get to the heyday of those AIDS novels in the late '80s and the early '90s, they're all so distinct from each other. And I think that that was one of the things that made them so important, is that they were individual, but very culturally aware responses. But the aesthetics were a private matter. They never, ever trumped the message. And I think it's when you trump the message; when aesthetics became more important than what the novel was about; that's when you get the institutionalized AIDS novel.

And I don't want to bash people. But like I think of Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man*. And it's just – it's just such a safe novel. It basically – it tries to normalize everything about being gay and about having HIV and all those sorts of things. And earlier, he'd written this book called *Love Alone*, which were these poems. They were unbelievable, I thought. They just ripped your heart out, and left it beating on the floor. There was nothing safe about that. But then, a couple of years pass, and it just, it gets codified into this safe product. He gets a National Book Award –

SS: Well, it wasn't that safe; he died. He couldn't save his life.

DP: He couldn't save his life. But it was the book that you could get behind, that straight people, that mainstream culture could get behind.

SS: Right.

DP: I mean, I think that – *And the Band Played On* is another version of that, even though it's much earlier. It's a book that offers a safe scapegoat, in the form of Gaëtan Dugas, Patient Zero. It offers these completely invented narratives, of getting inside people's heads and making them more venal, more self-involved, than anyone could have known that they were or weren't; this thing.

Those cases, the aesthetics trumped the message. Not for evil reasons, or something like that. I just think it was a mistake. I think that those great books were very individual, very isolated.

I don't know if it's to some degree a generational thing. We were all, we're all a little bit younger than the New Narrative people, and all that. So

maybe it was already in place, and we came along, and – we were the generation for whom AIDS began in our adolescence, and so it was really a major part of our consciousness.

But it always did seem to me to be a very private act aesthetically. But at the same time, that was the heyday of the Gay and Lesbian Literary Conference, and all those other big conferences. And as much as the creation of those books was very private, there were these incredible public social fora for gathering together to discuss them. You didn't discuss how you were making the book that you were writing at the time; you discussed how you had made the book that you had previously made. You discussed things out there in the world. And so there was that end of it. But yeah, we never talked about it with each other.

SS: No.

DP: I still remember one time when I passed you on the street, and I had just turned in *Martin and John*. And you were asking me if I was happy with it. And I was describing, I think I was really describing certain structural elements. And you kind of stopped me, and said, but are you happy with what it's about? And I just remember thinking – we kind of think about books in a different way; in the sense that I wouldn't have been talking about the sentences unless I was completely happy with what it's about. But you didn't take that for granted. And I didn't think that that was a bad thing. It struck me, two or three years out of college, that this maybe is how literature is made in the real world; that in college, you're presented these groups. You're presented the Beats, you're presented Bloomsbury, you're presented the Lost Generation, as these groups of

people who get together and hammer out an aesthetic. And maybe somewhere in Jonathan Franzen-, Dave Eggers-land, something like that, there are people who get together and have these meetings, and all that. But to me, real art is made by individuals, who are definitely socially aware, but who aren't trading tips; who aren't coaching each other; who aren't saying, you should write a book this way, and all that; who are much more interested in finding out about how others make books than imitating the way that they make books.

SS: I want to ask you about the way people treated each other in ACT UP, versus the way we all treat each other now.

DP: Um hm.

SS: A lot of people that we've interviewed have said that people were valued or respected based on their level of contribution to the group. And many people didn't even know each other's last names, or what they did for a living, and what a person's social status was, or how they could help you. None of that was relevant.

DP: Yeah.

SS: And I remember, when I first got into the theater, I had this talk with Jorge Cortiñas about the difference between the ACT UP value system and the theatrical value system, where everything is based on hierarchy. People would be mean to you if you were lower than them, and solicitous if you were higher, regardless of how they felt.

How is that transition, how was that transition for you? From a community that was cooperative and respectful, to back into the –

DP: Again, it's just like I said: ACT UP has spoiled me for the world. Take John Weir, for example. There we were, side by side, in Action Tours. He's a couple of years older than me. We went to the same writing program. He publishes his first novel to great acclaim. Never would have occurred to me, even, to ask John for an entrée. There was even a certain moment, when my book had been submitted to his editor, and all that. And even then, I didn't ask John to put in a word. It was just – it was so much about what we were doing in ACT UP. And things would just kind of come up, purely by the by. But just so casually.

I remember, I was looking for a job. And my friend Barry Lowenthal was in jail with Walter Armstrong, who was the copy editor at *Outweek*. And Walter had mentioned that they were looking for a copy editor, and he passed the information on to me. And no ad ever had to be taken out, or anything like that. It was just – yeah, everyone had each other's backs. And it didn't matter that so and so had been a suit before they went on disability and joined ACT UP full-time, and so and so was an artist. Very often, you didn't know what people did outside of ACT UP. And if you did know, it was secondary.

And there was definitely an artistic, a major artistic component to ACT UP. And of course, especially the visual artists gave ACT UP such an incredible presence in the world early on. And I think I in particular had such great respect for anyone in ACT UP who worked on the graphics, who worked on creating that visual message, because I think it was so much more powerful than

most of the words that were created there. It had such presence, from the wheatpasting and the slogans and the pins and everything else.

It was just this feeling of mutual respect that I have – I have never found in a group since then. Certainly, obviously, the world is full of nice people, and I try to make friends with them, and all that, and I've got plenty of friends who are that way. But I couldn't go to any particular group, I couldn't say that the New School is like that; I couldn't say that any of the companies that I publish with is like that; I couldn't say that the people that I have lived in this building with for the past 10 years are like that. ACT UP was a group of people who put a cause above everything else. We dated each other, and all that. And it was a famous thing that people were exchanging phone numbers at demonstrations, and all that, and so on and so forth. And there was always that kind of casualness to the whole thing, and sense of fun. But nothing ever got, I don't think anything ever got in the way of the politics and the message and the urgency and the importance of what we were doing. And I have yet to see anything trump that.

I remember going to the massive demonstrations at the beginning of the Iraq War. Hundreds and hundreds of thousands of people. There was no doubt that this was a hugely broad-based popular movement. But I just felt none of that sense of connection. So many people would argue; about what to chant, about where to march, about how much to cooperate with the police, and everything else. It was an uncomfortable experience, almost. If it hadn't been so important to publicly stand up and let the world know that I was an American that did not support this incredibly unjust war, I think I would have left.

Tape II
00:30:00

You never felt that way at an ACT UP demonstration. I never saw two people from ACT UP argue and all that. And when somebody would occasionally lose their head and start screaming at the police or a bystander, you could calm them down in a matter of seconds, because that's not what we were there for, however much righteous anger we might feel. It was unified and it was supportive; it was organized; it was controlled, in the best possible way. And I think all of that made it possible for us to be that much more creative, that much more dedicated, that much more smart about what we were doing. And I think that's why, in the space of four years, we changed the way the epidemic was talked about; we changed the way the epidemic was written about; we changed the way the epidemic was researched; we changed the way the epidemic was treated. And it's really because of that relatively brief period in history that so many people are alive today.

And I say that, again, I want to emphasize: none of these were my ideas. I'm not taking credit for this. The only thing I'll take credit for is, I saw how important it was; I saw how smart and how visionary some of these people were; and I just said, here is my body; use me; use my voice, to the extent that I can support that. And it was just an incredible moment. And I hope that people come together around some other cause like this, whether it's saving the environment or curing AIDS in Africa; something like that. But I have yet to see it, in almost 20 years.

SS: Okay, I just have one last question. So looking back, what would you say was ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

DP: It's greatest achievement has to be what I just said; just the way that we changed the way the epidemic was progressing. I think without any ACT UP, it's very doubtful that we would be where we are today if we hadn't changed the discourse and if we hadn't changed the terms of the discussion and of research. It was an unbelievable accomplishment, and I can't believe that we managed to do it, on some level. It was just perseverance. I wasn't behind the scenes, with any of those liaisons, with people who were actually going into NIH and NIAID, and, god, I forget all the acronyms at this point, and CDC and so forth. I don't know how much people on the other side were meeting us halfway. But I know that what we did was just unbelievable, and sped things up enormously.

The greatest disappointment: I guess maybe the greatest disappointment was that there was a push to take this whole thing broader. Because obviously, the world suffers from more problems than just AIDS. And there was a push to take that whole thing broader, and it was never modulated correctly. Because it would have been so amazing to see that energy taken out into a general platform against social and political injustice. And there were people who wanted to do that. And for whatever reason, it wasn't integrated correctly, and the group began to splinter. And it came to be not so much about AIDS anymore. TAG splintered off, and so on and so forth.

And also, at the same time, because we live in such a cynical, media-saturated culture, the media began to become wise to us, and inured to what we were doing, and the message didn't change, and the ways of responding to it didn't change. And so seeing that kind of decline in effectiveness; seeing that failing to grow into something larger; that was incredibly, incredibly sad for me.

It's always tempered by what we actually managed to do, and that's so important. But it's why, when I look at something like MoveOn, I'm like, eh, it's nice; but it's not ACT UP. And I wish that that energy was there. I wish there was a way – the world faces so many incredibly overwhelmingly urgent crises, and I wish there was a way that that kind of energy — that we saw in the '60s, that ended the Vietnam War; that we saw in the late '80s and early '90s; that if it didn't end the AIDS crisis, it certainly made it a lot better — and I wish that we could harness that energy again, to address the myriad of other problems that face us.

SS: Okay, thanks, Dale.

DP: Thank you.

SS: Thank you. Interesting.