

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: Adam Rolston

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Interview of Adam Rolston
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SARAH SCHULMAN: Okay. So, you start, you just say your name, your age, where we are, and today's date.

ADAM ROLSTON: Okay. My name is Adam Rolston, we're on the roof of my office, and today's date is August 27, 2008.

SS: How old are you?

AR: I'm forty-five.

SS: Right, and we're in Chelsea, I guess.

AR: Chelsea, yes.

SS: Yeah, over your business.

AR: My business, right.

SS: Your design business.

AR: My business is right down there.

SS: That's right. So where were you born?

AR: I was born in Los Angeles, right in L.A.

SS: Your parents were not native Californians?

AR: Well, my father, no. My father grew up in New Jersey, actually, and his family, two brothers, immigrated and worked in the garment district. On my mother's side, I was second generation, so she was born there, and her father emigrated there from Washington State.

SS: Oh, so your family's been in America for a long time, actually.

AR: Yeah, yeah. So the two brothers on my father's side came when they were in their teens, and then my father's mother came when she was twelve to the Lower East Side.

SS: Did you know your grandparents?

AR: I did. They're all passed away at this point.

SS: So when you grew up, did your parents convey to you any kind of articulated politic or sense of social responsibility?

AR: That's an interesting question. On my father's side, my father would always quote his father as saying that there were two kinds of post-war Jew, those that assimilated and those that were socialists, essentially.

SS: And which was he?

AR: The socialist.

SS: And which was your father?

AR: The socialist.

SS: And which were you?

AR: The socialist. {LAUGHS} Loosely speaking. Not literally, but loosely speaking. I guess what I'm saying is that the lefty politics is definitely something that was handed down as a post-war Jewish experience.

SS: And how did that manifest in your family life?

AR: Well, I think to a great extent, the first and foremost thing is just education, and particularly, in every sense of the word, a liberal arts education, a broad education, a broad cultural education. And once you start opening those kinds of doors to any person, I think that it's broadminded thinking.

SS: But how did that manifest? Did they send you to public school?

AR: Yes, definitely. I went to public school until I was fifteen, and then I got sent to boarding school on the East Coast, and that was how I ended up on the East Coast. That was really about my father's wanting to get me back to where he grew up, on some level, I think. But, yes, definitely.

SS: Did you ever see them participate in any kind of political activity or community responsibility type of activity?

AR: Not per se, no active political activity, except for lifelong Democrats, classic, liberal Jewish, lifelong Democrats. Yes, I think the direct action and me being political came from maybe a little bit my sister's and my rebellion against middle-class status quo, those kinds of mores. So in a way, it was a rebellion more than consistent.

SS: So is your sister older?

AR: She was older. She passed away.

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SS: Oh, I'm sorry. So she got politically active, and you think that she turned you on to it?

AR: Yeah, I think she and I together. We were very close. She and I together, I think, whipped each other up.

SS: So what about like the early seventies, Cambodia, Kent State, watching that on TV, the Black Power Movement? Do you remember having feelings?

AR: My relation to that?

SS: Yes.

AR: All that felt very romanticized and distant for me. I think I was definitely aware of it, definitely aware of it through, say, my mother's values. I can't think of a specific example, but if something like that came on the television, she would more often than not be supportive of the marginalized. Her personality, she was very much a caretaker and the rescuer of lost dogs and people.

SS: What did they do, your parents?

AR: My mother was a yoga teacher.

SS: Oh, really?

AR: Yeah, and my father is a retired attorney.

SS: What about Israel? Were you raised with strong feelings?

AR: This is one of my old jokes, the classic sort of Los Angeles assimilated Jew, not very religious. We went to Reform temple until I was about six, and then we stopped going. But I did get sent to Jewish summer camp, which was kibbutz, so I lived on kibbutz for six months, and my sister was there for a year, so that was a big influence.

SS: So your parents wanted you to have a Zionist experience?

AR: Absolutely. Absolutely.

SS: So that when it came to Israel, their politics or their social critique was suspended in some ways.

AR: A little bit. You mean in terms of the sort of dark side of Israel's? Yes. I think they were very sympathetic to the kibbutz movement. I've got to credit my parents with this, with my ability to see this, because when I got there, I was drawn to a particular kind of Israeli, because there were many Israelis that, you were told never to –

hitchhiking was a big way of public transportation around the country, at least at the time when I was there. The first thing you were told was, “Don’t take a ride from an Arab license plate.” That kind of, basically, racism was absolutely, I would say, more common than not.

Of course, my sister and I fell in with this very liberal family that was completely critical of the mainstream Israeli point of view in relation to the Arabs, and so I, even through that experience, had a broader more liberal experience of Israel than I think the typical American would have. And I’ve got to credit my parents with having that kind of – it didn’t come from nowhere. It had to have been through their influence, my ability to see beyond the “Don’t take a ride from a car with an Arab license plate.” To be suspicious of that was part of the upbringing.

SS: So which came first for you, being gay or being an artist?

AR: That’s interesting. Well, definitely being gay, definitely being gay, because I don’t think I could have conceived of – I had a sense of my sexual desires, twelve, thirteen, even if it hadn’t reached consciousness, and I don’t think at that point I even knew it was a possibility to be an artist. It just wasn’t in the language of how I was raised. This was middle class, get a profession, that kind of thing.

SS: So did you come out in high school, or did that happen later?

AR: Really in college, really in college, and didn’t have my first sexual experience until, I think, my third year in college.

SS: When did the politics of Gay Liberation or being gay come into your life?

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AR: I would say I have a very particular context, my coming out and my dealing with or confronting or understanding gay culture in general, because both my older brothers were gay. So there was a lot there already. A lot of, I think, an interesting way a lot of complexity, because my father's first response to them was, "Get yourself fixed." This was like the early seventies. "I'll pay for the psychiatrist, whatever it takes." Then by the time I came out there was relative acceptance, and it was actually pretty easy for me, once I had come to terms with it, to make the speech act. To say it was pretty easy.

But I would say I was more aware of the seventies gay culture because of them than I was of, say, the sixties or liberation gay culture. My brother was very sexually active. He lived in New York City, very involved in the nightlife scene. So that's the oldest, Dean. The next one down, Matthew, at that time he started his career as, and still does – he was a fashion and celebrity photographer, so moving in fancy gay culture, very, lots of cocaine, the whole thing, and I think that's what I saw and had a lot of confusion about for me personally.

SS: But did they bring you along?

AR: Not really.

SS: Oh, too bad.

AR: Not really. Not really. No. I know, that would have been good.

{LAUGHS} I think it was more scary to me, and I think now I romanticize that era, wish that I could have lived through it on some level, just because I think sex post the sixties was just less complicated than it was post-AIDS. But I will say they did bring me along in the sense that they were almost like a second set of parents. There was a spread.

Between my sister and the second oldest brother, there was a spread of about seven or eight years, so they had a big influence. Like, Matthew, they were both moving in New York. The reason I ended up in New York was because of them, absolutely, because Dean was moving in the art world and the nightclub world, and all that seems so exciting.

SS: So we're talking Studio 54, or we're talking the Saint?

AR: Studio 54.

SS: So they were fabulous and had shag haircuts or whatever.

AR: Right, right, exactly. Exactly. Definitely shag haircuts. So it was intimidating for me and a little scary, so I think that was my – was fraught for me in that sense, because that's what it meant to be gay. I didn't have any other model, and that didn't really fit for me on some level.

SS: But when you came out in college, what was the culture like there, the gay culture?

AR: God, I was such a nerd. I don't think I knew anybody was gay until maybe my third year or my second year, and I was in architectural school. I don't know if you have a sense of what the – they tend to be very intense programs, because it's a "profession," so it's a little bit like getting hazed, so just a ton of work. I really just worked all through college, so I don't think I had a real sense of what the campus gay culture was like at all. It's hard to remember at this point, but there was no kind of Gay Community Center or anything like that.

SS: Right. It was all underground.

AR: Yeah. Yeah, exactly.

SS: So how old were you when you moved here?

AR: So I was just post-college. I was in a five-year program, so I graduated when I would have been twenty-four, I guess. Yeah, twenty-four.

SS: What year was that?

AR: So it was 1985.

SS: So AIDS was already in full bloom when you moved here.

AR: Yeah, definitely, definitely. Part of my program was to go abroad to Italy to study, and I had my first sort of sexual encounter in my third year, and my fourth year, which would have been my senior year, I went abroad. So I've had one sexual encounter at this point, and I remember we did some traveling on one of our breaks and went up to Lyon to see some architecture, and fell in with these French kids. We couldn't speak French, they could barely speak English, and one of the first questions they asked me was do I have AIDS, when they found out that I was an American. So, it was there.

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SS: What did you feel when they asked you that?

AR: I think what we all felt; scared, because at that point that's like—

SS: They asked you that because you were gay or because you were an American?

AR: Because we were American. Maybe they intuited gay. I don't think I would have thought of myself particularly as gay at that point. Or at least I don't know if I had a sense of the culture and my identification with it.

SS: Did you feel it was inevitably going to be part of your future?

AR: For sure. For sure.

SS: So when was the first time that it came in your life? Who was the first person that you knew? Was it a friend of your brother?

AR: It was my brother.

SS: Your brother had AIDS.

AR: Yeah. Yeah.

SS: How did that get communicated?

AR: He was diagnosed in '85, so that was pretty pivotal for me.

SS: And he was the first person you knew who had AIDS?

AR: He was the first person that I knew that actually had AIDS.

SS: So can you take us through what his experience was like at that time?

AR: Well, in '85 it was still a death sentence. I think that's how it was conceived. When did AZT start?

JAMES WENTZY: Shortly after that.

AR: Just right after that, yeah, and I think that was the first core response was, "It's just a matter of time." That's how we related it to it.

SS: Did he go into the hospital? What did the doctors tell him to do?

AR: I think the first thing was Kaposi's sarcoma and seeing the spots. When it was diagnosed, he got it, he was living in New York City. I was living here then when he was diagnosed. So I don't know. That's when the family started dealing with it and I started dealing with it in a more real way and thinking about it in relation to myself really for the first time, as opposed to it just being this kind of fearful abstract thing.

SS: Do you remember what his experiences were. I mean how he was treated by the doctors and how his friends reacted?

AR: It's funny. I can talk about what it was like between he and I. It's hard to talk about what his experience was because now it's so filtered through all the stuff that I learned through that era, the things that other friends experienced. I don't remember anything except for a real sense of just helplessness about it in the beginning, and then even as he was starting to start treatments and stuff like that, still this feeling like it was a long shot.

SS: Did he take those early drugs, those pre –

AR: He did.

SS: Do you remember which ones?

AR: I can't. Yeah, I don't know. I don't know. Yeah, I don't know. So, I think at the time he had sort of extricated himself from his corporate job and was running an art gallery, and so he had a kind of nice – like he didn't have to deal with the discrimination stuff that was happening during that period, and I was aware of a lot of that, like job problems with diagnosis, getting diagnosed, dealing with illness, dealing with treatment, and discrimination in the workplace, and he just didn't have to deal with that because he had his own business.

SS: Did he interact with any like institutions like GMHC or –

AR: I can't quite remember, but generally speaking, I would say probably not. He was kind of not a joiner at all, not politically.

SS: Did he get services or no? He didn't have a buddy?

AR: No. No, no. On his own. Definitely on his own. And I think his only access to information and treatment was through doctors, his doctors. But relatively, he was an attorney. He did pretty well, relatively affluent, had healthcare – gay, downtown – had access to at least through talking to people who the best doctors were at the time that were most involved in research and treatment. So I think he had it pretty easy in that sense. I wouldn't say that it was a struggle for him in terms of getting treatment and information, but it's because of his social class. He had access.

SS: Well, you were completely different than him. You took the activist route, and you got plugged into the community.

AR: Yeah.

SS: Do you think that's just a character difference?

AR: I think so. I think so, a little bit. Yeah. Yeah.

SS: How did you first get to ACT UP?

AR: Oh, that's a – I should have thought of this before. I'm not sure.

How did I do it?

SS: Did you go with a friend or something?

AR: No, I'm almost positive I went by myself, yeah, and I know it was "Silence = Death," seeing that, I'm pretty sure, seeing that for the first time and asking what that was. But I do remember going by myself the first time.

SS: What did you find when you got there?

AR: And then I dragged friends. After that, I dragged friends.

SS: What was your first impression, do you remember?

AR: Oh, my god. For me, I spent kind of the first half of my life pretty isolated as a person, just sort of a loner, bookish, very serious, and I think ACT UP came in a moment when I was really, for the first time, accepting who I was as a person, as an adult. I'd gotten out of college, just, and here's this room of people that for the first time, I was completely not into the bar scene or the clubs or was very socially anxious in that way, and here, all of a sudden, there were this group of people that were like me in so many respects, cared about their world, wanted to do something other than just – I don't know, wanted to affect the world in some way, in ways that they cared about.

SS: It's interesting that you say that. Do you think that it was those kinds of people who came there, or do you think that the events made people become that way? I guess it's different for each person.

AR: Tough call. Also, I would say tough call. Even within myself, I would say tough call, was the predisposition there or was all of the anger and whatever about its effect on me and my brother? I always say when the short answer for me is I went to ACT UP because of my brother. I felt I had to do something. I couldn't even do that much for him. I couldn't do anything for him, even emotionally I couldn't, and I had to go somewhere. I think that was true for all of us, had to go somewhere. There had to be something to do, and I think once you got there, you realized there was a lot you could do. There was a lot to be done.

SS: So what was going on in ACT UP when you first came in?

AR: That's all such a blur now. {LAUGHS}

SS: Or do you remember how you plugged in?

AR: I do remember plugging in. I remember going to the first demo, and I can't say which one it was. It might have been Brooklyn Bridge, City Hall. I can't remember what the first demo was, but I do remember thinking, looking around the room and trying to figure out how I could participate, how I could contribute. I'd heard you could do graphics, so that's kind of how I plugged in.

SS: So how did that work? If you were someone who wanted to do graphics, what would you do?

AR: You'd go to one of the planning meetings for one of the actions and say, "Can I help?" I can't remember which one it was, but I did just graphic layouts for the posters that someone else had designed and came up with it, because I had come in late to the committee meeting or something. So I did all the layouts and gave the artwork to the group, and then someone else took it to the printers. It was like that. You just found what could you do that other people couldn't do. That's how you could contribute. And then you just plugged in, and it was all done through the committees, the planning committees for each action.

SS: So can you give us a specific action that you were involved in for graphic design?

AR: I can't remember any of them. Do you remember the one that had – it was a little dull in the end, graphically, but the goal was to get all these statistics up on posters. So it was a bunch of black and white photos with a statistic in the middle. I don't even remember which action it was. It was uptown somewhere. No, I know what it was. It was Gay Pride. It was Gay Pride maybe '87, all the posters for that. That was one where I did most of that with two other people. We worked on the graphics.

SS: Do you know who the other people were?

AR: I can't remember now.

SS: So would you decide what the content of the graphic would be, or would somebody else decide that, and then you would create it visually?

AR: No, and it's interesting, now that I have my own business, design is, particularly in my field, is a very collective effort, and there's so many people involved in it like clients and the junior staff and your business partners, and it's very collective, I often think back to – because in school you're just working by yourself, right? I often think back to that moment as a real strong learning experience for me about how to collaborate, because I didn't know the statistics. Sometimes even at certain points graphics skills I didn't have, but I had some aesthetic sense, and so it would always be three or four people coming together with various pieces of that puzzle and then making it. There's gluing the poster up onto boards, and someone else would do that. It was very collaborative, in a very positive way, for me. I learned a lot.

SS: ACT UP is known for this minimalist graphics style.

AR: Yes.

SS: But was there a feeling like you had to conform to that, or how come so many different people ended up producing work that reflected that?

AR: That was similar. Well, I think I can answer that twofold. One is that I think it was a particular population that was drawn to ACT UP, where there was a broad, I think it was creative, just by definition, of the population, creative, living in New York City, had their eye on, say, what graphic design in general was doing in that moment in the profession, but also what the art world was doing.

SS: Can you articulate what those things were?

AR: Sure. Absolutely. Absolutely. The art world at that moment was people like Barbara Kruger. She's to me the prime example and one of the most cribbed of all the fine artists by ACT UP, and really what she was interested in doing as a political artist was taking the institutional frames, as it were, or frameworks or formats, and subverting them by replacing the institutional information that was about the political mainstream and replacing it with a very particular and minority point of view. So her work all looks like advertisements, but it's all about the female experience or a feminist experience.

SS: Where did you see her work at the time? How did you become exposed to it?

AR: I don't think she'd had a New York show at that point yet, but I think Mary Boone was showing her at that point. But I had an interest, so I was looking. Magazines.

SS: How was that in dialogue with what was going on in graphic design?

AR: So I think even the primary example, which is Silence = Death, it looks like a corporate logo, right, but has this completely subversive and, at least in relation to the political mainstream, message. So appropriating the institutionally empowered format for the institutionally disempowered message, and I would say that as a core idea was consistent throughout the graphics of ACT UP.

SS: Was that ever discussed or was it just implied?

AR: Well, Douglas and I discussed it all the time.

SS: So tell me, what would you guys talk about?

AR: I mean, Douglas actually was—

SS: Douglas Crimp we're talking about.

AR: Douglas Crimp, right. In a funny way, this is the work that was being done. This was how we were talking about it. He, as an art critic, was, I think, both drawn to it but also influencing it just in the way he talked to all of us, and that's something that he was very interested in. Barbara Kruger and Louise Lawler and all those artists of that era were the artists that he was really interested in. So we did talk about it. Definitely, definitely. There was a real self-consciousness about it, like how can we be effective? How can we get a message out in a way that is – it's almost like if the sixties created a kind of aesthetic of marginality, the kind of hippie fringe, as activists we were really busy defining ourselves in opposition to that. "We don't have to do that. That is so automatically dismissed by the political mainstream. Let's find a more subversive way to make people pay attention." I remember one conversation where, "Well, gee, if we make this poster look like this, people will think that we're a huge organization."

SS: Do you remember which poster?

AR: It was the bus ad.

SS: "Kissing Doesn't Kill?"

AR: "Kissing Doesn't Kill." I mean, that really looked like a Benetton ad completely, right? And when it went on the buses, that was the impact, was people would look at it and think, "There's gay people kissing, and it's in the format of a

Benetton ad, so somebody approved of this,” right? And that was the confusion, that that’s an experience.

SS: How was the branding enforced? Let’s say somebody came in and had an idea.

AR: You used the word “branding.”

SS: Well, isn’t that what it is?

AR: Yes, absolutely.

SS: Oh, okay. So let’s say somebody came in and was designing and did what they did, they were a new person, they joined a graphics committee, and they didn’t have the right aesthetic. Would it be corrected?

AR: There was a little bit of – ACT UP had its own hegemony.

SS: Do you remember any examples of that?

AR: That’s an interesting question. It’s like a filter. You’d go into a meeting and you’d suggest something and it wouldn’t fly. Everyone would go, “Oh, no, no, no. That won’t work. That’s not really what we’re getting at here.” Never mean. I never experienced a – because, of course, when I came in, I probably wasn’t, quote, unquote, “up to speed” either, but I think you got pretty – it was a bright crowd.

SS: Who were the design mentors, would you say, within the organization?

AR: I think Gran Fury was really the core group that set the tone, so Marlene McCarty, Tom Kalin. Of course I’m going to forget names here.

SS: Were you ever part of Gran Fury?

AR: I was not. I was not.

SS: So what was your group, your circle?

AR: Our little collective, we called it GANG, just GANG, G-A-N-G.

SS: So can you tell us how that got started and who was in that?

AR: So it got started in a funny way. Gran Fury was closed at that point.

SS: What is that? We just interviewed Loring [McAlpin] and I didn't get a clear explanation of what that meant.

AR: On some level it was a little bit like high school at its most base level. To sort of spin it more positively, I think that you go in and people would have affinities, make friendships, and this was a group of people that actually, as fraught and complicated as Gran Fury as a social organism, because I was friends with a lot of them, they were also really tight, super tight. I think at a certain point that just gelled, and so to have new people coming in that somehow weren't part of that little nucleus, I think was complicated for them. So I think then smaller groups started to form that were independent. I saw GANG. We did little independent projects, videos and things that we wanted to work on together.

SS: But how did it start?

AR: How did it start?

SS: Who were the other people?

AR: So, Wellington Love, Jeff Nunokawa, Zoe Leonard. Again, I'm forgetting names.

SS: So you and Zoe were gallery artists, and Jeff and Wellington weren't, right?

AR: Correct.

SS: And that was the same thing in Gran Fury, the same kind of mix?

AR: Correct. Multidisciplinary, definitely.

SS: So do you remember who you started working with first of those four?

AR: Who set the tone?

SS: Yeah. Where did you get the name? Let's try that.

AR: GANG. I don't know. Actually, it was started with four people.

Now I do remember. It was started with four people, and so it was Gang of Four. Yeah.

SS: Was it after the band or after the –

AR: I don't know. I don't know. I have no idea.

SS: Because wasn't there a new-wave band, Gang of Four?

AR: Definitely.

SS: Oh, okay.

AR: Definitely. Definitely. It might have been that. Could very well have been. I don't remember. Actually, don't remember.

SS: Was this a part of the pseudo thuggish, fake thug image, the fake gangster image of ACT UP?

AR: Exactly, exactly.

SS: ACT UP, who never hurt a fly. Not one act of violence was ever caused by ACT UP, but yet we had that –

AR: All the rolled up tee-shirts and the jeans and the big black boots.

SS: Yeah, GANG.

AR: GANG, yeah. No, definitely, definitely. I remember our first tee-shirt, and it was for Gay Pride. Suzanne Wright had a dog named Eli, and we did this poster that was modeled after a sailor's, had a nautical sailor's theme, very butch, and it said "Queer Dog Eli."

SS: Did it say "GANG" on it?

AR: Yes. So that kind of tough-guy thing. Sorry. Eli was a pit bull, so it was this really tough image. He had a big studded collar on.

SS: But also, that's using the word "queer." ACT UP didn't really use that word so much, right, until Queer Nation happened.

AR: True, true. That was later, definitely.

SS: But this is pre-Queer Nation, GANG, isn't it?

AR: GANG was definitely pre-Queer Nation. But "queer" was definitely circulating. It wasn't as institutionalized as it got with Queer Nation, but that's a perfect example, Queer Nation and all the little splinters. People would come in and their interests would be slightly different than what was already established. I will say GANG, and it's coming back a little bit. One of the things that we were really interested in is, I think Gran Fury started to – I don't want to say "de-gay" AIDS, but the emphasis was on HIV, and particularly as HIV got more and more complex outside specifically the gay community later, which is really when we formed GANG, the gay thing started to drop out a little bit, and we were frustrated by that. I remember that specifically, and we wanted to not let that go. We saw ACT UP as both a gay and AIDS activist organization.

SS: But Queer Dog Eli has no AIDS content.

AR: Well, it was for Gay Pride.

SS: Okay. So did you later do AIDS-related content in GANG?

AR: Yeah. I think mainly what GANG did was stuff for demos, primarily as a way to work together to produce stuff for demos, either specifically for the demo committee that was organizing something or for out little presentation within the demo or an action around that demo or something like that.

SS: Do you remember any specific ones?

AR: I should have looked through all this old stuff I have before I did this with you. The Gay Pride posters that I worked on that I described earlier, that actually was done within GANG. Some of the GANG people had helped me on that and worked with me on that and collaborated on that.

SS: So can you explain the kind of apparatus of how an art collective would function in ACT UP? Did you get money from ACT UP? Did things have to come to the floor? What was the relationship materially?

AR: For us, I don't remember ever going through ACT UP for money or for approval on anything. We functioned to support specific committees that were producing something for an action, or we produced our own thing. Oh, that's not entirely true. I don't know if you remember the sticker that I made, "I am out, therefore I am"?

SS: "I am out, therefore I am," sure. Of course. That's a classic.

AR: So that was made. I had done it as just a little sticker myself, funded it myself, my fellow GANG members helped me stick it up, and I handed it out at ACT UP for other people to stick up. And there was a lot of that, like just people making things to give away and for other people to plaster places. But it was voted on the floor

to use that as a tee-shirt, the official tee-shirt, because we always had a tee-shirt for each Gay Pride. So that was it that year.

SS: The fundraising, the fundraising tee-shirt.

AR: Exactly. Exactly. So that went through the typical approval process.

SS: So you got to see like hundreds of people wearing your shirt.

AR: Yeah, and that was special for me.

JAMES WENTZY: Let's change the tape now.

SS: Oh, okay. Sure.

AR: It's fun to remember all this stuff, actually.

SS: Yeah, it's important actually.

AR: There's very few circumstances at this point where I actually talk about it.

SS: Well, we'll get to that, too, definitely.

JIM HUBBARD: Can I ask a question about GANG?

SS: Yeah, go.

JH: You were talking about how you were concerned about the de-gaying of HIV, and I wondered there is the GANG video color bars –

AR: Yeah.

JH: that say "All people with AIDS are innocent."

AR: Yes.

JH: Was that part of that reaction?

AR: Yes, I would say so, yeah. Yeah.

SS: Can you tell the story of that video?

JH: Do you know anything about the making, or remember anything about the making of that?

AR: Which video? This is the video with –

JH: This was color bars, and it says “All people –”

AR: Oh, right, right, “All people with AIDS”. Actually, do you know what that was made for? Where did you see that? That’s so obscure. It’s literally three seconds long.

JH: It’s ten seconds long. I know because I show it.

AR: Oh, okay. No, that was a very specific thing. The goal for that, we made it. I don’t know if we ever actually did it. I don’t think we actually achieved it. We had a mole at ABC.

JW: Actually, you should repeat his question a little bit.

SS: Because it’s not on tape.

AR: Sure, sure. So the question was *Color Bars*, which I don’t even remember it being called that, but that could be.

JH: I don’t think that’s what it’s called.

AR: Yeah. It was ten seconds. You know when your screen goes – I guess it’s at the end of the night when it goes to color bars or it’s a testing thing that used to be on TV, would come on and then “All people with AIDS are innocent” would flash onto it, and the idea was to – we had a mole at ABC, someone that worked in the editing department, and the idea is that that person would throw it up on the screen during some prime-time thing. I’m not so sure that it actually ever happened, but that was the goal. That’s what it was made for.

SS: Do you remember that person's name?

AR: I don't.

SS: When did GANG move from making graphics into video?

AR: I wish I could answer that. I do remember that the first thing we did was - and a little bit hooked into this idea of the de-gaying of AIDS, was there was, I think, seven of us at that point within the collective, and this was, I think, the first video thing that I remember. We wanted to make a video that talked about a single positive or negative experience that informs our coming to terms personally with being gay, or even just a positive experience in the context of becoming gay, as it were.

So I told this horrific story about in high school, being outed by one of my friends. Even though I didn't know that I was gay or wouldn't have thought of myself as gay, she knew it before I knew it. But then Wellington told this story about this beautiful boy that he followed on his bicycle in Amsterdam, this incredibly romantic little thing that didn't turn into anything at all. It was just this incredible moment for him. So I think that was us trying to get back to the gay thing, as it were.

SS: And what was it called?

AR: I don't remember.

SS: Do you remember where you showed it?

AR: It was in a couple festivals, and we edited it. We did the editing at Arts Intermix. Do you remember Electronic Arts Intermix?

SS: Mm-hmm. But you edited it collectively?

AR: We edited it collectively.

SS: How was that?

AR: And shot it collectively. Tough. {LAUGHS} Tough. But it was collective work, it really was. I learned a lot about - it really was collective work. There's lots of fighting, lots of arguing, lots of hurt feelings, but also a lot of closeness.

SS: What were the relationships? There were all these little art cells, really, inside ACT UP.

AR: Yeah.

SS: There was House of Color.

AR: Yeah.

SS: There was DIVA TV. There was Testing the Limits.

AR: And all of them had overlap. Like Loring was in GANG, but he was also in Gran Fury. And House of Color, Wellington was in House of Color, and so was Jeff, and they did a similar video around that time that was really beautiful.

SS: What was that called?

AR: I don't remember. But it was a very similar format where a bunch of just really cute, differently colored people telling their stories about being gay.

SS: How did all these different organizations relate to each other? Were there rivalries?

AR: I think rivalry, but I also would think of it as more like there was a kind of – I think there was a lot of all that high school negative stuff, but also to just spin it more positively, or to talk about it more positively, there was also a lot of healthy competition. Like, “Those guys haven't dealt with it. Let's us deal with it.” “No one's picked up that issue. No one's thought about the ten-second spot, the color bar spot.

God, no one's thought of that. Let's just do it." That kind of energy. So, healthy, and I think produced great things because of that.

SS: One of the things about these collectives is that people didn't sign their names to the work.

AR: Right.

SS: Then there was this sudden moment when it became crystal clear that you could actually have a career as an artist making work about AIDS as an individual.

AR: Right.

SS: Can you just tell us for you when that moment was?

AR: Yeah. I want to say David Wojnarowicz. Did I pronounce that right? He was the first artist that moved into the gallery system.

SS: But he didn't move from a collective.

AR: No, no.

SS: He was always an independent artist.

AR: No, but it was the first time I was aware of, and, I have to admit, a little suspicious of that kind of mainstreaming.

SS: Why?

AR: Because there's personal gain to be had in all that. I think that I spent a lot of time, because that was my trajectory, I made art during that period as an extension of the stuff that I did in ACT UP. I made that move, and I think I spent a lot of time being very suspicious of, "What's their motivation? Are they using art as a vehicle for communication, or are they using art as a vehicle of—?" And not even critically, just

like what's the most important thing, art career or using the art world as a vehicle for what they were doing in ACT UP?

SS: How did you negotiate that? Let me just say that I have this memory of going to your show and walking in. There was hardly anyone there, and you were there. And I remember –

AR: Which show? Which show?

SS: It was the show with boxes. It was so weird, because usually we were all in a crowd together.

AR: And here's one person by himself.

SS: Yeah.

AR: Nice image. Nice image. Yeah, and I remember, who was it, someone from Gran Fury, and I heard this only secondhand because it was controversial. I think it was controversial at that moment for that to be happening. Not just for me, but for everybody that was doing that, Marlene McCarty or whomever. Someone said, "This has nothing to do with AIDS."

Actually, I should contextualize that comment by the show. The show was a kind of riffing on the Brillo boxes, Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes. So it was stacked up just like his, except they were empty condom boxes. So for me, this was about trying to find the pleasure again.

SS: But how could something about condoms have nothing to do with AIDS?

AR: Have nothing to do with AIDS?

SS: How is that possible?

AR: I think his comment was similar to your experience a little bit, in the sense that how is this going to help the AIDS movement sitting in a gallery?

SS: Oh, I wasn't having that thought, but, oh, yeah, yeah. But okay.

AR: Or even just how does a single-authored mainstream gallery context, how is that going to help?

SS: So what's interesting is that what you're revealing to me is that in the forefront of that discourse of becoming a gallery artist at that time was still this socialist principle of the function.

AR: No matter how diluted. No matter how diluted, yes, absolutely. When I think of all the artists of that era that I really respected, I actually don't even believe in art per se. I think the artistic act is incredibly important for everybody to do, and I think making things is one of the most important things that human beings can do in whatever context, and I consider that art, whether it's a software program or a book or a video, whatever it is. Making things, to me, is what makes the world move forward and be a good place in general. But, yeah, it's a motivation thing.

SS: So could you take us through that experience, like how did you get the show, where was it, how did you prepare, how did you make the work? What year was that?

Tape II
00:10:00

AR: So, I remember one of my things during that era was, and it was embedded in the discourse of the time, was that as opposed to viewing safe sex as negative, as a loss, to embrace it as a positive, to make it –

SS: Did you authentically feel that?

AR: —to make it sexy. Did I authentically? I made myself authentically feel that. I really had not-safe sex only once or twice, is the truth. My first sexual encounters were not safe, my first boyfriend. But post that, it was all safe sex, so you had to learn to eroticize it, and you could, and even as it started to – and during that moment, also, the porn industry was grappling with that and whether or not to include condoms, whether to show the act of putting the condom on, and to me I really mark the moment when mainstream gay culture was able to eroticize the condom was when it actually became part of the video, the porn video. Showing it going on was making it sexy.

So anyway, during that period I wrote. I did some sort of ripping off of Jenny Holzer, I did some text pieces, and it was written porn of that moment of taking out the condom and putting it on and making it sexy.

I lost my train of thought. What was your original question?

SS: You were telling me how you got your show and how you made it work.

AR: Yeah, so I'd done that. I'd done that, and these two gallery owners, gay gallery owners, Wessel O'Connor, had been showing mainstream gay general interest art, and they were looking for a way for their gallery to be relevant to what was going on around them in their world. So they started going out into the community and finding artists. So I was just one of them. They saw that piece and said, "Would you like to have a show?"

I said, "I would love to."

SS: How was it received?

AR: Well. They gave me another show and another show, and then it kind of went from there, and I made art in that context, in the gallery context, for maybe five or six years after that.

SS: Did that change your relationship to other artists in ACT UP once you had a show that was well received?

AR: I'm not sure. Probably. It had to have in some way.

SS: Who was making the safe-sex videos in ACT UP with the two people?

AR: That's - god, what's his name?

SS: I remember them with Peter [Staley] and Blaine [Mosley] and –

AR: Yeah. Oh, how can I be blanking on his name?

JW: Gregg Bordowitz.

AR: Gregg Bordowitz. Thank you. And Gregg Bordowitz was the one who made the comment about my show, actually. He walked in and said, "What does this have to do with AIDS activism?"

SS: And did you talk about it with him?

AR: I don't know if I ever talked. I didn't actually took it personally and I wasn't hurt. I actually understood his comment. I got it. It made sense to me. I think what I said to myself, what I took, the takeaway for me on that was there's many different sites where you can battle these things. Even Douglas Crimp with the book *AIDS Demo Graphics*, he was looking to use that as a vehicle through academics to spread the word, as it were.

SS: How did you guys come to collaborate on that book?

AR: I don't even know how I got introduced to him, but I was drawn to him as a person. He's just generous. If you first meet him, maybe you wouldn't – just a very warm person. I don't know if that's people's first impression when they meet him. He's very tall, so he may be daunting. But I was drawn to him, so we started hanging out. A bunch of us started hanging out. That's when I met Jeff Nunokawa and Wellington I met through Douglas, I'm pretty sure. We just hung out. I was a maker of this stuff, like the graphics and artwork, but I also, even as a maker, I had, which is just me personality-wise, a kind of outside-looking-in, critical, analytical relation to it. So he and I would talk a lot about it. Then he said, "I'm going to work on this book. Do you want to help me with it?" So I helped him. It's his book.

Tape II
00:15:00

SS: Right, but your name's on it.

AR: Right, but I helped him. I helped him.

SS: And how was that as an art experience?

AR: Great, good. Nice, nice. I mean, nice to watch him work, to see how he worked, how he got through material, how he looked at the work. I learned a lot. I learned a lot.

SS: So you were moving from visual graphic, sculptural work, video, and book work. So you were working in a lot of –

AR: And I'm an architect and always have been.

SS: Right. So you were working as an – was that your job job?

AR: Yeah. My day job was I've always been an architect. When I went to college, I asked if I could go to art school, my father, and he said, "No. I will pay for

architecture school. I will not pay for art school.” So I always wanted to and have always done both.

SS: I want to get back to the Warhol issue, because a lot of people do cite Barbara Kruger, but there really is a lot of Warhol aesthetic and influence through all of ACT UP, including the kind of masculinity that was in fashion in ACT UP. Do you think that that was conscious? You made a conscious choice to make the connection, but—

AR: Right. Was that conscious? I think Andy Warhol’s relation to artistic production, that it wasn’t necessarily this rarified thing, that it was a kind of tool, and I do think of that, and I do think of Andy Warhol in that way, that it was a tool. It was a vehicle for, as he would say, fame or whatever, to look at artistic production and cultural production in that way as a vehicle or a tool that could be mobilized by an activist organization, that as an idea was just there. I didn’t think it was born of Gran Fury’s very intellectual relations, what they were doing. I think they thought about that stuff, and then it became part of the culture.

SS: Why did you decide to make it explicit?

AR: It goes back to the gay thing, actually. I didn’t see what was happening in ACT UP in the way that gay people were responding in all the various ways as particularly unique to that moment. I saw they were responding like gay people would respond. It was a gay thing. It was a gay thing, and it was a gay thing for Andy Warhol, too, I think. And I think you put it right. Even the kind of masculinity and the attitudes were born of a sort of previous - we are indebted to a previous generation. A previous generation of gay people made that possible.

SS: Let me look at my notes. So were you on the swim team?

AR: I was not.

SS: Do you have anything to say about the elusive swim team?

AR: They're all beautiful.

SS: Do you remember who they were? Everyone remembers them but no one ever says they were on it.

AR: I know Adam Smith, gorgeous Adam Smith. Loring was on it.

SS: Oh, we should have asked him.

AR: A very close friend of Loring's, and I'm forgetting his name, big blond. I think there was like ten or twelve of them.

SS: How did they function in ACT UP? What was their role?

AR: I say on it. I say on it, but it wasn't really like a committee or anything.

SS: No. Can you explain what it was?

AR: It was just the hot guys, basically.

SS: How did they function in ACT UP?

AR: I think they were friends. Really, it was just a group of friends, and they were all gorgeous and sexy.

SS: Were they accessible? Could you have them, or were they just an object?

AR: Well, I certainly couldn't have. {LAUGHS}

SS: Really? Was it competitive?

AR: No, no, I'm kidding. I could have. I would never have - yeah, anyways, it was just in like high school, the mean girls. They weren't mean, but there was a little social class that existed within that organism of ACT UP.

SS: What was your social experience in ACT UP? How much time of your life did you spend with ACT UP people?

AR: Apart from my job and the gym, basically that was it.

SS: You didn't have other friends?

AR: I had some friends that were from college, a few, but that really was my social life.

SS: Do you think that you became alienated from people who were not in ACT UP?

Tape II
00:20:00

AR: I think I often felt like I was speaking a foreign language when I got outside ACT UP, like among my college friends. I just felt like there was a moment in every conversation that I had with them where they were just kind of - yeah.

SS: What was the meaning of that?

AR: I think that the anger that I felt and was able to express through that just came out, just came out, and it would come out in that context.

SS: And that made them uncomfortable?

AR: Yeah, definitely.

SS: What do you think made somebody go to ACT UP? Like I said, you're our interview number 101. It's all kinds of people. People have no common background. Right?

AR: Yeah.

SS: Most gay people did not join ACT UP.

AR: Truth be told, you're right.

SS: So what made somebody be an ACT UPper?

AR: What was the ideal ACT UPper?

SS: No, what do you think it was, looking back, what kind of person would end up in ACT UP?

AR: When I said I walked into that room and I saw people like me, I think all of us – or a common trait was that HIV and the way that HIV was handled within our culture was an insult, was an insult, and that none of us were going to let that stand. That was, for me, I think, the common denominator was that we weren't going to just sit back and let our culture respond in that way.

SS: Yeah, but when you look back at that time, we had no rights. Sodomy laws were still on the books.

AR: Exactly.

SS: People had nothing. So for people who had nothing, to be outraged that they weren't being treated like citizens when they already knew they weren't citizens, what was that?

AR: Tough question. I don't know. What made a generation of people feel they had the right to be insulted? That's what you're asking. I don't know. I think that that's progress in the best possible sense. Why did Rosa Parks say no? There's a moment when there's enough discussion and enough collective energy and enough collective outrage to make that person say, "I don't have to," for Rosa Parks to say, "I don't have to get up." So I do think that that was the common denominator.

SS: So what about social life, romance, and sex inside ACT UP? Was that also all going on in ACT UP?

AR: For sure. For sure.

SS: You didn't have boyfriends or have sex with guys from outside of ACT UP?

AR: Oh, no. Oh, no. {LAUGHS}

SS: No? So it was an all one-stop shopping?

AR: One-stop shopping definitely. Or I would say that the boyfriends that I did meet, I would draw in. Like my partner now of eighteen years, I don't think we met in ACT UP. How did we meet? No, we met in a bar. And he had been a couple times. But after that, after we started dating and getting closer and closer, he was drawn in by my engagement, so he became an ACT UP member as much as me.

SS: So how did that function? What about positives and negatives? Was that an issue in sexual life inside ACT UP?

AR: Sure. Sure. Sure, and it changed over time. In the beginning, it was filled with fear and anxiety. By the end, it was how do you negotiate it at the practical level.

SS: So you would know what somebody's status was before you had sex with them, in ACT UP?

AR: Not necessarily.

SS: Was there safe sex in ACT UP?

AR: Yes, definitely, at least for me and the people that I had sex with. And I have to say, how you define safe sex was always constantly debated and evolving, but in 1985, by the time I got there, condoms, no question.

SS: Now, what about the thing about somebody rejects you or you break up and then you have to go to the meeting and there they are?

AR: Oh, it was all there.

SS: It was all there every day?

AR: It was all there.

SS: Do you think that was a draw?

AR: Yeah, for sure. For sure.

SS: How did that function?

AR: It was a culture, right? Not just an activist organization. It was a culture, and in many ways, I think that's what made the work so good. There was these just insane personalities, people that you otherwise probably couldn't stand, but because of their personality, just impossible, egomaniacal people. Right? Who made - she was a filmmaker woman. Long blonde hair.

SS: Maria [Maggenti].

AR: Maria. She was impossible, right? But she did incredible work, and I think everyone respected her for that.

SS: That's an interesting question. What was the relationship between the male and female artists, especially when it came to the break towards career-building?

AR: I think generally pretty good, but, again, that might be inflected from my own personal relationships.

SS: Who were the other women besides Zoe that you collaborated with?

AR: Well, Suzanne Wright, although - she was an artist. She was an artist at the time. Nancy Brody. Zoe Leonard. Marlene McCarty. Maria, who was the filmmaker. You. I can't think of them all, but it felt like a pretty healthy relationship to me. I was certainly so self-conscious. I would say also a little bit like when I talked about the difference between my brothers' generation and my generation, I think early gay culture was to a great extent misogynistic. It's how it defined itself. When I say early gay culture, I mean the early '70s, but also the 1920s, there was a kind of separatist definition of gay, and specifically gay male culture is what I'm thinking of. I happen to have been raised by women and like women, so I just really rejected that. So for me, it was a pleasure to be around women and to work with people like Zoe and Suzanne.

SS: Let's talk about the consequences of all of this, because one of the things you said to me –

AR: The consequences of?

SS: Of all of this, of all of these experiences.

AR: Okay.

SS: One of the things that you said to me before we turned on the camera was that you never have a chance to talk about any of this, and actually it's almost like it never happened.

AR: Yeah, it feels that way sometimes.

SS: In some ways, it's like AIDS never happened.

AR: Sure. Sure.

SS: What is the problem? All of us were there, we did all of these amazing things, we changed the world. How come it's not known or seen?

AR: Yeah. I don't know. I run my architecture studio, I'm the oldest person in the room because I'm the business owner. Tends to be a lot of young people. Even just to take a break for this interview, someone said, "Well, what are you doing?"

I said, "Well, I'm doing this oral history thing."

"Oh, for what?"

"Well, this thing called ACT UP."

"What's that?"

Then I had to explain, "Well, I was an activist when I was younger," and it just feels so historical. It's just the nature of history. People forget.

SS: But how do you feel when they've never heard of ACT UP?

AR: It's a little sad. It makes me sad, I think.

SS: What do you think is the reason?

AR: I don't know. One of my business partners is gay, one is not. The gay one, he's much younger. He's ten years younger. He just came into such a different world. That's history, sort of a romantic notion. Like probably my relation to Stonewall.

SS: But the fact that your brother had AIDS, do you mention that to people? Does that come up a lot or is that just sort of –

AR: I'm very upfront about it, yeah.

SS: And it comes up regularly? Or is it something that people don't know about yet?

AR: I think it's part of when I meet someone, it inevitably comes out as my bio or my history or what my life's been like. I talk about it a lot. I've actually had a lot of death in my family, so it becomes a package to talk about it. What's people's relation to it? Is that what you're asking?

SS: It just seems like when we were in ACT UP, so many people died, right?

AR: Yeah.

SS: That we knew, all the time.

AR: Yeah.

SS: It's like they never lived in this weird way, they're never mentioned, and what its impact is on us is something that I don't understand. You must think about that a lot.

AR: I do. The way I think about it is I look at my father, and he's part of "the great generation," right, the wars. The two wars completely informed his childhood and his adulthood. Can I really relate to that? He's a little bit of a Martian to me, and I think that that's how the kids in my studio look at me. They know what it was. They know that it was important even probably in how they've now lived their lives, because it changed things, but I'm still a little bit of a Martian, and I feel like a Martian a little bit.

SS: When did you leave ACT UP?

AR: It's not like you leave ACT UP. You kind of stop going to meetings, the attendance is less frequent. I don't remember.

SS: Do you remember why? What changed for you?

AR: I don't remember, but I will say that was a traumatic period in my life, in all our lives, actually. All of us had to completely readjust. It was like the exit from college or the big chapters in one's life. You had to readjust how you thought about yourself and how you lived in the world and stuff like that.

SS: Can you be more specific? What did you have to change?

AR: We got a dog. Kind of went in, that's what I noticed, actually, among my friends. Stopped making new friends. We turned in. Somewhere in the middle of ACT UP, Jeff Nunokawa, Wellington Love, very close friends, we started this movie night thing on Sunday night where we would watch old movies, and we did it for ten years.

SS: Oh, my god.

AR: Yeah, and so that started in ACT UP, and I feel like at a certain point that became almost the extent of my social life. I worked, go to the gym or something, and I had my Sunday nights with friends, had dinners and movies on the weekend, but everything turned in. We still talked about the same things, still paid attention to the same news stories on television. We hadn't changed per se, but we had privatized all of a sudden.

SS: I only have only one more question. Is there anything that you feel that we haven't covered? Do you guys have any questions? Okay. Well, then –

JW: Do you happen to know the artist Robert Farber?

AR: Sounds familiar. From that period?

JW: Yes.

SS: So my last question is, just looking back, what do you feel was ACT UP's greatest achievement and what do you think was its biggest disappointment?

AR: Its greatest achievement is that we changed the world. Its greatest failure is that we didn't change the world. {LAUGHS}

SS: So do you want to be a little bit more specific there? How did we change it?

AR: I think in very real ways. Like the demonstration at the NIH changed the NIH.

SS: Do you know in what way? What did we win at that demonstration? We've been trying to figure that out.

AR: Weirdly, funny, I said that so authoritatively.

SS: Right. I thought maybe you would know.

AR: But you could also argue that the Republicans changed the NIH, too, basically a kind of deregulation, and that happened to coalesce with what our needs were and what we wanted, and also I think what the Republicans and what the pharmaceuticals wanted.

SS: Oh, you mean the FDA?

AR: Sorry. FDA. Do you know what I mean?

SS: Yeah.

AR: So did we really change the world? I think we did. I think it made it possible to restructure how drugs were accessed and how clinical trials were accessed, and that now lives on as an institutionalized thing. So that's a small example, a very

specific example. But on the other hand, the fact that we had eight years of Bush, we didn't change the world. The world's still the same. I think part of the leftist liberal fantasy is that there's progress, at least for me, that we're getting to a better society where people that – like the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, where people can have – it's a human right to live to your full potential. There's this fantasy of the ideal culture, and you see it in literature from as far back as whatever, throughout history. I think I believe that we were helping at the time, but I feel like we also failed. We only did so much. We could only do so much.

SS: Thank you, Adam.

AR: Thank you.

SS: Okay, great.

AR: It was fun to talk.

Tape II
00:35:00

SS: That's good. It's the first discussion about GANG that we've had, so it's great that we have that.

AR: Too bad my memory is not better.