

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: **Ira Sachs**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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SARAH SCHULMAN: So you start by telling us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

IRA SACHS: My name is Ira Sachs. I'm forty-six years old. It is August 22nd — 24th, 2012. We're in New York City in the apartment I live in right now with my husband, Boris Torres, Kirsten Johnson, the mother of my two kids, Felix and Viva, who are seven-month-old twins.

SS: And your movie is about to open in New York City.

IS: And I have a film called *Keep the Lights On*, which is about to open in New York City, yes.

SS: So, notoriously, you are from Memphis, and everyone who knows you knows that.

IS: Right. I also made movies about Memphis, so I've tried to publicize my Memphis roots so that —

SS: How did your family get to Memphis?

IS: Why you go back. Two immigrations. So my mother's family came to Memphis in 1854, German Jews who I believe came through New Orleans and came to Memphis and opened a dry goods store — that kind of thing. My father's family came around 1900, Eastern European, Russian Polish Jews, and those two families never liked each other, as you can imagine, which was the general conflict between the two immigrations.

SS: Right. That was the Jewish conflict of our generation, was between the Germans and the Russians, and now it's disappeared entirely.

IS: It was. Completely disappeared in two generations. It did not disappear in my mother's generation, and I wouldn't say it disappeared in its entirety, to be honest. You still have lingering feelings that are different around those immigrations, which usually have to do with class and economics, like they do —

SS: So your mother played instruments and spoke foreign languages and was refined.

IS: Yes. And my father went to the University of Florida, Gainesville you know. My mother went to Wellesley.

SS: Right. There you go.

IS: The distinction was there. I think for me, the distinctions between my parents are also: one was extremely bourgeois and the other was much more classically bohemian and sort of hippie. My dad was a kind of hippie, and my mom had a suburban house with a pool and the three kids. They were divorced, conveniently, and in a way that tension is one that I've always participated in, which is who am I, how do I appear in the world, am I an activist or am I a participator, or am I a — how much do I want to be a punk, how much do I want to belong, those kind of things.

SS: But also they produced two artists.

IS: Yeah, my other sister is actually a novelist also, so there's three of us who all — my sister Lynn is an experimental filmmaker. My sister Dana is a novelist, both writes nonfiction and fiction. Then my dad actually had four other kids, who are all sort of in their early twenties, sort of doing different things.

SS: So why did you all become artists?

IS: You know, I think because we could. I think there's a privilege that we had that allowed us to make choices based on what we wanted to do instead of necessarily what we needed to do. You know, my mother, who's not an artist, is always trying to figure out why that happened, and she's, like, she took us to museums and she gave us crayons.

My father is a real original person, he has a lot of originality, and I think he was certainly doing something, living in a different part of town than any Jewish man was living in, listening to different kind of music than most Jewish fathers in Memphis. He was alternative in a certain way. So there was an exposure to lots of difference.

00:05:00 I also think Memphis, we're all three also interested in sort of the nexus between social and political and, for me, psychological. I think my sister Lynn is, in a way, less psychological in her work and really sort of social and political in a certain way. I'm interested in how character is formed in sort of — I made a film called *The Delta* in these places where people bridge or try to bridge different communities, classes, histories, identities. I'm still interested in identity politics on some level.

SS: So which came first, gay, political, or artist?

IS: Gay.

SS: And that was when?

IS: Thirteen. I mean, thirteen was when I first had sex with a man.

SS: So was that a place of social contradiction for you, or was it something that was smooth?

IS: Oh, I think that I'm just getting over it now, really, in my forties. I have this strong sense that we believe we are an enlightened generation that has come up

after Stonewall, that we live in communities in which our gayness is not thrown far away from who we are, it isn't hidden in the same ways. I came out when I was sixteen, but I actually think we're kind of minutes from Stonewall historically, less than minutes in a certain way, and particularly individually we contain that history.

I made this film *Keep the Lights On*, which is about a generation. It's about a couple that's together for ten years in New York and it was based very much on my own work — I mean on my own life and a relationship I was in that lasted ten years. I tried to explain the film in a way to my mother and the issues around — lots of issues, addiction, drugs, bad behavior, compulsive behavior, pain, a lot of pain in that relationship. The way I could best describe it — and maybe this was an attempt to distance myself from the material — was to say that she grew up in the forties in Memphis and African American people who grew up before the Civil Rights Movement, it's not like once there was a right to vote they got rid of all that feeling. That feeling stayed with them. If you meet a seventy-year-old or eighty-year-old or a sixty-year-old black man in Memphis, there were many, many years in which he was formed with a sense of shame and with a fear of violence and all that stuff, and that carries forward. For me it really carried forward until there was a point where my domestic life exploded and that allowed me to try to do something different but it exploded because all of that kind of imploded in a certain way.

SS: Well, also you come out at sixteen. That's 1984.

IS: Yeah.

SS: The AIDS crisis starts in 1981.

IS: Yeah.

SS: So there's the trauma for our generation.

IS: Right.

SS: I mean, I'm quite a bit older than you, but nonetheless —

IS: Not quite a bit.

SS: Well, I'm fifty-four. There's the trauma of homophobia, and then there's the trauma of AIDS, and it's a very particular combination that is really hard to explain, because even though other people have gone through it, there's so much visibility now that it's a completely — the dirty dark-secret generation, which is what we are —

IS: Well, there's so much visibility and there's also so much less — less illness and less death.

SS: So how do you explain to people that special combination and what its consequences are?

IS: It's interesting, because in a way I was able to make — you're asking me questions that I'm not sure I've reflected on. In a way, for example, I have reflected on the impact of the closet on my love relationships and on myself. The impact of AIDS on myself is — I've thought about it maybe in different ways. I made a film called *Last Address* in which I photographed the last residential address of a group of New York artists who died of AIDS, and in doing so, it's just an elegy. It's an eight-minute film, and it's a somewhat poetic rumination on absence and presence, and in a way I'm speaking about something that seems kind of intellectual or constructed, but I actually think that in certain ways that film represented my feelings around AIDS. I guess I've so far thought about them more as an artist and less as a person.

SS: All right, well, then, let's go back. So it's 1984, you're sixteen, you're coming out. You've been having sex with men for three years. Have you heard of AIDS?

00:10:00 IS: I first — no. No. I say no because I worked in New York the summer after my freshman year of college. That was 1984, and I was eighteen, so I was going to turn nineteen later that year. I was eighteen years old, and I was working in New York, and I worked as a busboy at a restaurant called Caramba on Great Jones and Broadway, which there began other things. It was a scene: there were actors and I was this Yale student working there. There was a real dynamic there, including the fact that the owners were trying to always seduce the busboys. They were really unpleasant people, and so there was an element — there was an atmosphere of homophobia from the kitchen staff, which was sort of like I'd be homophobic, too, if the boss was always trying to seduce me by — like, there was a hot tub in the basement, and there was, “Bring me a margarita down to the basement.” There'd be this guy who owned it, he was the size — bigger than Dom DeLuise — in the hot tub.

That was sort of New York and it was a happening place. Believe it or not, Caramba was a happening place and everyone came through there. I remember meeting a couple and we had a little affair. They lived in Hoboken, which was the last time I've been to Hoboken, actually, and it was the — and we had sex. It was the last time I had unprotected sex. So I don't think I did that with the idea of I was having unsafe sex. I didn't know. There wasn't — I didn't — I wasn't aware of safe sex at that point. I wasn't going against something. It was later. It was maybe the next — within

the next few months that idea was made. I knew that idea because I knew there had been this one — that time became the time I thought about most.

SS: So how did you find out? Did you meet people who are HIV-positive?

IS: No.

SS: Did the messages start to reach you?

IS: The messages started to reach me as a sophomore in college.

SS: Do you remember how they came through?

IS: No, it's a really good question.

James Wentzy: Did you go to the baths?

IS: Did I go to what?

SS: To the baths.

IS: No, I didn't. I had been involved in kind of anonymous sexual life in my teenage years. Then when I went to college I thought I kind of got rid of that, like it was sort of like college didn't mean anonymous sex. It meant obsession. [laughs]

SS: It meant love.

IS: It meant love. It meant bad relationships. It meant a lot of other things. But I kind of put aside anonymous sexuality. In a way, I was lucky because if I had come to New York at that point and I had participated, then I wouldn't be here — likely — very possibly.

SS: But being gay at Yale is such a specific experience, and there's so many prominent people in the gay community who went to Yale.

IS: Right.

SS: It's like gay in the ruling class or something.

IS: Right.

SS: I mean, can you explain a little bit of what the scene was like in the mid-eighties when you were there?

IS: Yes. I hear it's still a pretty gay school, which is great. I mean, it's still attracting gay students. They published on the cover of their alumni magazine, "Is Yale the Gay Ivy?" And this was two years ago. When I was there it was a very visibly gay community and there were things like there was an article in *The Wall Street Journal* in which it said, "one in four, maybe more," about gay Yale. It sort of felt like that — there was a dominance.

But I have to say, I arrived at Yale and, as far as I know, I was one of two out gay freshmen when I arrived. By the end of the year, there were hundreds of us. But I only knew one other guy, Larry Helfer, who went to Hunter High School, and I were both out when we got there, which I made a conscious choice to do because it seemed better than to go back in again.

SS: But there was also the contradiction that the people who hurt gay people the most also went to Yale because it's the belly of the beast kind of situation. So George Bush went to Yale.

IS: Right.

SS: So how is all that played out there?

IS: I think we thought in the same way. In a certain way, the privilege of being someone who goes to Yale is also the privilege. It comes before, in the sense that you think you own the place before you even arrive.

00:15:00 It's funny you say that because what I flash to is Temple Israel in Memphis, Tennessee. I felt like that was my kingdom. I was the president of the temple youth group. That's what I felt like when I arrived at Yale. That's the kind of people that tend to go there. It's not 100 percent. There's a lot of people who come there with much more anguish and conflict. I came there with the sense that I could assume authority comfortably and easily and that I deserved it.

SS: So did you become politically involved?

IS: I did.

SS: What did you do?

IS: I think initially I was involved in — by the spring of my freshman year, I was involved in something called GLAD Days, which was like a Gay/Lesbian Awareness Days kind of thing. I was wearing buttons and I was giving out buttons.

That was freshman year. By sophomore year, I was putting on productions that were queer in a lot of ways. I organized a gay arts week, GLAD Arts Days. I came to New York and picked up Quentin Crisp and drove him to New Haven to speak for the night and I took him back. We had John Kelly. We had Jim Sherwood show *Parting Glances*. My friend Kim Sanders and I took Jim [Bill] Sherwood around antiquing because that's all he wanted to do.

SS: And is that the first person you knew who died of AIDS?

IS: I worked on *Longtime Companion* also in '89 when I got to New York. This is interesting in terms of ACT UP, actually, because I got involved — there was a group of about ten of us who organized to change the bylaws of Yale University and to

get sexual orientation included in the nondiscrimination clauses. I was one of those ten people. Dominique Dibbell was one.

SS: Who brilliantly starred in your film, *Lady*.

IS: Brilliant, yes, which is playing on Sunday at the Museum of the Movie Image. So I'm actually going to go see it screened. I haven't seen it in a long time.

But even then I felt like there was — I was active in that group. We met for months. We put on coats and ties and we went to the — you're talking about the power Yale. We went to the board, and the board was like ex-Secretary of State. But I always felt that there was a group of people who could do that better than I did. So there were the people who were going to become lawyers, and they could write the briefs better than I could. There were the people who could kind of deal with — I was a participant, but I wasn't one to enter the real halls of authority and try to change it. I didn't trust myself enough to do that, and I didn't naturally feel like that was where I was going to excel. And that became true in ACT UP as well, in the sense that I was most likely to succeed, I was president of Temple Youth Group, I was directing plays from my freshman year, so I came naturally to being a leader, and I took no leadership role in ACT UP.

SS: Okay. We'll get to that.

IS: Yes. I'm just sort of interested in it.

SS: It's interesting, but I think that's true for a lot of people. I mean, same here.

IS: Right.

SS: That's true for a lot of people.

IS: Yeah, it's interesting.

SS: That's a good question.

IS: But my senior year of college, we won that. We got sexual orientation. I went back recently for — there was a gay reunion at Yale, and a lot of that reunion, what became apparent was the historical spectrum over time and how you were of a moment and there had been a moment before you and there would be a moment after you, and this was a very important thing for me to learn, actually. At this reunion I was aware that in '79 there had been activists who had made it — that it *was* the Gay Ivy. It didn't just happen. There were things that happened in the course, and a lot of that was actually the Civil Rights Movement. So Yale was a very — it wasn't Dartmouth, it wasn't Princeton. It was a place that they were — what's his name? There was a minister there who was a very public figure. There were all these public figures.

Jim Hubbard: William Sloane Coffin.

IS: William Sloan Coffin, exactly. So I think that history, I realized I was a part of that history, and then I realized that everyone after me, whenever they picked up a pamphlet and they opened it and they wanted to know what Yale stood for, they saw that Yale stood for nondiscrimination based on sexuality, that that was a clause in every book that Yale publishes about what they stand for, and that we had been these individuals who'd made that happen. To me, that was a really clarifying thing, how we are born and how we will die and how we can make little marks in the middle.

SS: So at the same time that you're so out and you're doing all of this, it's also the New Queer Cinema is happening, right, and obviously you're aware of it.

IS: Yes.

SS: These are people that are a little bit older than you.

00:20:00

IS: Yes.

SS: How is that affecting how you were imagining yourself as a filmmaker?

IS: Well, I moved to New York. A big reason was I considered — part of what new queer cinema was about was also that cinema was an art form, and that we were part of — we were queer filmmakers, and we were kind of in the world in our heads of Cindy Sherman and the B-52s and the Talking Heads, and there was a world of — the New York art world seemed vibrant and non-kind of — I think the thing that's been interesting about queer cinema was it wasn't particularly — it wasn't particularly commercial, and it wasn't — you didn't know what it was going to lead to. But it seemed like there was a place to go, which was New York.

I applied to film school. I applied to NYU, UCLA, and USC. I applied with an essay about Mussolini's son. Mussolini's son had been sent to Hollywood to learn about Hollywood cinema, and then he went and was supposed to go — he did. He went back and he made fascist films. So I wrote an essay about how I wanted to blow up conventional cinema from the inside, and I was very politically involved, and so my model was Mussolini's son. So if I went to UCLA, I could get out of there and then I could make these really political films. And I didn't get in. [laughs]

SS: You're so lucky. You're so lucky. You'd be directing TV commercials now.

IS: I think I was lucky, and, in a way, I assumed a mantle, and again, it was exactly the time I entered ACT UP. So I came to New York in January of '88. I lived on Smith Street in Brooklyn with Mark Gevisser and —

SS: Were you guys a couple, or were you roommates?

IS: No, we were roommates and best friends, and still are actually, yes.

SS: How did you meet? Because he's such an important figure in all of this.

IS: Oh, Mark went to Yale, so he had come as a freshman, we'd been introduced by — Jewish cousins, really. Johannesburg and Memphis are very similar, their Jewish histories, their race histories, their way that they — so we had overlapping friends who introduced us.

So we moved here in '88, and he was — actually, I moved here in '88, and he was six months ahead of me, and by being six months ahead of me, had heard of some place called — he'd heard of ACT UP. Esther Kaplan had heard of Florent. It was like someone had to tell you to go to these places.

Queer cinema, it's funny, because it's like I really — I think a lot of growing up is sort of constantly feeling like you're a sophomore and there's someone who's a senior that you're modeling yourself after. When I was in college, there was a woman named Tina Landau, who was a theater director.

SS: Sure. I know her.

IS: I was always, like, I want to be Tina Landau, and when I came here, I wanted to be Todd Haynes. I wanted what he had. I wrote about *Poison*, and I wanted to make *Poison. Lady* in a way is very similar in structure. It's got different forms. It's using different ways of telling the story. It's black and white and color. It's postmodern in that way.

SS: Huh. I never would have put that together. Okay. That's interesting. So Mark brought you to ACT UP?

IS: Either Mark Gevisser alone, or Mark and Esther, brought me to ACT UP.

SS: Now, at that point had you had any close friends who had died of AIDS or people who were sick?

IS: No.

SS: So you came to ACT UP without the personal experience.

IS: The fear.

SS: You had the fear?

IS: I had the fear.

SS: Some people have the fear and they run away.

IS: Yes, right.

SS: You had the fear and you came closer.

IS: Yes.

SS: Why is that?

IS: Talking about it from *this* history, it completely replicates what I had in college, which was a place to be active and a place to do things and a community and a

roomful of people. A lot of what was difficult about moving to New York and a lot of what is difficult about becoming an adult is you suddenly don't know where to be. You don't know how to find people. There's no lunchroom. Suddenly you don't have a lunchroom, and in a lot of ways the Center was a lunchroom, as was The Bar.

SS: Right. The Bar.

IS: The Bar.

SS: On Fourth Street and Second Avenue, right?

IS: Exactly. You know, there was a place — and I never felt as comfortable that I would know people at The Bar as I did that I would know people at the Center. It was really comforting to know there'd be a group of people and you'd see your friends.

SS: Okay. So you come to ACT UP.

IS: Yes.

SS: And then what happens? How did you fit in?

00:25:00

IS: I fit in in the back right corner. I literally know where I always sat.

SS: Why was that? So that you could observe everything or —

IS: Yes. I didn't sit alone. My memory of it is that I wanted to be a part but I didn't want to be — I didn't want to be called upon in ways that I wasn't comfortable. I feel like I was really young. I looked at people as being older than me. I looked at people as having expertise, and I was excited by it and I was impressed by it and I was intimidated by it. But it wasn't like I was — I would take roles, but in smaller committees, in — to tell you the truth, I probably was hesitant on some level because I was really trying to figure out what I was going to do with my creative and professional

life. I had been a leader to the extent I had been — as I said, I'd been head of the Memphis Federation of Temple Youth, and I'd sort of decided at that point to never run something again, because I found it extremely claustrophobic. I now do. But I didn't like the responsibility. I think I in a way was — I was sort of lost, I guess, in some ways. I feel I was sexually compulsive, and I was lonely, and I was so — I just felt like no one ever told us how difficult it was to be twenty-four.

SS: But, I mean, in your defense, it's not like ACT UP lacked for leadership.

IS: That's true.

SS: ACT UP didn't — it wasn't like they needed it and certain people didn't stand up. There were plenty of people standing up and taking responsibility.

IS: That's true. That's true.

SS: So there actually was room to comfortably be a rank-and-file person.

IS: That's true. I think that's true, and to feel essential within that role. I'm organizing now for Obama. I'm trying to get a thousand people involved in the campaign, and I have — I'm working with ten or twelve people. Some of whom were in ACT UP, many involved with AIDS activism, many of whom worked at GMHC. A different group of people — and I'm channeling a lot of ACT UP when I think about it. But I — yeah, I don't know. I don't know.

SS: So which committees did you work on?

IS: I guess I worked on the Women's Committee. There was a Women's Committee that I was on. I wasn't on the Youth, but I was also on — I would work on

certain actions. I was involved in certain actions. This is where I was worried about this. My memory of the details of ACT UP is poor.

SS: Well, tell me one anecdote of being involved in something.

IS: Well, I remember being in Albany. We got arrested in Albany, and I remember my night in jail with Don Holder for some reason.

SS: How did you get arrested?

IS: I think we chained ourselves together. We went into their offices, if I'm not mistaken. But, see, I feel like this is where — my test. If you compare — I really don't remember so much. I don't know why. It's an interesting question about why — yeah.

SS: Was that the first time you got arrested?

IS: No, I guess I got arrested three or four times with ACT UP.

SS: Okay. So let's start with that.

IS: Yes, but I don't remember. [laughs]

SS: So you were such a good boy. You were a good Jewish boy.

IS: Right.

SS: And you did everything right. And suddenly there you are, you're being arrested for this homosexual thing.

IS: Well, I'd been arrested at Yale before.

SS: Oh, okay.

IS: There was a union — there was always strikes at Yale, and I was arrested for that. I also did come from Memphis — civil disobedience. We are actually

talking, fifteen, twenty years after '68. The idea of civil disobedience being an everyday thing, it was very common in a lot of ways.

00:30:00 My mother's actually talked about the Reformed Jewish Movement, and this is an aside, but how when she was young and when I was young, the rabbis were social activists. That's the primary position, and also it was a full way for them to assimilate, because if you could be a social activist, then you didn't have to speak Hebrew, and then you could do something else. My father was also a card-carrying member of the ACLU so he ran for House of Representatives as, like, the Left Liberalist.

SS: So do you think ACT UP was a Jewish phenomenon?

IS: Do you think ACT UP was a Jewish phenomenon?

SS: I'm asking you.

IS: [laughs] No, I don't think so. Not if I think of the names and the faces and the last names of people who — I would almost say it was the opposite. It didn't feel very Jewish to me. I think the people that come to my mind who were kind of taking up a lot of space, a lot of them were absolutely not Jewish.

SS: Who were some of the people that stand out for you?

IS: Well, Maria Maggenti and Ann Northrop and — what's her name, starts with an "M", gray hair?

SS: Maxine Wolfe?

IS: Maxine.

SS: Well, she's very Jewish.

IS: Maxine Wolfe, right. You know, Peter [Staley] and — my sense of names is terrible, but — actually, there was a large Latino presence in ACT UP. And I

feel like there was a large — there was WASP and Latino. Maxine was certainly one, but — and there was David [Robinson]. I guess there was some Jewish people. I'm remembering first names. But I think that there was. It wasn't a predominant feeling there.

And also I think the sexual — to tell you the truth, the swim team and all of that was certainly not Jewish. None of them were Jewish. They were all Slavic, it seemed like, or some version. There was also that, a feeling of a somewhat nerdy Jewish boy who was not working out, who didn't swim and barely knew how.

SS: Right. The gay version of the shiksa goddess.

IS: Yes.

SS: Okay, that's interesting. So when you're in ACT UP, did you now have much more proximity to people with AIDS or people who were HIV-positive?

IS: I did, but not on a personal level, interestingly.

SS: How did that happen?

IS: Because there were boundaries. There were generations, I would say. So my group of friends, we went together to ACT UP and we didn't necessarily blur all the kind of lines. We stayed safe. So if we did an act, in general, there was a sense that we were a clique. We were our own little clique, and because of that, the boundaries were ones that didn't seep into the personal so much.

SS: So you didn't have sex with guys who were HIV-positive in ACT UP?

IS: I'm sure I did, but not —

SS: You didn't talk about it.

IS: Didn't talk about it and did have — I was very AIDS-phobic and very safe, extreme, like whatever that — I wasn't AIDS-phobic in terms of the people with AIDS, but I was HIV-phobic, I guess is really the word. As soon as I knew about safe sex, there was never a — I never really crossed boundaries.

SS: So coming from this place where you had protected —

IS: But I did work on — I worked on *Longtime Companion*.

SS: Yeah, let's talk — with Norman.

IS: Which was in '89. But it was almost like we didn't want to look —

SS: The director was dying, right?

IS: The director was dying. The director was on a —

SS: Norman René, right?

IS: Norman René was the director of the film. We shot on Fire Island, which is the last time I've been to Fire Island, which was the winter of '89, to shoot the last scene of *Longtime Companion*. There was a guy who was the hair and makeup guy, and he hadn't been back in a couple of years, and I knew that he had used to go to Fire Island regularly with a group of fourteen men. In '89, he was the only one still alive, and within two years he'd killed himself after *Longtime Companion*. He was positive.

SS: What was his name?

IS: I don't remember. And Norman was sick on set, and, like, in certain — in the scene we shot on the beach, which is the final scene, he was on a cot and he was sick. It sounds terrible or crazy, we just didn't think — we thought maybe it was HIV, but we really told ourselves it wasn't.

00:35:00

SS: So he wasn't openly —

IS: No, definitely not. No, definitely not. Not to me, and I was his assistant. But that doesn't mean I was a personal friend, but I was certainly in the inner rooms of that film.

SS: And how do you understand that now?

IS: I understand it as that there was an enormous amount of shame, and on my side, there was a distance, that in a weird way there was a generation of, like — the generational gap was in years, not in decades. So those of us who were three years younger were in a different place. We were just trying not to go into there.

SS: So what was motivating you in ACT UP?

IS: It is, for whatever reason, it's easier and I can talk honestly and I can answer the questions of feeling and theme better than I can the images. I don't know why that is. There must be some question, but why I remember so many details, so few details narratively, I don't know. I remember like every time I had sex. I just don't remember every time I got arrested. [laughs]

SS: What about did you visit people in the hospital? Were you in a care group?

IS: So, wait. You asked me a question. What was it?

SS: What was your motivation?

IS: What's my motivation? I think I did come of age and came of a sense of being at a time where I felt like making a change and making a difference was a call to arms. It was necessary and it was exciting and it was power and it was intellect. There was an intelligence. I still feel that, like it's interesting brainwork to make things shift. And there was a lot of anger and there was a lot of rage. It was so bald, the lack of care

or interest in our lives. It was the illnesses were extreme and the death was extreme, but the neglect was as much if not more extreme.

SS: We witnessed a lot of suffering in ACT UP, right?

IS: Yes.

SS: Even if it wasn't our closest friends.

IS: Right.

SS: There was Bob Rafsky, there was David Feinberg, there were these people who were profoundly suffering, publicly suffering in front of us there.

IS: Yes.

SS: There was something — there was a visceral experience of that that other people didn't have.

IS: But in a way not as much as you would think, considering how many people — like, it wasn't a roomful of people sick and dying. It didn't feel that way, and I'm curious if we try to figure out why. It didn't feel like a room at GMHC of survivors. There was something else. It didn't at all. I don't think you would have gotten — that many people wouldn't have showed up. Would you agree?

SS: People came to ACT UP for so many different kinds of reasons, and many, many people came that we've interviewed who did not know anyone who had AIDS.

IS: I see.

SS: So there's a lot of different motivations.

IS: I feel like I was one of those people. I mean, I did through ACT UP, but only in the way that one does across a room. I didn't know Bob Rafsky. I never talked to him, except I can hear his voice, but I didn't know him.

I had one friend from Yale who was four years older than me, it was Hugh Steers, who was a painter, who died at thirty-two. That was maybe three years after I graduated from college in the early nineties. But I didn't go through his illness. I was that many years — it's almost like that would define how many years away I was.

I can now list on one hand the people I — one hand, not even two, the people I knew semi-well. Jim Lyons was my lover, and we went out for a year and a half. He was sick during that entire time we were together. He was sick for the ten years before and he was sick for the ten years after. I went into that and then I came out of that.

00:40:00

Esther Kaplan and Bernhard Blythe were very close to Kevin Kennedy, who was Lisa Kennedy's brother. Lisa was a writer at *The Voice*, and there was a whole world at *The Voice*. Kevin died, and I was a friend of Kevin's friends, really. So there were these steps away. In so many ways the youth element of ACT UP is significant in the sense that it really did provide some structure and concept of how to be an adult.

SS: Was there ever anything that ACT UP did that you profoundly disagreed with?

IS: No.

SS: Like Stop the Church?

IS: No.

SS: Needle exchange?

IS: No. I profoundly agreed with those things.

SS: So when did you leave ACT UP?

IS: I left ACT UP, I would guess, around '90.

SS: And why was that?

IS: That's a good question. From my memory it felt more fringe as the years went on. It became more strident, in my mind, it became —

SS: Can you give an example?

IS: It didn't seem as powerful. It didn't seem as potent. It had a fuse, and the fuse had blown, in a certain way. Now, of course, I want to see your films even more, because I'm curious about if it's — what happened first? Did it become less effective, or did I get out of it? Had its effectiveness begun to wane?

SS: In 1990? No. I don't think so. What would you say? No.

JW: There are some differences, but —

SS: I think you're — Ira's in the film, right?

IS: You think I'm being wrong?

SS: Is Ira in the film?

JH: Yes. Well, you're in Target —

IS: Well, maybe '92.

JH: — City Hall.

IS: Yes.

JH: Right, and there's that footage of you at the CDC downtown —

IS: Yes.

JH: — which is 1990.

IS: So maybe it was '91, '92. Maybe it was more years.

JH: '92.

IS: But it certainly wasn't more than — oh, so '92. So there you go.

SS: That's different. Ninety-two is different.

IS: There you go. Then that's it. I didn't leave at a point in which ACT UP was at full steam and I stepped out of it. So probably that make sense. My potency, in a way, is creative, and somehow I didn't find a way to maintain creative — I wasn't as creative in ACT UP as I needed to be in other realms so to me it felt. So if I go make gay films, which is what I tried to do through '97, then I was doing the same work but different and better. Like I was better at that.

SS: All right, so let's talk about that. So after you leave ACT UP —

IS: I feel like I'm frustrating you because my memories are so bad.

SS: That's the way it goes. There was a certain promise or potential for gay content, and there was a moment when it looked like the culture might accept it as part of human experience.

IS: Yes.

SS: And then that didn't happen. Where does that leave people who are committed to that content?

IS: I kind of want to go back to ACT UP. I mean, only because I'm trying to — I'm now just — I'm just sort of thinking the thing that isn't really — like it's weird, because people talk about — it's funny because I'm just — of course, now the faces are running past my head and the faces are not the swim team. They're actually very female, in my head. And I feel like I have had two female crushes — crushes on women, in my

sense, in my adult life, which one was in college, a woman named Maria Schumann, and one on Heidi.

SS: Heidi Dorow?

IS: Yeah.

SS: Because she looks like a boy. [laughs]

00:45:00 IS: But she wasn't a boy. I really had a crush — she wasn't a boy. I'm remembering Tracy Morgan and Heidi and Katie Tozwell, who I lived with for a certain amount of time, and Maxine and Garance [Franke-Ruta] and probably in a way. Within a male world like ACT UP I didn't know Peter Staley — never spoke to him once. I needed to find the girls to hang out with. I needed that group of people which would be more comfortable to me. I was on the Women's Committee of the Dukakis campaign. That was the first thing I did when —

SS: Right, you weren't on the Alpha Male Committee.

IS: No, and I was literally on the Women's Committee. I went in, I got out of college, and I joined the Women's Committee, and I worked with Bella Abzug and Lauren Bacall and whoever. I mean, they weren't fuzzy women, but —

SS: They were on the Women's Committee of ACT UP?

IS: Dukakis campaign, '88, in '88. I've thought a lot about how growing up in a period, a feminist time in a feminist world. I worked for the feminist paper at Yale. My sisters went to Wesleyan and Brown, and they were both feminists. That was a big thing for me, and it meant a lot to me, and it connected to queer activism.

I think what's been really interesting to me — and this happened post-ACT UP — is how much for women of my generation it has mattered that they're women

and they aren't doing the same things as men. But at the time, I didn't think of women as having any different potential as men, I just didn't at all when I was in college, and I didn't in ACT UP either. There wasn't a sense — I'm sure there were frustrations, but there wasn't a sense that there was no space for women voices there.

SS: Right. It's only when ACT UP started to become insiders that that started to break down, but when we were all excluded, there was equality, absolutely.

IS: Right. When you say equality, I flash in my head to the Center, that room, and to Cooper Union, that room, and you can't think of Cooper Union without thinking of Lincoln. You have to think of Lincoln and you have to think of democracy. That's something that I feel — in a way I've been trying to recreate a lot of things that I learned in ACT UP.

SS: Well, I want to talk about *Last Address*. I was just at a party and I met a Reinaldo Arenas scholar, and I was telling him about your film, and it came so many years later that you decided to make that film, and, to me, I've seen it, I think, three times now. The number-one thing that hits me about it every time is the gross disparity of living conditions that these different people went through who were equally important as artists, maybe not famous, but in terms of their contributions.

IS: Yes, yes.

SS: So you go from Mapplethorpe to Arenas and it's the whole economic spectrum of New York City.

IS: Yes, yes, yes.

SS: But it's so subtly conveyed, but it's unmissable.

IS: Yes.

SS: Did you discover that in the edit, or was that part of your intention?

IS: No. I think that — it's hard, because the choice, there's twenty-eight artists who died of AIDS that are remembered in the film, maybe twenty-three, something like that, and they're so personally chosen, that it's not a random sample. It probably represents also what the New York art world looked like to me, the art world that I was exposed to, the art world that I remembered, and the names that came up. I think within that there were these distinctions. It was also kind of interesting about who lasts, and it's not just the people, it's not just Mapplethorpe. I guess the ones who we think most of are Keith Haring and Mapplethorpe. Those are the two. I would say my guess is 90 percent of the people who see that film have only heard of Mapplethorpe and Haring.

SS: Right, because Ron Vawter or Cookie Mueller, I mean —

IS: Yes, Reinaldo Arenas.

SS: Yes, well, he at least had a Julian Schnabel film.

IS: Yes. But, you know, I —

SS: How many of those people had you met?

IS: Maybe five. Jim Lyons and Hugh Steers and Norman René, and that's about it.

SS: So there is an autobiographical —

00:50:00

IS: There was an inclusion of autobiography by the selection, same as there is for this. You're choosing two hundred people over time, and it's like there is a selection process that takes place.

SS: Actually, anyone who wants to be interviewed.

IS: Oh really? But they have to find you.

SS: Yes. So you've named your son after a very important gay artist who died of AIDS.

IS: Yes.

SS: And what do you want that to give him?

IS: Felix Rust Torres, who is my son, is — and Rust is actually the last name of the old man who died in '99, who was the partner of my gay uncle. So there's an idea. We figured once we said Felix Torres, we needed to give him a different middle name. I'm still looking to belong and not belong because I'm pathetic and need to belong to a club, but belong because I want to feel comfortable and I want to feel strong. In a way that's what ACT UP was able to do. It was a very — I think people really had a good — enjoyed themselves. They were comfortable there. There was a —

SS: That's a good point.

IS: People were not uptight. They weren't self-conscious. They weren't in shame. Also it was a place where gay sexuality was shared, it was celebrated. It wasn't hidden. What I found in my forties is that I'm finally comfortable with myself in a way that did take me much longer than I knew it would or was possible in a certain way. I'm organizing, as I said, for Obama, and one of the things I'm trying to channel is

the energy, the — and I just made a film called *Keep the Lights On*, and my motto to myself was to make an imperfect film.

SS: A promise one can always keep.

IS: A promise one can always keep, but also a permission one is allowed. I think ACT UP was — I'm talking in somewhat generalizations, but it was not an uptight place.

SS: That's right.

IS: That seemed like a wave of the future, and I think what happened is ACT UP disappeared. AIDS was more powerful than we knew. Obviously there were great strides made in terms of medicines, and things did change, but in a way, the world was more uptight. It was the end of the sixties. If you call the sixties — the sixties were many things, but one of the things was this idea of communal action, and I've really, really been striving to get back to that.

So when I made a film this year, not only did I try to make an imperfect one, I tried to keep in mind that the social aspect of life, the communal aspect of life is powerful and empowering. It's empowering to me. I run *Queer Art Film*, which is a monthly series at the IFC, where we invite an artist to pick a film that they love and share it with an audience. It's a good idea, but what's really great about it is that every month a couple hundred people get together and they hang out and they watch a movie and they talk to each other, and they're in a room.

Architecture is something you can't underestimate its importance — buildings. There was Cooper Union for us to gather in. There was the Center. There is the IFC. There are these spaces.

SS: It's the lunchroom.

IS: It's the lunchroom, and its architecture is power. What is more powerful than architecture in a certain way?

SS: I only have two more questions, and if there's something else that you want to bring up, let me know. So the first thing is, as an artist and as a filmmaker, what kind of representation of AIDS do you think will be effective in the future?

00:55:00 IS: In my film I use Arthur Russell, the music of Arthur Russell as the score of *Keep the Lights On*, and I discovered Arthur through *Wild Combination* which was documentary. Arthur died of AIDS, and he's in *Last Address*, and he died in '93, and most of his music was unheard in his lifetime. I saw this picture of Arthur about two or three weeks before he died. There's a photograph of him, and he's recording himself. He's lying on the sand by the beach, by the ocean, and he's recording himself and the sound of the waves. He really was on his way out, but this is what he was going to do on a Saturday afternoon, was go out there and record his voice within nature and, I'm sure, make something amazing of it.

I wanted to make a film about that photograph, and I started working on it as a narrative film, and I have not figured out a way in. I'm having a very hard time figuring out a way in, because how do you represent illness? How do you represent what happened, what happened to the body? How do you represent — less death; it's really what happened to the body. I felt the shame that exists around the physical alterations that people go through based on the AIDS medications, is an unspoken conversation.

SS: The Crixivan look, yes.

IS: Many looks, many, many looks, that people walk around the world with, without anyone to talk to about what that feels like to have. I think there's a film in there but I don't know how to represent. I don't know how to represent it.

SS: The one thing is KS [Kaposi's Sarcoma]. I remember seeing Michael Mayer made a film of a Michael Cunningham novel, *Home at the End of the World*, and his characters had KS. It looked like it was drawn on with a Magic Marker. It wasn't this monstrous thing that ate people's faces, which is what I remember it being. I feel like there's so many people who have no idea what KS even looked like.

IS: Yes.

SS: When I saw David Weissman's film, I felt like — have you seen it?

IS: Yes.

SS: I feel like, wow, people have not seen this.

IS: Yes, yes. I think that's true, and I think that's why I made a film about AIDS without any people in it, for exactly the reason of the conflict of representation. I wanted to make a film — my co-writer, Mauricio [Zacharias], and I talked about making a film called *Oh, Fuck, I'm Going to Live*, which I think is —

SS: A lot of people that we've interviewed would fit into that.

IS: Yes, right.

SS: Definitely.

IS: I think the epidemic of mid-forty-year-old HIV and AIDS survivors, whether with or without HIV, who have gotten involved with drugs, crystal meth specifically, and gotten close to dying through that is astounding. I dabbled and I got

close enough to some edge that I realized I'm a nice Jewish boy from Memphis, Tennessee, what the fuck am I doing? But it was — the party was over.

SS: But there's a number of ACT UP guys who —

IS: And there are so little places for people to feel good about themselves.

SS: I want to talk about crystal for a second. There's a number of guys in ACT UP who've died crystal-related, and there's a lot of people who've had incredible struggles with crystal, that are running their lives still now. Do you think — what is the connection?

IS: It's a little like dropping crack into South Central L.A. Certain environments are ready to explode, and if you take all the different elements which include AIDS and that history, but also include shame and also include an enormous amount of secrets, and also a very complex, interwoven, well-developed sex culture, which is all about promoting the secret as being one of the great things about it —

SS: What is the secret?

IS: The secret is not to talk about what you actually do sexually with other people. The secret is sex. The secret is — I don't think it's insignificant that there are so many gay people who live open relationships with each other, which has the effect, 01:00:00 whether you believe in monogamy or not, it means that there are moments when someone comes home and doesn't tell someone something. Something is not being told.

And for me, for a lot of times, that was a great thrill, not telling — the interlude while you're on your way to the bus, basically, the little piece of life that could go without being seen by anyone, that is the middle that you cut out, and then you did A, but you cut out that bar which is sex. Then you drop drugs in there, and then it

just seeped in. Drugs are also — they were different than sex because they were stronger. They're drugs. They're chemicals. There was a sense that for many of us that we could control everything, that we were masterful, that we could control New York, we could manipulate the world, and then, of course, we weren't going to be controlled by something so simple as a pipe. But, actually, it's stronger than you are. And I just think the amount of self-hatred that gay people live with, I'm sure there are many, many other people who live with it, but gay people really — we don't own it, but we have it.

SS: Do you think that that's changing?

IS: For the next generation, you mean? I think it is changing, yes.

SS: So that's the good news.

IS: I do.

SS: Well, then here's my last question, then, since we're ending with good news.

IS: Great.

SS: Just looking back with hindsight, what, in your mind, is ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what would you say is its biggest disappointment?

IS: I think its greatest achievement is the actual change that took place, is the idea — is the David and Goliath, really, and is that the fact that Goliath said, "This is how it has to be done," and David said, "No, we think there's another way." And the other way won and the other way proved to be correct. There is so much that has come from that, including life, including — so it's actually the factual things that happened around ACT UP, the changes that came out that are the most important thing, even more than the social kind of existence of it.

What is most disappointing is how little — I wouldn't even say how little the organized communal action disappeared. That's not — it's the individual. It's the lack of that narrative being one for the vast majority of individuals who are in ACT UP who felt that their moment of being part of the opposition was contained within ACT UP. I, in a lot of ways, include myself in that, but I then went off on a professional track that I thought was somehow more important and was actually what it was also was more closeted.

SS: What made you come back to institution-building for the community?

IS: Institution-building and also a different set of creative work that I'm doing, I would say. I wouldn't just say it's the institution-building. Specifically, well, two things: I worked on the Obama campaign in 2008, and I organized my friends to organize our friends, and I found that I had the skills that were about bringing people together easily, and as a director, it came naturally to me, and that there was just as many resources around community organizing as there was around making a film in New York. People were good at it. I like collaboration, so I was good at bringing people together and then I wanted to continue that.

But I needed — it's a little like the ACT UP question. I needed to do it in a way that was comfortable to me, so I had to sit with what I wanted to do to continue my activism for at least a few months to a year, and then I was offered — someone asked if I wanted to organize a night at the 92nd Street "Y" Tribeca, which was a new theater, and I came up with the idea of doing a month series, and I came up with the idea of *Queer Art Film*. When I started going out with Boris Torres, my husband now, one of the things we

01:05:00 committed to each other was to say yes to things instead of saying no, and that was kind of like the way we lived in the first few years that we did things together, and I said yes to organizing an event which is now three and a half years later still going on. What's interesting is I'm not on the periphery of it, and probably because it's in the realm of things that I'm more comfortable on some levels, and I'm older.

SS: Okay. Yes.

IS: Yes.

SS: Thank you.

IS: Thank you.