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Interviewee: **Jason Simon**

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Interviewer: **Sarah Schulman**

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ACT UP Oral History Project
Interview of Jason Simon
December 8, 2013

SARAH SCHULMAN: So the way we usually start is, you just tell us your name, your age, today's date, and where we are.

JASON SIMON: Okay. Tell me when I should go.

SS: You should go.

JS: My name is Jason Simon.

SS: Um hm.

JS: Today is December 8, 2013. We are at my apartment at 790 Riverside Drive, New York City, New York.

SS: And how old are you?

JS: And I'm 52 years old.

SS: Okay, mazel tov, great. So where were you born, Jason?

JS: I was born in Boston, Massachusetts.

SS: And were your parents born in Boston as well?

JS: No. My parents were born in Johannesburg, South Africa.

SS: I didn't know that.

JS: Yep. They were born in – do you want the story?

SS: Yes, I want to know.

JS: My grandparents were from like Riga and Vilnius and as little kids, alone, kind of story that were sent to escape the pogroms, to Johannesburg, which had a high quota. My parents were the first generation born in South Africa. Then, as soon as they could, they left. So they left in like 1949, 1950, when the nationalists took power, and immigrated to – well, they went to London, where my dad did a medical residency.

They lived there for 10 years, and all my older siblings were born in London. Then they came to the U.S., in 1959, and I was born two years later.

SS: Okay. So was your father working at a hospital in Boston?

JS: Yes, he was at the Beth Israel his whole professional life.

SS: Okay. That's interesting. And your mother – what did she do?

JS: She did a lot of things. In London, she, in addition to bringing up a family, she got involved with theater. And that had a big influence on my uncle, who stayed in Johannesburg, and became a very important theater person there. He created a whole multiracial theater culture there. Then when she came to the U.S., she stayed involved in theater, but she also got, she decided to get an advanced degree, so she got a doctorate from BU, Boston University. Her dissertation was on [Jerzy] Grotowski, Wilhelm Reich, and John Dewey, and aesthetics in education.

SS: Wow.

JS: And she ended up running Goddard College's graduate program in Cambridge. And she created, I am told, the first doctoral program in women's studies in the country.

SS: Where?

JS: At Goddard-Cambridge.

SS: Oh, wow.

JS: I don't know if it's true, but this is the legend; that it was a doctoral program in women's studies, and it was the first. I've never actually tried to verify it, but it's possible.

And then she – they were quite leftist Boston types, and quite involved in the South African boycotts, which started in Cambridge. And ended up running a community arts center in the suburbs, was her last sort of full-time job.

SS: So you grew up in a really politicized environment, it sounds like.

JS: Yes. I think that's true. They were, yes.

SS: What's your earliest movement that you remember being aware of?

JS: The Vietnam War. I mean, the anti-Vietnam War stuff was – Daniel Berrigan hid in our house from the FBI. My brother had a silkscreen press in the attic, doing Vietnam War postering. My dad went to North Vietnam on like a medical-peace-mission thing, like a kind of Jane Fonda thing, but with doctors. They were the ones that exposed that Americans were using plastic shrapnel so it wouldn't show up in x-rays. They were called the Bach Mai Hospital Fund.

So yes, those were my first memories.

SS: So did you ever rebel?

00:05:00

JS: I did, but not in any ways that were interesting. It's germane. I was like a — I turned into a club kid. Disco culture was really big for me.

SS: In Boston.

JS: In Boston. Yes, and then coming to New York.

SS: So what was the disco scene like in Boston?

JS: Well, it was just the only clubs where I wouldn't get asked for ID. They were like black gay clubs that I was going to so I wouldn't get carded, basically.

My son's in the next room, so I sort of have to keep it on the DL, but – so yes. Because if you wanted to have alcohol, things like that.

SS: So you've been in a gay community since you were a real young guy, actually.

JS: But only like half-aware, like only like semi-consciously. To me, it was all about the music.

SS: Right.

JS: Sexuality was really not the point.

SS: But you weren't afraid.

JS: No.

SS: Since you were very young. It's interesting, because it's unusual for our generation.

JS: Yes. I had older brothers, who were total, like, flower child, children of the '60s. They were at Woodstock; they were artists and very political. They were all art – a lot of arts, a lot of politics, a lot of radical culture.

SS: So when did you start getting interested in media?

JS: It was totally a college thing. I had a professor, a teacher, Bill Brand, at Sarah Lawrence College, where I went for two years. I literally just stumbled into his class. As soon as I decided this was what I wanted to do, I dropped out of college.

SS: So what was it about his class that took over your life?

JS: I just got very excited about the things I was seeing. I was just seeing all these great movies that I had no clue about, at all. And I was handy. I was capable of operating equipment, things like that. As soon as I put those two things together, I was

like, well now I know what I want to do. I don't need to be here. And so I left college, and I apprenticed myself to a sound man.

SS: Okay, before that, do you remember some key films that really rocked your world?

JS: It was all the European New Wave stuff. So it was all the [Jean-Marie] Straub and [Jean-Luc] Godard and – {SIGH} – it was a combination of documentary and New Wave stuff. Bill is, he makes quite abstract, very formal, very handmade 16-millimeter work. But he co-taught the class with a European teacher. I think between the two of them, in a way, the New Wave was a kind of a compromise, in a way that they could both sort of – I'm trying to remember now. I remember being very taken with films that I think now are a little bit of a strain, kind of boring, but then, I was really focused on. Like Straub and [Daniele] Huillet, basically.

SS: So you just decided to drop out. So did you think that being an artist was a viable way to earn a living? Did you have any concerns about that?

JS: Well, it wasn't my goal, to be an artist. My goal was to work in the industry. I had a brother who was like the artist of the family. I had an older brother, who's a painter, and nine years older than me, who I kind of idolized growing up. I spent a lot of time with him in his studio. And like, that was an artist, you know. For me, filmmaking was, it was a very tactile, it was very hands-on, it was very technological; and very social. Like, the meaning making was a really social one. It wasn't about whether or not I was an artist. It was about whether or not I was involved in this world, of filmmaking.

SS: Okay, so you apprenticed to a sound guy?

00:10:00 JS: So I left – yes. I went back to Boston. And I lived not with my folks, but in an apartment in Cambridge, with another guy. I was working for a guy named Stuart Cody. His claim to fame was that he had done the sound on *Blue Water, White Death*, which meant that he could – if a Nagra, the old sound recorders, if it fell into the ocean, he could take it out, and take it apart and put it back together, and it would work. And it's kind of tricky, he was an MIT-trained engineer. He now builds custom expedition batteries. So if you're going to Mount Everest, he'll build your batteries for you.

But the real hook was that he was the service provider to the entire American documentary – like American Direct Cinema community, which was based in Cambridge. So we were servicing productions by Ricky Leacock and Fred Wiseman and John – John Marshall, Stuart Marshall? Jean Rouch was coming and teaching summers at Harvard, and I would sit in on his classes there. It was a kind of a mom-and-pop store by this like MIT-trained engineer; but very very tied in to this American Direct Cinema community that I was totally focused on.

SS: But that's not commercial cinema. That's art cinema. I mean –

JS: Yes. No. Commercial – it wasn't, to me, like the goal wasn't to be working in commercial cinema, it was to be working in cinema.

SS: Okay.

JS: The thing about those productions is that they were – it was spare means. So I learned to be a sound person there, and when I eventually came back to New York, I was a one-man band with the Nagra and the boom pole, and that's what I did.

SS: So what made you come back to New York?

JS: I felt academically starved. What happened was, is that we were also renting equipment to this university department of the new thing at the time, and it was called Semiotics, at Brown. I was literally delivering Steenbecks to Brown's Semiotics Department. I was visiting as like a schlumpy technician, hoisting editing machines. And I was like, oh my god, this is so sexy. I got to get back to school.

SS: So what did you do?

JS: So then I went back to New York, and I went to Columbia School of General Studies. And the thing about Columbia School of General Studies was that you could take anything with anybody, if they gave you permission to be in their class. So I went to Edward Said. I was like, "I want to take this literature seminar I see listed here." And he was like, "who the hell are you?" I just told him, "I've been doing this documentary work in Boston, but now I want to go back to school." People would say yes.

I did the same thing at Columbia's Film Department. I was taking graduate film classes, because I had more technical experience than their graduates – even though I was still an undergrad. I had all these technical skills that their grad students didn't have. So I then became like, the sound person on all these thesis film and things. I was studying with all these really great film professors there, as well. Columbia School of General Studies was fantastic, because you didn't have to matriculate and do the Great Books courses. You could just convince teachers to let you into their really exclusive seminars.

SS: So when did you put together media and political movements?

When did that start to happen for you?

JS: That was the beginning. I mean, that was the education that I got from the word go. That was Bill Brand's – that was his curriculum, that was his orientation as a teacher. It was a given. It wasn't somehow a turn away from a mainstream towards this. It was that – yeah, that film- and video-making — really, it was all filmmaking still, then — was a political act.

00:15:00

SS: But what were your first actual applications of that – when you started really – what was your first experience bringing a camera to something that was active in the world?

JS: It's hard to say. In the summer I visited a friend in Haiti, whose – a Super 8 film camera – a friend's father was doing forestry work in Haiti. So there was this kind of like incredible situation, where you were way out in these places where I could be with a Super 8 camera, and maybe – and that was a project that was like a student Super 8 thing, but it was – I'm trying to, in a way, think about your question, but I'm probably going too far back. It was a time when I—it was a project where I was grappled with this issue of, it was a very charged political situation, like the poorest country in the hemisphere, living under a brutal regime then. And I'm going to be there with a camera. So how do you deal with it? That was probably the first, if you're asking for like firsts.

It was always in this, it was always understood that the form had to also experiment. I wasn't confident enough, maybe, to think that I wanted to also just be modeling the convention. I also felt like I had to kind of be creating these niches formally, as well.

So another thing I did was about the redevelopment of Times Square. In 1984 I shot this thing in Times Square, that was all about the – again, it was 16 millimeter. But it was all about these Polaroid portrait photographers that used to be in Times Square. And then – but – even though I was shooting those guys, for me, it was about the redevelopment that was about to start, which is now complete.

SS: Right.

JS: Thirty years later. It's never been a thing of, like – you know, *Hour of the Furnaces*. The camera is the weapon, and the audience is either on the right side or the wrong side, there's no in between. It's never been like that for me. It's always been a kind of something where, I don't know, you're sort of responding to a situation in a lot of different ways at once.

SS: Were there any makers at the time that were real prototypes or real inspirations for you – who had that synthesis?

JS: I mean like a million and a half other people, I think in the '80s, when Chris Marker's *Sans Soleil* came out; that, to me, was the sort of revelatory moment. I think before that, there were – I always really loved the *verité* and American Direct Cinema traditions. I still think it's like the best cinematography you'll ever see.

SS: Okay.

JS: I think that, in terms of – I don't know – yeah, I mean there's just a million movies.

SS: So when did you first become aware of AIDS?

JS: I guess it was '84, '85. Yes, '84, '85, '86. In 1984, I was working at restaurants downtown. And the restaurant –it was a very hip restaurant. It was like a fancy –

00:20:00

SS: What was it?

JS: It was called Texarkana.

SS: Okay.

JS: Did you know it?

SS: I remember it vaguely, yeah.

JS: It was kind of a celebrity, like Warhol, hangout. There were shifts where you could end up working till four o'clock in the morning, and then you'd go to clubs after that, basically, because you had to unwind somehow. Even though I was just like a lowly busboy, it was definitely — it fed into this whole club culture. I was doing that at the same time I was going to the Whitney program, which was also very invested in club culture, in a way. At that time, I became really close friends with Gregg Bordowitz. At the restaurant — there were problems with crack at the restaurant, with some of my coworkers. Gregg was starting to work on his tape called *Some Aspects of a Shared Lifestyle*. I started to work on a video that I made about TV commercials, that was kind of looking at this other stuff. Everybody was basically living in this world, but very involved in what you could do with media and video. Gregg and I, I think, were both working quite a bit then.

SS: So did the Whitney program address AIDS? Did it come up in class, or in people's work?

JS: Gregg had a big impact. But Gregg was a year after me. So he and I became friends – I was there '84, '85; and he and I became friends then; when he was there '85, '86. And '85, '86, we were both making videos, and he was making *Some Aspects*. The summer of '85, for example, between my year and his year, we did a Marxist reading group with Craig Owens. It was just me, Mark Dion, Gregg Bordowitz, and Craig Owens, meeting in the summer. It was just the four of us, including Gregg and Craig. And it was like this – I mean, identity was huge. All kinds of questions about identity were coming up. But, no, it wasn't like – I don't remember AIDS being like a – it – I remember it much more being about an anxiety – it was like an un — it was like an, to my memory, it was an undirected anxiety, in '84, '85. And that's where, and Gregg's tape is sort of about that. So –

SS: Actually, doesn't Gregg say, in *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, that he was infected by Craig Owens?

JS: I don't think he says that, no.

SS: No?

JIM HUBBARD: No, he doesn't say – he tells the story, but he doesn't name the person.

SS: Oh, okay.

JS: Yes, yes.

SS: Okay.

JS: Yes, no. And *Some Aspects* precedes *Fast Trip*.

SS: Right.

JS: Yes.

SS: So who was the first person you knew who was positive?

JS: Um –

SS: Craig Owens.

JS: Well what happened with me was, I left New York in '86.

SS: Okay.

JS: It was a strange moment. What happened was – we were all having this very intense working period, and real work hard, play hard, great, great time – '84, '85, '86. Then I decided to – I was working in advertising. I was being like offered a career in advertising, and I ran away to art school.

00:25:00 So I went to San Diego in the summer of 1986. Fall of 1986, Gregg got tested. Before he got the results, he came to visit me in San Diego. All of — not all, but a lot of our conversations were about the test, and not knowing the result, and what the scenarios might be. It was a huge part of our friendship and our lives. But I was also at this remove. The next year, ACT UP founded – but I was still in San Diego.

I think that there are people I was working with at Texarkana who – I mean I know that there are people who were sick, but they were like – co-work, you know, sort of people you'd end up at bars with after work, but they weren't people I was like really working with, like I was with Gregg or Mark, or –

SS: So for that one year – so while you were in San Diego –

JS: Two years.

SS: – two years; and ACT UP was starting. Did AIDS reach San Diego, or was it just this kind of –

JS: Well, I brought Gregg out to San Diego, and he did talks. So, yes. I mean – oh, god. I'm sorry, the timeline thing is tough. Basically, I was in San Diego from fall of '86 through spring of '88; so it was like a short two years. And Gregg came out; DeeDee, like Paper Tiger TV West was there.

SS: DeeDee Halleck, you mean, or –

JS: Yes, DeeDee Halleck. I'm trying to remember when ACT UP started in New York, like what were the echoes in San Diego? But I can't remember.

SS: Okay. But what about, from a video point of view? You must have been hearing, and getting video in the mail, and seeing what was happening.

JS: Well San Diego was basically like a very concentrated bubble. I was anxious to finish this work, finish this degree, and get back to New York. That's pretty much what I did. It was a way for me to finish a film that I had shot, and get out of my job. It was a free ride, and it was just work. That was a bit sealed off, I feel. When I came back to New York, it was suddenly, then it was like 1988. Basically, I was in New York from '88 to '89, before I left again. And that was, I think, the most intensive period around my involvement with ACT UP, and AIDS media. That's when it started more intensely.

SS: So tell us about the first thing you did with ACT UP, or what happened when you first came to a meeting.

JS: Again, I felt like I was kind of tagging along with Gregg. Of course, I'd been hearing about it. Yes, I was tagging along. It was this meeting where – I remember being really struck by how the meetings would always start with this call for anybody who was police to declare themselves, which I had never heard of before, ever.

00:30:00 There were these ways in which I felt like a whole way of organizing was being invented – at least for me, it felt like total invention, because that was just totally unfamiliar. So in terms of how discussions were organized and facilitated and how police informers would have to be – the potential could always be indicated there – and then how actions would get planned, and how affinity groups could get organized – and it just was like, you just felt like you were witnessing the invention of an oppositional culture.

SS: So where did you plug in? What were some of your roles?

JS: You know – I mean –

SS: Did you go on shoots, or were you –

JS: I did, but it was always like – I was always very skittish about it. I've always – I always had a fear of being thought of as an activist. Like I had anxiety about being misrecognized as an activist. Because it was like – I knew activists; and I knew how hard they worked, and I knew what they put on the line. I never felt like I could claim anything close to that.

But eventually, with the City Hall march, this affinity group, DIVA TV, started, and I had equipment, and Ellen Spiro was a friend, and I knew Bob Beck from Electronic Arts Intermix. So it was really DIVA TV, those first –

SS: Now why did DIVA TV start? Because there already was a video collective in ACT UP, right? Testing the Limits. So what was the purpose of DIVA TV?

JS: I think the purpose was very practical, around actions. That there was this idea that if you were going to be risking arrest, and potentially brutal arrest that there had to be recording witnesses. So there was this very particular goal of counter

surveillance. We made fake press passes and the goal was to share footage. It wasn't to produce a single, unified work; it was just to generate a lot of footage; have as much on the record as possible, both from ACT UP members, speaking about what they were doing; but then also to make sure that there were cameras around for – you see this in the footage, right? People saying, let's wait – I mean, this is in *Target City Hall*, like let's wait until there's more cameras before we go get arrested, or something. Things like that. So I think it was pretty practical that way.

But again, I was only in New York for that one year.

SS: That's okay.

JS: Yes.

SS: So how did you, literally, how did you share footage?

JS: Literally, we would meet up; we would have a kind of rough division of labor planned out. People who were responsible for sound would have to – some people would have to think in terms of, if you're going to be doing more sound-based work, then you want to maybe have longer takes. If you're going to be doing more counter surveillance, then try to be here. If you're going to be doing more-establishing things, you try to be there. So just try to not have too many people be doing the exact same thing at the same time.

My memory is that the fake press passes were sort of like this great device, because they really could get you through a police cordon.

And then, people would just volunteer to edit. And so then everybody would just give whoever was editing their footage, their tapes.

SS: Now did you edit anything?

JS: Nope. No.

SS: So what was the concern about police brutality? Did you film anything that looked like police brutality or could be used for it?

00:35:00 JS: I'm sorry, I don't – I remember it feeling quite chaotic and quite and me being, in a way, less practiced than other people. I had just come back from San Diego. I had these, like, skills; like they had the chops. I remember at City Hall — maybe City Hall — I think I remember doing some walking-and-talking kind of stuff with people. But I might think that because I just was watching *Target City Hall* recently. It's kind of a blur.

SS: Did you own your own camera?

JS: Yes.

SS: What kind of cameras were you using for *Target City Hall*?

JS: Hi8.

SS: Okay.

JS: Yes. My memory is that it was Hi8 — there might have been some VHS — but my memory is that it was Hi8.

SS: So the person who was assigned to or volunteered to edit would get the footage; and then they would edit. And so there was no – you didn't have to have consensus about a final cut, or anything like that.

JS: No.

SS: And then where and how would the work be shown?

JS: I think there's only three DIVA TV tapes.

SS: What are they?

JS: *Target City Hall*; *Like a Prayer*, around the Stop the Church action, which is after I left; and *Pride*, which is also after I left. I think that's it. But I think you see DIVA footage in a number of other projects. This is sort of retrospective, but I feel like it wasn't so results-oriented. It was to record and have cameras there, and then – the results — the effect – making this distinction between effect and result. The effect was in being there. And the result would maybe come afterwards, great – other people could do different things with the footage. But I think – my memory of it is that the effect was part of the process of just being there.

SS: Because *Target City Hall* is an iconic work. I mean, it's everywhere, right? Many people who've only seen one or two things will have seen that. And I'm wondering how that became such an emblematic piece.

JS: Somebody who just saw it recently, for the first time, told me something really interesting. Which was, they said that it was the first time they had ever seen an ACT UP video where the police were being so gentle. They thought that was a revelation because in *Target City Hall*, there's so much emphasis on passive resistance, and civil disobedience strategies. That's what this person who was seeing it for the first time said. They then saw, for the first time, how the police actually took their cues from that, in a way, and behaved accordingly. The conversation that followed — actually, this was with Bob Beck, now Bob Buck — was that that all changed after Stop the Church. For Bob, that was where suddenly a line had been crossed, especially for New York City police. That if you're going to mess with the Church, then it's a very, very different story.

SS: Right.

JS: And that in *Target City Hall*, you see a much gentler police force.

SS: Now what about the social life around DIVA TV? Did you hang out with those people a lot?

JS: I didn't.

SS: You didn't.

JS: I mean, my memory – there was other overlaps. Like Ellen Spiro and I had friends in common through the Video Data Bank. My experience of that, of being in this affinity group, was – I really was quite shy about it, personally – more so than other people.

SS: So when your friends became publicly positive — like Gregg, or I don't know if you were friends with Ray [Navarro] —

JS: I knew Ray a bit, yeah. Moira was closer with Ray.

SS: How was that emotionally, at that time? This was very early; there were no medications; everybody was very young. How did the groups of friends handle that kind of information?

00:40:00

JS: Um – I think it was very teary, but also taking cues from them. With Gregg we had – I don't know, I have a dialog with Gregg; he's still one of my closest friends. And it's kind of in the videos. In *Some Aspect*, he refers to a conversation, at the end, where – and it's a damning portrait of this person he's talking to. Where that person is saying, you're bisexual; why can't you just not have sex with men for awhile, because this is so crazy, you know, for your own safety?

That person is me.

SS: Oh, great.

JS: He's quoting a conversation with me – kind of ignorantly, desperately pleading. And then I also shot part of *Fast Trip, Long Drop*. At the end, where he makes this very kind of profound statement about extinction or something — he's lying in bed, and he's just had a bout of actually being very ill. He makes this kind of heavy statement at the end, and then he and the person behind the camera start to crack up, at this kind of seriousness at the moment. And that's also with me; I shot that as well.

So I feel like that's the portrait of my dialog with Gregg about the hardest aspects of this, are also things that he and I – I mean, I take my cues from him, but he and I, it's also – it's always been very – pragmatic. It's not like – I don't know. I mean – maybe I impose that; but – he responds to it, too.

SS: Right. So let me ask you to switch hats for a minute, and be a professor of video. Okay, so what is the historic impact, what is the aesthetic impact, of AIDS activist video now?

JS: I can answer that with continuing the time line a little bit.

SS: Oh, yes, that would be great, go ahead.

JS: Because I was only a marginal member of DIVA TV, and only from '88 to '89. Another gig that I had in '89 was I actually recorded and transcribed the entire How Do I Look? conference, that Douglas organized.

SS: Oh.

JS: So it was another one of these kinds of moments where you feel like –

SS: Douglas Crimp, let's say for the record.

JS: Yeah, Douglas Crimp organized a conference that took place at Anthology Film Archives called How Do I Look?, which is very, very much about queer

identity. And as a job, as a money gig, I took on recording and transcribing that whole event. And all of this kind of activity – and I was also actually the runner-up to be the director of the Collective for Living Cinema. I was in this – whatever – finalists.

So all these things were happening at once; ACT UP, and How Do I Look?, and the Collective, and making my own work, at the same time. I was then offered a job to join Bill Horrigan at the Wexner Center. I ended up taking that job, in Columbus, Ohio, with Bill, where I would be both programming films and videos with Bill, but also building a facility for artists to make films there, which was very attractive. I didn't really feel like there was any place in the country that had that kind of promise to actually be like a high-end artists' production–post production facility. It needed to be built, like from the ground up.

00:45:00 So when I went to do that, AIDS media, we could say, at that time, was this absolutely unstoppable force for presenting institutions. There was a way in which if you were a presenting institution, which Bill and I now were, you were kind of on one side of that, or another. Like you were going to be a platform, or not, and we definitely were.

So I left New York again, and out of the picture, in terms of ACT UP and Gregg and that kind of stuff. But I felt like I was in this real ground-up building situation with Bill in Columbus, Ohio.

So it really did change. I can say from an institutional point of view, I feel I witnessed from the – how important the change was going to be, in terms of the viewing landscape, the media landscape, the presenting landscape; that we were definitely part of an educational imperative.

SS: So what was the dialog with other, more-conservative organizations? Because the Wexner was very much in the forefront of that.

JS: Yes. I think that that's testimony to Bill, as a real visionary curator. It was a bit of a game, I think. He was showing – sometimes we couldn't believe what we were getting away with showing. Showing Curt McDowell films, and things like that. And then Bill was also fantastic in bringing in Curt McDowell, but also Barbara Rubin and historicizing a lot of the work that people were thinking was kind of being invented in the –

SS: But he's Barbara Rubin's number-one fan.

JS: He's Barbara Rubin's number-one fan. Right, it's true. But nobody else was programming that work in 1989. So Bill was able to historicize a lot of AIDS media this way, in a way that really worked institutionally.

I think if you're in an institution, and then you're perform sort of validating and legitimating voices. So you make a commitment that you're going to validate and legitimate these voices that are trying to radically change the culture and the iconography of the culture, if you're in a cultural institution. That's what we tried to do.

I think, yes, for Bill, from a curatorial side, was quite visionary about it. And me, as his sort of partner in crime, was trying to do it from a sort of infrastructure side, where this facility could exist, that still operates, for exactly these kinds of artists to come and work.

SS: So when did you come back to New York?

JS: As soon as I finished the lab. Which was '91.

SS: And did you come back to ACT UP, or no?

JS: I did. Whew. Now, okay, so we came back – actually, what happened was is that – it was a bit of a teary departure. I loved working with Bill, and he’s still also a really close friend. So it was really hard to leave. I didn’t want quitting my job in Columbus to be my last memory when I returned to New York. So I decided to go to South Africa. Moira and I actually planned quite an extensive trip there. We traveled a lot, we met a lot of people – including, I started to get a sense of people doing AIDS work in South Africa. I ended up shooting footage there that ended up becoming a GMHC show. So – I went to –

SS: What was it called?

00:50:00

JS: I don’t remember. It wasn’t a widely circulated show; it wasn’t a superlative effort. There was a group doing theater work, AIDS-education theater, in Johannesburg, that I traveled with a bit. I had a camera, so I was shooting a bit. After this trip, brought the footage, and Gregg and I sort of put it together. It was – GMHC made a lot of shows. And Gregg and Jean [Carlomusto] there. So in a way, that was my return to New York — was with this piece of media about AIDS-education theater in South Africa, where my roots were.

SS: Right. And AIDS in Africa was not a thing yet, right? It wasn’t a fixed concept in people’s minds.

JS: Not in minds here.

SS: Yes.

JS: People there were scared witless. Yes. So then, came back, and Gregg and Jean, by that time now had the *Living With AIDS* show and studio at GMHC; and got to help a bit there. I think I worked on a few shows, just if Gregg needed help.

What else? I feel like there are some other – like – I’m going to start blanking on time line and dates things now. But when we got back to New York, in ‘91 – when was the FDA?

SS: What year is that?

JH: The FDA is ’88, October ’88.

JS: Oh, so that was before I went to the Wexner. Oh, so, okay. We went, so –

JH: The NIH you’re thinking of?

JS: Maybe it was the NIH. Was that –

JH: Well that’s May of ’90.

JS: No, I was still in Ohio. So, okay, no, I thought FDA was after. Um – whew. Um – I mean, when I came back – I mean, one of the things I di-... now I’m really sort of trying to stretch a little bit.

When I came back, in ’91 – I had learned, like, in a way – in a way, like with the sound person in Boston, and a lot earlier – when I came back in ’91, I felt like I had learned quite a bit from Bill about programming. So I started, I was curating some video, doing some video programming, in New York and in Europe. But titles that – in a way there was a sort of second wave of more art-based media going on around AIDS. So then I was like showing pieces like Tom Kalin’s films. I’m trying to remember when Leslie Thornton did her portrait of Ron Vawter. I remember showing things like this, that wasn’t like full-on DIVA TV style, activist work. But there was this wave of artist media that also was so important.

So yes, I remember programming shows like, well there was one program that went around Europe, called Downsizing the Image Factory. And there was a show I did at Artists Space called Man Trouble. And these weren't like AIDS media work, but it was, they were integrated, it was integrated programming. They weren't exclusively AIDS media at all. It was more sort of like zeitgeist programming.

I'm drawing a blank on what else I did –

JH: Do you remember which pieces were in those shows?

00:55:00 JS: I remember Tom's "They Are Lost to Vision Altogether." I'm drawing a blank, I'm sorry. I forget. There was Leslie's portrait of Vawter; Tom's *They Are Lost to Vision*; I think I showed Diana's *Hair Ego*. I think Ellen's work is in one of them. But I forget.

SS: So now, when you teach at College of Staten Island, and you have immigrant students and working-class students, and you show them these ancient AIDS tapes; how do they respond to it?

JS: Sarah, I don't, I'm trying to remember what I've shown. I mean –

SS: Or, why not show them? Do you think that it wouldn't register with them, or?

JS: I mean, for me, so much of the teaching is about confidence of tools and making the students feel like there's significance to their own experiences. When I've shown them – I think now, it's like there's a sense in which activist media gets kind of lumped together. There's – I'm trying to think of a specific instance that can respond to that.

SS: Let me ask it this way. Do you think that the innovations of that work can be seen in contemporary work? Or do you think it's been eclipsed?

JS: I think it's been totally eclipsed. I mean – it's sad, but I really do.

SS: And why is that?

JS: Um –

SS: Is it just that the work is no longer relevant, or is it because the work's not being seen?

JS: I think part of the energy of that work – the intensity of so much of that work had to do with this combination of the available means, right — that suddenly, you had the technology that was totally available, really for the first time. I mean, incredible kind of historical coincidence that video would have reached this point of availability and handiness that would make that kind of work possible; with such an intense personal urgency to be felt by such a broad community. So that combination invented a whole new relationship to media; and it radically changed the media landscape. There's no question that that's what happened in the late '80s.

01:00:00 Ever since then – this democratized media has become this Frankenstein of – overproduction. Now, this idea of overcoming this sort of numbing of media, through personalizing those stories, I think it does happen, and students can relate to it and audiences relate to it. But the vocabulary is such that when they see this older work; when students see the older work in the older formats, and the kind of weird, strange – quality of it, the periodizing of it is profoundly alienating for students, I think. Right now, I'm screening in an indexical way, not in a sort of audience-based way, this reconstituted version of *Video Against AIDS*, this six-hour program that Bill did with John Greyson.

It's this incredible sort of video-history capsule, but it's also so profoundly different looking and feeling. So much of it is a kind of witness-bearing, where people were just inventing the vocabulary as they went. Now, I think it is hard for students to connect with it; it just really is.

SS: You guys have anything you want to ask?

JH: No, I think I –

SS: Is there anything that you think we haven't –

JS: No, I feel bad about that last exchange. I mean –

JAMES WENZY: Don't.

SS: No, it's fine.

JS: Well, what do you think?

SS: It represents a way of making change that isn't understood.

JS: Um hm.

SS: Because there's not a bottom-up model for social transformation that anyone who's young has ever experienced.

JS: Um hm.

SS: So that media is a bottom-up media, and that's why it's unrecognizable.

JS: Um hm.

SS: But if that ever came back, then I think it would be helpful to people. Because I feel like we knew how to look at old work –

JS: Um hm.

SS: – that looked weird and different, and for some reason, it’s very difficult, at least for our students, who are not sophisticated, to do that.

JS: Um hm.

SS: I don’t know if it’s a class issue; I’m not sure what it is.

JS: I mean, I think – I don’t know. I think that there is a kind of technological semiotic at work here, where there really – nobody could have known it, at the time, that this work could be so circumscribed by the technology. You would never have known it, making it then.

SS: Right.

JS: And now, the vocabulary is so peculiar and so – it’s fascinating. It’s kind of glorious, at this level of invention going on – that this whole vocabulary gets invented at that moment. But it’s like a musical form, or something. It really is — I think socially, what you say is true. I think aesthetically, there’s something also going on that is much more peculiar than your description even accounts for, because of the technological effect that’s going on there.

SS: Well, I mean, people have trouble with things that are slow.

JS: It’s not just the pacing. It’s the pacing, but it’s also, it’s the frame, it’s the color, it’s the grain –

SS: The haircuts.

JS: – the haircuts. Yes, the fashion, the haircuts; but also the grain of the video.

JH: So you’re saying that the aesthetics of AIDS-activist video is too particular for young people now to understand.

JS: I think that they can understand it. I think that they — it's a whole other process to get them to identify with it. I think they can understand it. But I think so much of the work — I think so much of the job at Staten Island has to do with getting an identificatory effect to happen, with the process that you want them to be in; that that's —

01:05:00

SS: Well, but that's a class issue, because a lot of people in ACT UP, even though it was a broad class range in ACT UP, were used to seeing representation of people like themselves; and so they were demanding representation, because people of our class had representation. But our students have never seen any representation of their own experiences. I teach fiction writing, right? There's no novel of Staten Island. Or, what's the novel of the Pakistani refugee to New York City? So for most of our students, the idea of being represented is itself completely new; that they would be represented.

I have a lot of Asian students who only write stories with white protagonists, because they've never read stories with Asian protagonists. So we're on a whole different scale.

But you think it's not that; you think it's the aesthetic.

JS: Well, I mean, the problem with applying this self-representation argument to video is that the Internet is an ocean of self-representing video. The question is, is what makes the meaning there significant to them, and to us, and to an audience. So I think that the mechanisms with video are a little bit different than with writing, because there's a banal quality to video as well, that has to be overcome.

I mean, [John] Baldessari said, video will only be interesting when it's as common as a pencil. And so now, it really is like the pencil. So now, what do we do?

It's like starting from scratch, in terms of meaning-making, for people that have to learn to understand the potential significance.

Historicizing it is not, it's a small part of the job. To say something is historically significant doesn't go very far in the classroom. You can't say something's important – they have to feel it.

SS: So basically, from this conversation, you're saying that AIDS-activist video is a very time-limited event; and that its consequence is not in video: its consequence is in the existence of AIDS meds, services for people with AIDS; but not in video.

JS: Well, AIDS-activist video changed the landscape of video. There's no doubt of that. It completely – it completely shifted the culture. It shifted the culture in a way that we still see the effects of. But now we see it as a backlash. Institutional video is hyper-aestheticized, and totally stripped of content, in order to be museum-quality, in a way. That is a backlash, from the '80s and early '90s invasion of culture by activist media. That's what Bill and I did at the Wexner, was we basically opened the doors.

So it's not that the time of AIDS video is over. It's that video's capacity to generate change and make meaning for people in this personal way has to be completely reconfigured, somehow reunderstood. I mean, talking about Stop the Church with Bob Buck, and how he saw that as completely shifting the behavior of the police after that moment, is exactly what just happened with Pussy Riot. It's exactly what just happened with Pussy Riot. They were really kind of given a pass, until this one action. So these things are – and that was on video. Part of it was people seeing it in Russia on YouTube.

So there's no question that these same mechanisms are completely at play, in lots of ways, through video. But it needs to be understood.

SS: So I only have one last question. Is there anything else that you want to talk about?

So just looking back — and I know that you view your role as marginal, but actually, it's not, because many, many people were in ACT UP for one year or worked on one project or whatever, and it's still significant to us — so just looking back, what do you consider to be ACT UP's greatest achievement, and what do you see as its biggest disappointment?

JS: Sorry. Can I just take a moment here?

SS: Yes, take a moment.

JS: In my own experience, it's exactly what we've already said, right; that there was my own relationship to this story is a connection through video and through media, and the — sorry. It's going to be loud in the soundtrack, sorry.

I mean, I think my connection with this story is a video connection, and it is one through media, and dotted through these different relationships. I do think that the triumph of AIDS media was to insist on a politicized and content-driven cultural platform for these demands. That culture had to be, that institutional culture and media culture had to embrace this need and this mandate.

I think that over, slowly, but inexorably, there's been a backlash to that. So that that same cultural landscape now really resists that kind of work. And so there is — we do have to try harder.

SS: Right. Or let someone else fix it. Okay, thank you.