

**What You Don't Know Could Fill A Museum:  
Activism, AIDS, Art and the Institution  
Public Forum**

Saturday, January 4<sup>th</sup>, 2014, 7-8pm  
Elizabeth A. Sackler Center For Feminist Art, Brooklyn Museum  
200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn, NY

Organized by: Visual AIDS

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## Event Set-Up

When invited by the Brooklyn Museum to participate in Target Free Saturday we at Visual AIDS took the opportunity to continue our ongoing public conversation about art, AIDS, and representation.

Discussed were ways in which HIV/AIDS is currently being represented in films, books, and the academy, as well as in museums and galleries. Founding questions for the event, which many of the panelists refer to, include:

How is HIV/AIDS being represented in public?

How could it be?

How "should" it be?

The event began with introductions, and comments from the panelists, then a Q&A period begun by the moderator which then included the audience.

The event was recorded, and transcribed. Transcription was then edited by Colin Marston. Photography courtesy Visual AIDS.

Thank you to the Brooklyn Museum, Elizabeth Koke, Matthew Branch, Elisabeth Callihan, and others who made the evening possible.

**Visual AIDS** utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV+ artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over. [www.visualaids.org](http://www.visualaids.org)

## Introduction and Statements

**ANNOUNCER:** We are going to meet our moderator. She is going to introduce you to our panel. Our moderator is Brittany Duck. She's an activist, a visual artist and a lover of all things created. She's currently completing her Master's degree at the New School where she's also serving as a member of the Queer Collective, which is a student advocacy group. In addition to all these things, she's also a volunteer organizer for Queers for Economic Justice and with The Audre Lorde Project<sup>i</sup>. Please welcome Brittany and the rest of our panelists.

**BRITTANY:** Hi. Thank you all for coming. We have a great turnout tonight. My name is Britney and I'm going to be your moderator this evening. Tonight's panel, inspired by the increased cultural production dissemination in consumption regarding HIV/AIDS<sup>ii</sup> was put together by Visual AIDS, an organization that for the last 25 years has been using art to promote dialogue in conversation around HIV/AIDS. Tonight's conversation builds on the discussion that was actually started last August called *(re)Presenting AIDS. The transcripts*<sup>iii</sup> for that dialogue can be found on Visual AIDS' website and you'll have that address in your program tonight.

Tonight we'll hear from four people who are working at the intersections of art, AIDS and representation. I will provide a brief bio for our panelists as these images continue to play.

We'll then have a brief clip of Jean's work<sup>iv</sup> and then panelists will say a few words about what art, AIDS, and representation means in this current moment. Then, finally we'll launch into our conversation.

Beginning with **Tara Burk**, who's a PH. D. candidate in Art History at the Grad Center at the City University of New York. Tara's dissertation examines queer feminists' public art collectives active in New York City during the late 1980s through 1990s. In 2004, Tara graduated with honors from Stony Brook University with a B.A. in Art History and Women's Studies. She also has a forthcoming essay in the refereed journal, *The Women Studies Quarterly*<sup>v</sup>, about the 1977 lesbian art and artist issue of the journal *Heresies*, a feminist publication of art and politics.

**Hugh Ryan** is a writer and a traveler currently based in New York City. His food and travel writing clips have appeared in numerous venues. He has ghost written eight young adult novels. As a copywriter, he has produced web copy, video transcripts and social media for a variety of major brand name companies. In 2013 he wrote "How to Whitewash a Plague"<sup>vi</sup>, a *New York Times* op-ed about the New York Historical Society's *AIDS in New York: The First Five Years*.

**Vincent Cianni** is a documentary photographer. His works explores community in memory, the human condition and the use of image and text. His photographs have been exhibited at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, The Philadelphia Museum of Art, The National Museum, The Photographer's Gallery in London, The Seventh International Photography Festival in Mannheim, and

The George Eastman House. A major survey of his work was also exhibited at the Museum of the City of New York in 2006, and the photos you've been enjoying are courtesy of Vincent.

And finally we have **Jean Carlomusto**, a filmmaker. Her documentaries have been exhibited internationally in festivals, museums and on television. She produced, directed and edited "Sex in an Epidemic", which premiered on Showtime Networks. She created OFFERINGS, an interactive video altar, that was featured in art exhibitions such as: *Make Art/Stop AIDS* in the Fowler Museum at UCLA and *Not Alone* at the Durbin Art Gallery in Durbin, South Africa, that exhibit is currently touring throughout South Africa. Jean is also a professor of Media Arts and the Director of the Television Center at LIU Post. And she is currently directing a documentary about Larry Kramer for HBO.

Welcome to all of our panelists and now we will have a clip of Jean's work<sup>vii</sup>.

[The video OFFERINGS is shown to the audience]

## Conversation

JEAN: To spring off of OFFERINGS, I've been working since 1986 on covering AIDS. Because I see a lot of folks here are on the younger side or younger than me, let's just sort of go back for a moment to the atmosphere in '86.

I was working as a graduate TA at NYU in Education Technology. We had classes where students had to pick to work with a group to make a video. There were only three projects that could be made. They needed someone to make a film of a dissection of a cat; the second video was on training people how to do root canal; and the third project was to make videos for Gay Men's Health Crisis.

The project that nobody in the class chose was Gay Men's Health Crisis. That's how scared people were of getting involved around AIDS. It was not fashionable. It was a plague. It was full of fear, an awful awful time.

So I started volunteering at Gay Men's Health Crisis, during that time it was very hard not just to represent AIDS, but it was hard for a person with AIDS who had facial KS to go out food shopping because they were getting thrown out of stores. That's how bad it was back in that time.

The work that I did was all in community and made me come to awareness that we were going to need to fight back to make any kind of change. At a certain point, let me just say that in about 1993 after many of us have been doing AIDS activism for years, there was a real change because we began to get so desperate that even in ACT UP, this AIDS activist movement that was formed, began to have internal friction because more and more people were sick. Those of us filming around AIDS, we were beginning to find that this footage we took of our friends protesting in the street, these photographs, all of these materials, these all our friends -- were dead.

The material changed. At that point in time, I found that it wasn't just about getting the word out. But preserving the archive is also about preserving our friends' voices that are no longer here. So in my current day practice I do find it important to maintain my archive. That's a part of my current activism, keeping history alive.

I see my role now in telling history, to tell people to examine how this history may fit into current discussions about the plague.

VINCENT: Hello, I'm a documentary photographer whose work investigates community, memory, and the human condition through image, text and audio. My career has been built on telling stories. My interests are in marginalized communities, social justice and human and civil rights issues. I teach photography at Parsons The New School for Design and the International Center of Photography. Duke University's Rubenstein Library established a study archive to collect all my documentary and personal photography projects.

Although HIV/AIDS has not been a constant subject in my artistic inquiry and I do not identify myself as a gay artist or as an artist whose work focuses on HIV/AIDS, I have

culled a series of pictures that were made over 25 years as I documented my personal experience during the early years of AIDS. I see this work as relevant to my identity as We Skate Hardcore, Gays in the Military, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the effects of fracking on a Pennsylvania town. All focus on underrepresented communities, populations who at one time or another had little access to political, social or economic freedoms and choices.

Therefore my perspective sitting on this panel is one of inclusion in a wider more expansive history. The questions surrounding queer art and queer artists, HIV/AIDS art and artists are the same questions that arise when speaking about black art and black artists. Interestingly enough, 2013 is said to be the year for black films<sup>viii</sup>. But in describing the great filmmaking that emanated from the African American community as *black filmmaking*<sup>ix</sup> sets it apart from the larger industry and history of “*filmmaking*”. Why does it have to be discussed as different or separately?

I am often asked where my ideas for projects come from. They arise from my experience. They are an extension of my life, my history, my memories. What allows them to be understood universally? I think that in a world of 7.1 billion people, where everyone is a complex fabric of identities, relationships, experiences and histories, each of us is uniquely different. We belong to different communities, and none of us have that same make-up of identities and communities. So what ties us together?

My answer would be the preservation of human rights, dignity and respect, those desires and freedoms that are common to us all as humans, life (and health I would add), liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Hanna Arendt says that, “the perception of human rights is understood when a group of people have lost them and it takes a political and activist community to stand up and fight for inclusion. More importantly these rights are acknowledged when other people observe the violations of inalienable human *dignitas* from a distance, for example in drawings, in photographs, in newspapers, in posters and in public art.” Our role as artists is to make this work so that others can understand our humanity (and therefore our commonalities) and hopefully bring about change.

Simply put, all art stems from a communal experience. The first form of human expression (or art) was dance. In primitive cultures, before history was being told with language or written with words, stories and memory were relayed through the reenactment of last years hunt, of recent births and death, etc. These reenactments were repeated to establish an identity, a sense of community.

And so this brings me to the central point of the discussion today: What is the museum’s role in representing HIV/AIDS? My answer would be: the same as in any other issue. My view is that museums, galleries, cultural institutions, and academies have their own agendas and we cannot rely entirely on them to define history. In particular, museums are concerned with objects and how they embody the history they reference. But they are focused on the artist as creator, not the artist as activist. And many times when grappling with these issues, the failure usually stems from those who are invested in these interests (i.e., the administrators, their supporters and their audiences and the politics that stem from them) and those who present the work (i.e. curators) and their lack of understanding and scholarship on these issues.

So we must look to organizations that focus their energies and scholarship on HIV/AIDS issues, on the preservation of these histories, usually more often found in library collections such as gay and lesbian archives at the New York Public Library, Yale University's Beineke Library and the San Francisco Public Library. I think the greatest strength is for LGBTQ artists and scholars, especially young LGBTQ scholars, some of whom are sitting on this panel, to be the ones who define these histories and present them to the public in the form of exhibitions, books, and films - those who lived the experience, those who commented on their experience through their words and art, those who thoroughly studied the histories of those experiences.

And even more so, we must look to political and advocacy organizations that utilize our art, such as Visual AIDS or in the case of Gays in the Military, Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, to disseminate this art and these ideas. Finally, artist cooperatives who fight against injustices, such as Gran Fury and Fierce Pussy, to establish a public presence. In a sense we must go back to the primitives and rely on oral histories, telling (or relaying) our own stories, writing our own histories.

I have always pursued establishing relationships with institutions, archives, libraries and organizations that advocate for human and civil rights, whether it be homeless shelters in Newburgh, HIV/AIDS service organizations or LGBT military political advocacy groups. I see a great distinction between the world of museums and the world of activists and archives. My own history is important. In understanding who I am as an artist and the photographs I make, it is important to see my work as a whole and my life as a whole. Growing up in a coal-mining town in PA made up of mostly Italian Americans is as important as squatting in an abandoned building in East Berlin for six months, living in a Brooklyn Puerto Rican community for fifteen years, living with HIV for 25 years and being gay all my life. Thank you.

HUGH: As Brittany mentioned I'm a writer aside from kid books, I mostly write journalism, a lot of it on queer topics. I'm also the Founding Director of the Pop-Up Museum of Queer History, which is a grassroots non-profit that helps local communities around the country put on shows about queer history, broadly constituted. As a writer, I've had the opportunity to discuss AIDS in a museum context on numerous occasions. Prior to all of that I worked for years at a number of nonprofits that served primarily HIV-positive and high-risk populations in NYC, including the Hispanic AIDS Forum, the Hetrick Martin Institute, and the Peter Cicchino Youth Project at the Urban Justice Center.

As such, I've watched our recent parade of AIDS and AIDS-related museum shows with a wary eye. History isn't something we find in a natural state and toss up on the walls - it's a story we create out of raw materials like flyers and interviews and video tape, which is then further remixed by the viewer, who brings their own thoughts to the topic at hand, reads as much or as little of the accompanying text as they choose, and wanders a meandering and oftentimes cut-short path through the most carefully planned of exhibitions - if they come at all. And who can blame them? We're taught history as a series of names and dates to memorize, with the most important one being the date of the final exam, after which we can forget everything because history doesn't matter. Not in America.



I want to share with you a part of an article called “The Memory of History” by public historian Michael Frisch. Here, a Nigerian friend of the author is commenting on the American public’s lack of real connection to our history:

Why bother with history, when you’re rich and powerful? All it can do is tell you how you climbed to the top, which is a story it is probably best not to examine too closely. No, you don’t need history. What you need is something more like a pretty carpet that can be rolled out on ceremonial occasions to cover all those bloodstains on the stairs. And in fact, that’s what you usually get from your historians.<sup>x</sup>

AIDS is one of those most recent bloodstained steps, and already, the carpet is being rolled out, like Calvin Klein’s recent statements about how straight people had to help the terrified queer community because we were too afraid to step up; or this past summer’s New York Historical Society show<sup>xi</sup> that called the AIDS crisis the price of sexual freedom, and repeatedly referenced a concerned New York City coming together to fight against a nebulous homophobia that seemed to be in the air and in the water, but rarely in actual people or institutions. And these are just the obvious examples.

If you look, it’s not hard to see the blood dripping from beneath the carpet. It’s fresh and flowing still today. But most of us don’t even realize we’re on a set of steps. Instead, we see history as an archipelago, discrete islands of occurrence that bear no relationship to one another. In this view, the “good fight” against AIDS is over. New infections are either in countries that aren’t “our problem,” or are among people who “refuse” to take care of themselves.

Never mind the historic (and current) policies of domination, enslavement, and colonization that constitute much of our relationship to many countries with skyrocketing rates of HIV. Never mind that a huge number of new infections in the U.S. are occurring among poor young men of color, who have always faced racism, unemployment, homophobia, lack of access to health care and education, poverty, and other structural inequalities that complicate the simple motto of self-respect and self care as paragons of prevention. This is the archipelago of history: a series of facts fast receding into the distance, considered at most but a panoramic background to life today.

And this amnesia goes far beyond AIDS. Our historical memory is so short that we can pride ourselves on the legal battles queer people have won in this country - the repeal of Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, the legalization of same-sex marriage - while wholesale ignoring, denying, or simply being ignorant of the fact that these gains, while both symbolically important and materially helping many, make us complicit in the very systems of militarism and state-mandated acceptability that early queer activists fought so hard against. Perhaps these compromises are worth it - obviously, they were for some. But without recognizing what we gave or gave up, how can we truly measure what we have gained? And once a part of the system, how cognizant will we be of the next systemically disenfranchised group, the new homophobia, tomorrow’s AIDS?

Audience: [applause]

BRITTANY: And we will have Tara.

TARA: Hi. I'm very happy to be on this panel, especially to be back at the Sackler Center for Feminist Art, where I was an intern for the inaugural *Global Feminisms* exhibition<sup>xii</sup> in 2007. To position myself, I am literally a child of the 1980s, too young to have participated directly in the decade's activism and scenes and as a result admittedly idealistic about much of that history. Part of my work as an art historian is to negotiate my distance and proximity to the topic I'm writing about. The phenomenon of intergenerationality is particular to queer experience and plays an important role in how we understand AIDS art and activism (and it helps me position myself to its histories and representations). Some examples include Gregg Bordowitz's evocation of Charles Ludlam's Ridiculous Theater Company (in his 1993 essay "The AIDS Crisis is Ridiculous"<sup>xiii</sup>) or Gang and fierce pussy's activist posters and mailings of the early 1990s, which referenced feminist cunt art aesthetics of the 1970s.

I am working on a dissertation at The Graduate Center, CUNY, on the American activist art collectives Silence=Death Project, Gran Fury, and fierce pussy. I argue that the creation and dissemination in the urban public sphere of New York (and beyond) of cultural ephemera addressing the AIDS crisis and queer sexuality was a central tactic of the American culture wars. My publications, including "From the Streets to the Gallery: Exhibiting the Visual Ephemera of AIDS Cultural Activism"<sup>xiv</sup> (*Journal of Curatorial Studies*, Winter 2013) and "Radical Distribution: AIDS Cultural Activism in New York City, 1986-1992" (*Space and Culture*, forthcoming 2014), build upon these questions. Ephemera - as a formal practice and a signifying practice - is key to my approach to this subject. That is, just as ephemeral materials - cheap, easily reproduced and distributed - have been exemplary for voicing dissent during the AIDS crisis, so too did they (particularly in NYC in the 80s and early 90s) bear a certain pathos, literalizing the dispossession and disappearance of HIV-infected populations.

I'd like to share this quote from Eileen Myles, from her *Artforum* review of the 2010 exhibition *ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987-1993* at Harvard University, organized by Helen Molesworth and Claire Grace. Myles wrote:

Surprisingly - and maybe, when you think about it, a little ecstatically - very little material is still extant out of the enormous output of ACT UP's many individual artists and groups. So much work by these artists virtually disappeared into the very environment that spawned it. Their production was absorbed by the world of their time. In terms of distribution, that's an utter coup.<sup>xv</sup>

So, in thinking about the questions guiding this event, I was struck by ideas of the partial, of recuperation, and of responsibility.

I have studied and researched many artists involved in the creation and dissemination of AIDS-related work over the past 25 years which has been interesting for me because I am struck by the remarkable range of aesthetic and political responses to the AIDS crisis. Many of these cultural practices reconfigured both political and artistic activity in deeply impactful ways for subsequent generations, as is evident today. Going back to the 1980s, for example, the proximity of *Let the Record Show*<sup>xvi</sup> - the activist art installation by ACT UP at New Museum of Contemporary Art (fall 1987), an informa-

tion-laden, photo-and-text based piece in a street-facing window on Broadway, literally intended as a demonstration -- with *Against Nature*, an exhibition organized by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (winter 1988) of personal, highly aestheticized works not necessarily “about” AIDS but most certainly interfacing with the crisis. *Against Nature*<sup>xvii</sup> was a reaction to what some perceived as an increasingly dogmatic, art-hating camp of agitprop-producing cultural activists.

As more exhibitions and documentaries emerge concerning this historical period these questions are vital: what does it mean to blur the boundaries between art and activism? Are there appropriate and inappropriate responses to HIV/AIDS? What does it mean that to date the history of AIDS art and activism has been written, recorded, and managed by its participants? What does it mean to exhibit something in a museum that was never intended as “art”?

Ann Cvetkovich (from her essay “Video, AIDS, Activism”<sup>xviii</sup>), “A history remains to be written about how participation in ACT UP and AIDS activism has influenced an entire generation of cultural workers whose work continues to blur the boundaries between art and activism even when it is produced individually rather than collectively.” Along these lines, Sarah Schulman concludes many ACT UP Oral History Project<sup>xix</sup> interviews with a similar question about the legacy of ACT UP on subsequent cultural production.

Part of the story I’m interested in is the studio projects of queer (women) artists during and after their participation in AIDS activism/art activism, including Zoe Leonard, Marlene McCarty, Suzanne Wright, and Carrie Moyer, for example.

All of the thoughts I’m trying to coalesce here and in service of what Avram Finkelstein has cautioned against - a tidy canon detailing the art history of AIDS cultural activism, one that is often hindered by historical inaccuracies and misinformation (for example - *SILENCE=DEATH* was created in 1986 by a small consciousness-raising group of 6 gay men formed in response to a dearth of political action around the AIDS crisis, it predated both ACT UP and Gran Fury although it is frequently misattributed to both). Art and cultural activism made in response to AIDS goes way beyond binaries of sloganeering/elegiac, or collective/individual. It’s hard to even find language to describe it. It’s an exciting time as many turn towards the work and legacies of the 80s and 90s, but for these reasons it also comes with great responsibility. And certainly AIDS is not over. It is ongoing, it is going on. As Kay Rosen so wonderfully put it for the Visual AIDS tote. There have been many activist art responses to AIDS throughout the 1990s and 2000s. Today, I’m only addressing what I’m currently working on, the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s, but I am aware of the exigencies that accompany activist histories and archives (see Cvetkovich quote below).

As art historians, critics, filmmakers, curators, activists - how should we organize and represent this history? What models are available and useful to us? A useful thought from Ann Cvetkovich: “The challenge is to ensure that activist history never becomes dead history; it must be actively integrated into the lives of its audience. The history of activism offers testimony that because activism has happened before, it can happen again.”

The types of institutions that have, to date, presented shows on AIDS art and activism is instructive: universities (Harvard, NYU), libraries (NYPL), historical societies (NYHS, Lesbian Herstory Archives - recent shows on fierce pussy and Dyke Action Machine), small independent galleries (White Columns, Printed Matter - fierce pussy retrospective 2008).

A striking thread through most recent exhibitions and documentaries about AIDS activism in the 80s and 90s is a sense of historical memory as partial, even contested, rather than complete. This method of framing is critical, since any endeavor to re-present these histories is inevitably forestalled by the fact that so much historical memory has been lost due to deaths of participants. Jim Hubbard has phrased it (at the recent Visual AIDS event at the Graduate Center) as “a responsibility to tell the story of all my friends who died.” Avram Finkelstein (in “AIDS 2.0” published in POZ magazine last year, on the recent emergence of cultural work around the subject) has said, “After decades of shell-shocked contemplation, those who were there are finally able to speak about it.”

BRITTANY: We’re going to start a Q & A. Being the moderator, I’m going to use my privilege to start asking the first question. I want to ask the panelists, a couple of things that were mentioned, with this idea of inter-generationality and also urgency. Thinking about Jean, what you said about this imperative to preserve, to preserve the lost, to preserve the people who are no longer with us. But also Vincent’s ideas about building community through a concept of common humanity. While also fighting against this morbid thing that Hugh brought up about history not mattering but also thinking about what Tara offers us about avoiding canonization.

How can we actually build an inter-generational concept of urgency? How do we start to build this idea that there is something historical that does matter but that will be used to mobilize something that will really affect what’s going on in the present. So for the panelists...

Audience: [laughter]

JEAN: One way that I am trying to do this is by working in inter-generational groups, that’s my way of going through this. I’m not painting this from the vantage point of the museum. That was not relevant to me.

I’m involved in a group right now. We’re trying to work up a seder-like event that could perform a service. We would offer one night a year, where people could come together and go through the history much like a seder and also maybe bring somebody new into the fold.

To memorialize the dead, to recognize that there’s still a lot of work to do, that there are people living with AIDS at the table, so that’s just one simple way that I’m trying to maintain a practice.

HUGH: One of the things that the Pop-Up Museum works really hard to do is to work with a large variety of people creating exhibits. We are not strictly for artists, we’re not strictly for historians, we’re not strictly for anyone. We’re really trying to cast a

very wide net. At our last show, actually, our youngest presenter was 17 and the oldest was in her '70s.

The youngest had just started college and the oldest had written some of the first books on lesbian poetry in the '70s. And getting them in conversation together, not just about their specific subjects, which was important, the specific pieces of history that you're trying to share, but just as people who had something to share about history.

I think too often, we don't think of ourselves as people who have something to tell in that way. Sitting down and thinking through how you tell someone something you already know, I think makes you engaged with it in a way that is much more powerful than having to see it from a book or a classroom or from your family or your friends around you.

You end up having to think through what it means in a deeper way. I think that kind of historical processing is something that very few of us are given the opportunity to do once we leave school.

I think, that for me is really important. Empowering people to think about themselves as people who can think about history and can think about what has led us to this moment and have an analysis of it even if you're not an economics professor. Or, even if you're not an artist who's on the walls here.

VINCENT: I think in a very practical way as well. I teach at Parson's The New School for Design in the photography department, most of the classes that I teach have to do with the narrative of a photograph. One in particular is a documentary class where I encourage students to work collaboratively to investigate different subjects that are presented to them.

Gathering photographs, interviewing people, collecting histories. I think this idea of archive that a few of us have mentioned, is in a sense a lot more important and reaches a more far reaching audience than museums do. Museums are very narrow in their focus. The idea of the archive, building histories, communing people.

This last project that I'm working on, which is being published in May 2014, is Gays in The Military. It really is depending a lot not only on the photographs, but also on very intensive interviews that I did with each and every 120 or so people I photographed.

That becomes an essential part of the understanding of the image. I started the project four years ago. I really wanted to get a sense of what it is like to be in the military as a gay person.

So, I had to look at everyone from 92 year old World War II Vet all the way to 18-year-old recent enlistees and everything in between. It's really essential to feeling that understanding cross-generationally. What each and everyone's experience was.

TARA: Thinking about recent exhibitions, activism and art made in response to AIDS, it gives me a sense of living history. One that is happening now. I think a lot of museums

do amazing programming across a range of subjects and topic areas but interestingly enough the ACT UP New York show organized by Helen Molesworth and Claire Grace at the Carpenter Center, and NYU have now curated a Gran Fury retrospective in 2010. Both of those entailed really great programming, Gran Fury members met with Occupy Wall Street activists in workshop. They're supposed to get a residency in Harvard to connect with undergraduates to make posters and do bathroom installation.

When the show came to White Columns, the ACT UP show<sup>xx</sup>, it was surely different. Molesworth had said that the impetus of doing the show is because she realized that undergraduates didn't have the awareness of ACT UP and its legacy.

This is also Sarah Schulman and Jim Hubbard's explanation of starting the ACT UP oral history. This history project began with the realization that 10-15 years out of the peak of activist change, the stories weren't being told, they were being white washed. These projects are really important in they're coming from the ground up.

In White Columns, the generational response is different. It was a beautiful installation, they had gathered everybody, which was really about honoring those people who weren't present, but who had art up and there is this poetry series created by Sarah Schulman, living artists reading to deceased ones.

I think there's just been really creative ways of memorializing, and thinking about generationality in programming, workshopping and it's totally a game changer in the digital age. Like when I grew up, I didn't have access to the Internet. Looking for things meant something very different than it does now.

You have access to so many histories. Avail yourself of the incredible resources of the Internet too. And of communities that exist on both sides.

BRITTANY: Do we have a question from the audience?

AUDIENCE MEMBER (HANNALORE WILLIAMS): Vincent, you mentioned the human condition as it pertains to art. How would you say looking at the pandemic from 30 years ago to today, what presently, do you think the pandemic says about the human condition?

VINCENT: As I said in my presentation, HIV/AIDS is not a constant issue in my inquiry. The human condition comes from our own personal experience and the honoring of that really comes from somewhere other than who we are, either as an individual or as a community.

I think the human condition arises when people different from the way we are, people outside our community, recognize our humanity. The photographs that I made in that project during the early 1980s were really an interest I made as I was living my life. I had a project in mind, worked for a specific reason, and faced that I was photographing myself, and I look at that 25 years later and recognized that there was something there, that there was something being said. I think looking back, considering what our history was, will form us, and actually be able to put that out into the world. And, of-

fer up some kind of understanding to generations in the future. I hope that answers your question.

BRITTANY: Do we have another question from the audience?

AUDIENCE MEMBER (JIM FOURATT): My question has to do about the role of the museum and the archivists and curators in relationship to popular cultures representation. Just looking specifically at *Dallas Buyers Club*, which is now a very popular movie, there's something that none of the other films that I've seen had done. It actually shows people with AIDS wanting to be sexual, wanting to be empowered, wanting to make their own choices. You see a lot of films about activism but this is a rather different thing.

The problem is the authenticity. The PWA Coalition in New York, founded the first buyers club. In San Francisco, the first buyers club was founded by PWA's and they were not-for-profit groups. You have this representation in popular culture. But, what is the role of the curators within the museum in terms of the authenticity of story telling?

JEAN: I am not going to directly answer it but I want to expand it because I think the other question is - what is the role filmmakers play, also, in re-historicizing this history they're picking on. It's part and parcel of the same story. Whose story is going to get told and that's at the heart.

I think what you're asking is the heart of this whole issue right now. AIDS has always been an extremely political plague and it's always about whose story is allowed to be told. We still don't do that.

VINCENT: I can speak a little tangentially to that as well in terms of my own practices going back to the Gays of the Military project but not specifically about HIV/AIDS. The paradigm that I used in that project was to interview the people and let them speak about their own issues.

I think Jean brings up a very interesting point about documentary filmmakers that you are shaping a story based on what people have said.

The less heavy handed you get, the less editorializing you do in terms of what stories are being told, the purer it is. To answer your question very specifically about museums, I think the archive is doing a much better job at telling stories, preserving histories, in a much more factual manner, much more authentic manner than the museum.

But I think what really fuels it is the scholarship, the understanding of the people in the crowd actually wanting to visit our archives. I think that was one of the problems of the New York Historical Society, is that there were people who were putting the show together, and they didn't really understand what was going on in those first five years.

I think young people who are really interested in this issue, young people who do research should also be the people to be placed in these institutions - to actually tell that story.

HUGH: I just want to say something, Brittany, what you had said about filmmakers. I think that we are used to pieces when we read about something like *Dallas Buyers Club*. People will interview the filmmakers in popular culture and we'll know the perspective that they're coming from or at least part of it, and people will ask them all sorts of questions.

When it comes to museums, I think curators are rarely treated the same way. The museum becomes the objective voice, which doesn't exist. That's one of the big things, how do we forefront the people behind museums - the Ethos behind the museums. How do we let people know what is the voice? Who's in the room making this exhibit? What are they drawing from?

That helps us understand what we're actually looking at because there is a voice, there is a perspective and to pretend there isn't I think, it weakens everything.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I wanted to ask a little bit about archives doing a better job than museums at presenting this type of material for these topics. My understanding of what we mean by archive is that it would end up being the material that curators and museums and the institutions can access to present. People interested and involved with archives are doing a service to us all by collecting materials, stories, but unless some kind of institution or the archive becomes an institution to present it, they're dead stories because there is no way to get them out unless someone is digging in the stacks.

I just wondered a little bit about that, if you could clarify what you meant about how an archive does a better job or how they can relate to each other.

VINCENT: The very nature of what an archive is, is very expansive. It collect images, collects objects, collects letters, collects videos, collects a wide variety of things.

You're right. It doesn't see the light of day unless there are people that actually access that archive. Let me give you an example of my work. All of my documentary and personal work is being collected by the Rubenstein Library at Duke University.

It's a depository of everything that I made during my life including negatives, contact sheets, correspondents, etc. That's what gives a really full understanding of who I am as an artist. You can relate that to subject matters. We get that much expansive material. There is an authenticity that is built into it. The museums, students, scholars, have access to these archives.

Again, we're looking at a very specific perspective. It takes specific information for very specific ideas that you're looking for and they take it out of the context of the archive and put it in a different context.



AUDIENCE MEMBER (IAN BRADLEY-PERRIN): What does the revisitation mean, in the cultural and historical moment we are in? Because it is not really a revisitation—except for the institutional voice. So what does it mean that we are in an institutional revisitation?

BRITTANY: The question was, in this moment of revisitation, from the institutional ones, what does that mean for where we are now. That there is such this emphasis on revisitation of what the crisis meant in the previous moments.

JEAN: I think part of this revisitation is the fact that through years of activism, not just AIDS but around LGBT rights, we've become more powerful and demanding more of the history. And so, we're revisiting our history at this point. We are privileged to be able to do that.

To call attention to our plague and to say, "Look! This is New York City and there's not one goddamn memorial in this place except for a frickin bench that nobody even knows what it is by the river." That's pathetic.

Audience: [claps]  
[laughter]

TARA: I'll come in from a historical perspective which is different but I think Jean's right, a lot of the curators and cultural workers doing this work, programming, and making the shows are queers, not a blanket statement, but there's something to that.

I think in general there's some interest in socially engaged art practices, art activism, PO, there's been major shows on the '80s and '90s that have come up. This is part of that story as well.

There is a sort of broader revisitation of that period regarding what does it mean now?

VINCENT: You mentioned Don't Ask Don't Tell and DOMA and I think when you look at those things, I don't think we could have achieved those two milestones had we not remembered what our history was for the last 30 - 40 - 50 years. HIV/AIDS is part of that history. It's part of that history of the queer community, those within the LGBT community that always are happy to fight for something that should be their inalienable right to have. Just like anyone else.

So as long as there's any built thread that makes us different and makes us have to fight for something that is not given to us, then yes, those histories need to be presented to us all the time. We need to be remembering those things and looking at those things.

BRITTANY: We've got time for one more question. I saw the hand in the back go up.

AUDIENCE MEMBER (SUR RODNEY (SUR)): I think there's always a problem with re-presenting histories because you have to revise them so that the audience today can understand them. I feel they're useless. They're always re-imagined and truncated.

I think when you're looking at any kind of situation, bringing it to an audience today, you have to begin to look at where the audience of today is and then look back to figure out how they got there and fill in the gaps of what they don't know.

If you look at something like, Don't Ask Don't Tell, there's this revisionist-kind of history in terms of looking back in fights that we had for struggles of gay rights, we look at where people are now, where our culture is now and look back, you'll find out it was the exact opposite.

Because the fight was really not about fighting for people to be into gay rights, to be in the army or get married it's the exact opposite. But to make sense to the culture that we are now, we have to re-imagine what people fought for in the past and link it to something in the future that gives you a revisionist history of facts.

I see this failing happening continually. You have to look at where people are now, how they're thinking now, where they got to where they are now, and then go back to fill in the gaps to really recognize how different it is. It is my continuum.

Actual truncation of events and history to make now seem like it's much more present and retroactive, it really isn't. It's much worse.

Audience: [applause]

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Sur, that was beautifully put.

BRITTANY: I'm going to say thank you for making our last comment, a really exciting one. If anybody wants to respond to that also take this opportunity to say closing remarks related to that historical revisionism.

HUGH: Thank you that was a really great comment to end on and something that I think about a lot is how we got to this moment and how we employ history to understand this moment. I think that history at its best helps us to understand what we're going through. History at its worst is just cherry-picking things that make us feel good about where we are.

One thing that I would add to what you said is to look at not only how history needs to be marshaled to help people understand the context, but to look at what history people are choosing and what it actually means and why they're choosing that bit of history to bolster what they're saying.

I'm constantly frustrated by speeches that to me are in pursuit of more conservative goals that have invoked these activists whose actual positions haven't really been considered.

But I think this is not in any way specific to AIDS/queer rights anything like that. I think you tend to have that tendency because we do not have a real grasp of much of our history at all to sort of take historical figures, take out everything they actually

thought except for a couple of platitudes that we can tape onto them. And then, use them as stand ups.

To say, “No. Our ideas have this basis in History. See, Martin Luther King agrees with me. But, everyone takes up Martin Luther King and says, “No, he agrees with me.”

JEAN: I don’t know that I have a complete answer to your very well thought out point. One thing came to my mind when you were speaking, I was trying to think how do we resolve it. What came to my mind is the play, *The Normal Heart*. Which has had revivals over time, it was recently revived. The revival moved me more than the original did in many ways.

I think just in watching people come out after they have seen it; it was more of a story. It’s not really history, but it is history, it’s not, it’s a play. But it’s based on history. It’s a story. I think you have to have an honest approach to this material that acknowledge it it’s a story.

It’s not this monolithic history. It’s a story. For that reason, I’ll listen to it.

VINCENT: I applaud you as well for what you said. Going back again to Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and DOMA, I’ll give you two other examples. Number one, everybody refers to the history of gays in the military as Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell. That in itself is incorrect. It goes back to the Revolutionary War.

We have to understand what happened for that couple hundred years and the atrocities that occurred especially in the mid 20th century to a lot of gay people to understand what Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell really meant.

A lot of that isn’t really understood by anyone. I think that’s one of the things that I intended to do with this project is to go back and look at these. To really try to make sense about what Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell means.

Another thing I wanted to mention is just a personal experience. I remember 1986 I was invited to this transvestite wedding outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to photograph in. There were about 300 people there. Half of the Brides Maids were really men/half-women. I came out of there not really understanding what this theater was. Why these two people in the middle of the 1980s were really striving to what the larger culture was. And I saw myself as apart from that set from that.

Now, we have DOMA. When I think about that, I still don’t really believe for myself personally, in the institution of marriage. But I understand it in terms of union rights, civil rights. What can be afforded to us?

But a lot of people don’t really know what the previous histories were. We have been struggling for centuries and centuries to get what a lot of other people take for granted.

TARA: I really appreciate your comment. I was wondering if you have examples to offer of successful instances of engagement?

Just to return to the Myles quote that I started with, I'm almost struck with an event like this that there is a small panel and very large audience. It's on tip of the iceberg. I just want to mine all of the minds of this room and the stories of the street. There's so much here, it's palpable and then it dissipates.

NELSON: I want to thank everyone on the panel. I'm excited to see lots of new faces and I want to jump off on that. We love to hear from you guys.

If you can either email us, inside those little pieces of paper, there's also some questions and ideas like what do you want to see, please put that in. There's also tote bags on the way out.

BRITTANY: I just want also to say thank you everyone for coming. I also want to say thank you to Ted Kerr from Visual AIDS

Audience: [applause]



<sup>i</sup> The Audre Lorde Project is a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans and Gender Non Conforming People of Color center for community organizing, focusing on the New York City area. Through mobilization, education and capacity-building, we work for community well-ness and progressive social and economic justice. Committed to struggling across differences, we seek to responsibly reflect, represent and serve our various communities.

<http://alp.org/>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.artwrit.com/article/aids-2-0/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://www.visualaids.org/blog/detail/download-the-transcript-from-representing-aids-culture-and-accountability>

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.jeancarlomusto.com/offerings.html>

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.feministpress.org/wsq>

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.whitecolumns.org/view.html?type=exhibitions&id=524>

<sup>vi</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/04/opinion/sunday/how-to-whitewash-a-plague.html>

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.jeancarlomusto.com/offerings.html>

<sup>viii</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/movies/coming-soon-a-breakout-for-black-filmmakers.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>

<sup>ix</sup> [http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/3041684?](http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/3041684?uid=3739832&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21104289918223)

[uid=3739832&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21104289918223](http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/3041684?uid=3739832&uid=2129&uid=2&uid=70&uid=4&uid=3739256&sid=21104289918223)

<sup>x</sup> [http://books.google.com/books?id=plcWOr22\\_TgC&dq=memory+of+history+michael+frisch&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](http://books.google.com/books?id=plcWOr22_TgC&dq=memory+of+history+michael+frisch&source=gbs_navlinks_s)

<sup>xi</sup> <http://www.nyhistory.org/exhibitions/aids-new-york-first-five-years>

<sup>xii</sup> [http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/global\\_feminisms/](http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/global_feminisms/)

<sup>xiii</sup> <http://mitpress.mit.edu/books/aids-crisis-ridiculous-and-other-writings-1986-2003>

<sup>xiv</sup> <http://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Article,id=15058/>

<sup>xv</sup> [http://www.eileenmyles.com/pdf/LestWeForget-EileenMyles\\_artforum.pdf](http://www.eileenmyles.com/pdf/LestWeForget-EileenMyles_artforum.pdf)

<sup>xvi</sup> [http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence\\_id/158](http://archive.newmuseum.org/index.php/Detail/Occurrence/Show/occurrence_id/158)

<sup>xvii</sup> [http://users.design.ucla.edu/~jihyunkim/projects/pdf/J.Kim\\_LACE\\_OUTSIDE\\_2008.pdf](http://users.design.ucla.edu/~jihyunkim/projects/pdf/J.Kim_LACE_OUTSIDE_2008.pdf)

<sup>xviii</sup> [http://books.google.com/books?id=-eu5cm9iuewC&pg=PA182&lpg=PA182&dq=ann+cvetkovich+video+aids+activism&source=bl&ots=uBxIBzm9QI&sig=krMf2c9kJBeH6l-LoyU5qz2W9zu4&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Z5GYU5C1C4zhsAS2\\_YD4Ag&ved=0CEsQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=ann%20cvetkovich%20video%20aids%20activism&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=-eu5cm9iuewC&pg=PA182&lpg=PA182&dq=ann+cvetkovich+video+aids+activism&source=bl&ots=uBxIBzm9QI&sig=krMf2c9kJBeH6l-LoyU5qz2W9zu4&hl=en&sa=X&ei=Z5GYU5C1C4zhsAS2_YD4Ag&ved=0CEsQ6AEwBg#v=onepage&q=ann%20cvetkovich%20video%20aids%20activism&f=false)

<sup>xix</sup> <http://www.actuporalhistory.org/>