

Interview with Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman

Alexandra Juhasz

Alexandra: This issue of *Corpus* is on women, gay men, and AIDS. I'm interested in talking to you about your working and social relationship, and your project devoted to ACT UP's oral history (www.actuporalhistory.com).

Sarah: AIDS has been a part of our relationship since we met.

Jim: Well, not quite. I can't remember where we first met, but I think it may have been at a party. Through [my then roommate] David [France].

S: That's right. A party of all the gay leftists. There used to be so many. But, my earliest memory of AIDS in our relationship was you and David, making AL721, an early AIDS drug, in your apartment. What year was that?

J: It probably was 1986.

S: When we started the NY Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival [now called the MIX Experimental Queer Film Festival]. AIDS was a factor the very first year.

J: Definitely. We had people from ACT UP come and talk, and they had a table.

S: But when did Roger [Jacoby] die?

J: He was diagnosed in August 1984 and he died in November 1985. It was February 1987 that we decided to start the festival.

S: Did we show Roger's work that first year?

J: We had a whole show of his work: "Floria," "L'Amico Fried's Glamorous Friends."



FACING PAGE and RIGHT: stills from videos by James Wentzy

S: “How to be a Homosexual.” And the first AIDS film we ever showed, by Larry Brose, “An Individual Desires Solution,” which was this really dense, very painful, visually overwhelmed film that really accurately showed emotionally what everyone was feeling. It was exciting to see that an experimental film could express a truth about AIDS that no conventional film could express.

J: Remember the statement from the third year where we said: “In the first year, there was only one film about AIDS, in the 2nd there were a large number, and in the 3rd year, every film was informed by AIDS.” It was a really fast transition.

A: I was recently at a panel about AIDS art from that period at a conference for art critics. People wanted to talk about how they can’t find any current art work about AIDS to write about today.

J: I don’t understand why people don’t find it interesting.

A: You two still do, what does that say about your relationship?

S: It’s all about the Holocaust, my dear. We’re Jews of the same generation. We grew up with this never-forget mentality, and being responsible to your people who were murdered and getting justice for them. It’s motivated us for two decades.

J: Currently we are doing an ACT UP oral history project. We have completed 62 interviews that last 2-4 hours each. We have 110 hours of tapes, and 101 people on our waiting list. We’re obsessed by the subject. To me it’s the central tragedy of our time. I don’t understand why others aren’t interested in it.

S: What is plaguing this generation is that they are being bombarded by fake representations of gay life that are corporate product. When we were young, there was zero representation and so everything came from the subculture and from personal experience. If you are being constantly told that AIDS is over, that gay people cause their own oppression, that straight people are the heroes of AIDS—and this is the main message of official corporate works about AIDS—you become disassociated from the subject matter.

A: Yet you two stay connected, to AIDS, and to each other. How do you name your relationship?



still from video by James Wentzy



RIGHT: still from video by Gregg Bordowitz and Jean Carlomusto

S: Jim is not my lover, or my partner, he is my friend that I have been working with for 20 years.

J: And we work really well together.

S: We know how to work, but we don’t know how to work it...

A: How are you drawn to each other, if both of you are uninterested in the other, at least sexually? I use queerness to describe a kind of love or admiration that is not sexual.

S: You don’t like to use the word Jewish? There’s things about Jim that remind me of certain relatives I had as a child.

A: You guys do have a familial relationship with each other. I call that queer. But, of course, there’s another use of the word that is used to tell a history that says AIDS activism brought us queer activism and this was the first time women and gay men were working together on a cause.

J: Didn’t gay men and lesbians work together before queer activism? It depended on where you were and in what situation.

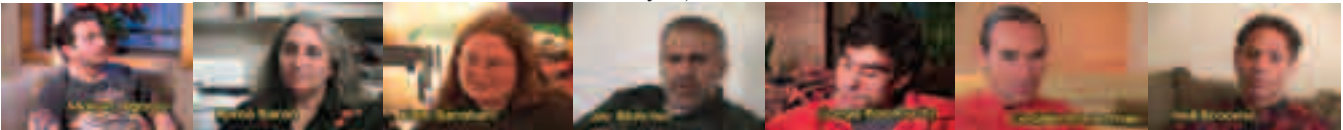
S: If you were on the left and schleppy, there was more interactivity. But not for slick, beautiful people. And we’re not slick. That’s a real point of bonding: our feelings get hurt by slick people.

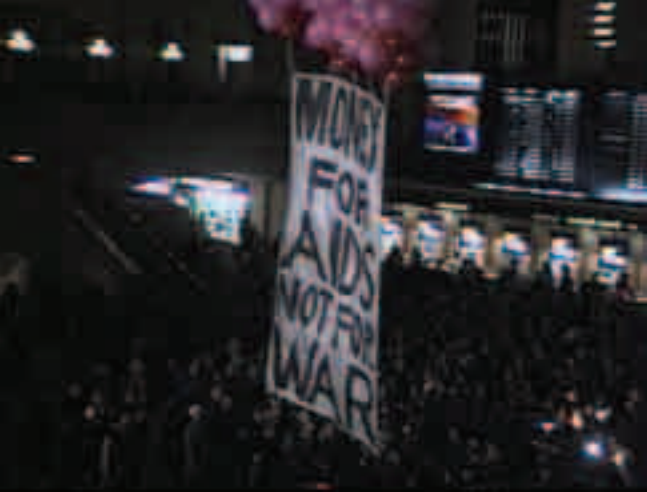
A: You use the Yiddish word schleppy to talk about a way of being in the world.

S: I had male relatives in my family who worked and worked and couldn’t GET a break and didn’t get respect. But they knew the difference between right and wrong. And that part of how we do things is familiar to me; HAIMISH is the word. It’s a certain kind of person, and we’re not being reproduced.

J: Well if we are I’d like to meet them!

THESE AND FOLLOWING: Thumbnails of Interviewees from The ACT UP Oral History Project, Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman





LEFT and FACING PAGE: stills from video by James Wentzy

S: Socialists.

J: That’s a big part of it, too.

A: And that’s not being reproduced either.

J: We’re getting a long way from AIDS. To get back to our AIDS-related project, there are 1,000 unique hits a day to our site for the ACT UP Oral History Project. And 20-60

people per month are downloading each transcript. 15,000 copies of interview transcripts are out there in the world.

S: In places like Moldova and China. This material that did not exist 2 years ago is now being disseminated to people who crave it and need it. It’s amazing. And if people in Moldova are learning how to build an AIDS activist organization, I’m happy. That’s the point of the project!

A: Is the AIDS that is currently between you past or future oriented?

J: My relationship to AIDS is largely of the past. I created a collection for the NY Public Library of AIDS activist video from the 1980s and early 90s. The activism and films I did ended in 1992. And our oral history project is about reflection. A great deal of it is in the past. I know surprisingly few guys with AIDS.

S: That’s not true.

J: Compared to 1987.

S: Our cameraman has AIDS and two of our best friends have AIDS.

J: I’m talking about feelings. This is my impression: that I don’t know so many.

A: There are lots of HIV-positive people that are in the closet for new reasons.



S: Maybe they don’t see how it will help anyone, how it will make a difference to be out with AIDS. People we interview don’t feel that way about the past, when they participated in ACT UP. It’s rare to have a group of people where no one expresses regret. At a moment when very few people did the right thing, all these people for very diverse motives and from diverse backgrounds, did the right thing.

A: Why, do you think?

J: The largest motive for women was that they knew someone who was sick or died. The men came out of fear. It was more immediate. And, a lot of those people have not done such interesting things since.

A: Do they say that?

S: People say that was the best moment of their life. When they were the best that they’ve ever BEEN.

A: Because people were dying and the stakes were higher?

S: No, because they did the right thing. Fighting for justice and winning is exciting. Fighting and not getting progress is very defeating. It’s a chance of history whether you are in a moment where a movement will succeed or not.



A: Was it just a chance of history that ACT UP succeeded?

S: I’m a “vulgar” Marxist and I believe in the pendulum of history. You cannot force a mass movement, it has to be in the zeitgeist to exist. This is a group of people who were despised, they had no rights, they had no support from their families, society, or government, they had a terminal illness and they were supposed to roll over and die. And they decided that they mattered. And they decided to come together and forced others to change, against their wishes. And that’s the story. That can happen again. It has to and it will.



- S:** One of the things that comes up over and over again in our interviews is the word “forced,” it is a very important word in all of this. Right now we are in an oppression mentality, broadly, in every aspect of culture. There is a predominant value of allowing the powers that be to control the structure. If you are trying to force change you are doing something wrong, something negative. You are supposed to be zen and your higher power will do it for you...if it’s meant to happen, it’ll happen. That’s propaganda about people not having impact on their own environment. ACT UP consciously articulates that we can force people to do things they do not want to do because those things are right. That’s what Jim and I do all the time, we are like a force of nature. We force people to do things, because we know that it’s right. And look how many people are responding to our project and how many people have this information now because we are pushy.
- A:** Imagine the people reading this magazine are primarily young, gay, urban men of color, who may or may not be HIV positive. What do you want to tell them? What can you say that they want to hear? Especially given where we began: Jewishness, socialism, and AIDS brings you together and these are not currently deemed as sexy.
- S:** I’m 46.
- J:** And I’m 54.
- S:** We’re the generation before representation. This current generation has an obstacle that we did not. They are being bombarded by fake stories about themselves. And their challenge is to look at their real life and notice the difference between that and what they are being told about themselves. That’s their journey and struggle, and anything I can do to help with that, I will.
- J:** The bombardment is interesting. When we were growing up there were very few stories and they were all horror stories, but because there were so few it made you yearn for something else. Today’s overwhelmingness is the huge obstacle.
- A:** Gay and lesbian activism and AIDS activism fought for increased visibility.
- S:** That’s not what they got, they got misrepresentation.



- A:** Increased representation of misrepresentation. If you imagine coming into a sense of being young and gay where the only project is to make your own representation, that’s ennobling. As opposed to being young and gay and your job is picking through the crap.
- S:** On your cell phone...
- A:** That’s not ennobling, it’s just tedious. No wonder people feel tired. It wakes you up to make things, it tires you out to wade through them.
- S:** I want to say to our readers that your life matters. We get the message everyday that somehow we don’t matter and we’re supposed to overcome that. I care about what happens to you.
- J:** In this culture, individual success is what matters. The society has changed enough so that certain young gay men of color can have influence and success, but, the large majority cannot. And it’s only through some form of mass action that change can happen. I think this would be a better country if people stopped striving for individual success.
- S:** You’re saying that celebrity culture is a huge obstacle towards AIDS awareness.

