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GRAN FURY talks to DOUGLAS CRIMP

DOUGLAS CRIMP: One of your members, Mark Simpson, is no longer with us. Perhaps we can officially dedicate our remarks here to his memory. When did Mark die?

TOM KALIN: Mark died of AIDS on November 10, 1996.

DC: Okay, let's begin with a work that seems appropriately sad. Ten years ago a few of you in Gran Fury made a poster with four questions, the last of which was, "When was the last time you cried?" Was that the final work done under the auspices of the group?

LORING McALPIN: Well, after that we did the flyer *Good Luck . . . Miss You* for "Temporarily Possessed" at the New Museum. That was meant as our farewell.



Gran Fury with *The Pope and the Penis* at the Venice Biennale, 1990. (Left to right: John Lindell, Donald Moffett, Mark Simpson, Marlene McCarty, and Loring McAlpin).

DC: That was 1995. You did the four questions in '93. Do you remember the

other three questions?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: "Do you resent people with AIDS? Do you trust HIV-negatives? Have you given up hope for a cure?" The conversation leading to that work was largely driven by Mark Simpson. We were grappling with a problem we had at that later stage—trying to put very complex things into a very concise text. This work was a response to our frustration at being unable to articulate the complexity of the issues. We decided to just go bare bones and say how we felt, which had never been our primary focus.

TK: I remember that Mark always had a yellow legal pad in his house on which he wrote all sorts of things. And those questions were among the things he wrote. They were about feeling alienated as someone living with AIDS and about feeling less well physically. That, and the fact that the visibility of the crisis and the AIDS activist demonstrations had faded away.

AF: Up to this point, the only emotion we had directly articulated was anger. But it's funny that you should even mention this work, Douglas, because, unlike a lot of the other things we did, there was no response at all to that piece.

LM: Well, we were addressing a different audience. It was really directed toward our own community. We were trying to acknowledge something but not judge it, to ask, "What's happening now? Where did our anger go? What are we going to do?"

TK: In my memory, you all went out with buckets of wheat paste, just like we did in 1988 with *AIDS: 1 in 61*, the first work we did with the name Gran Fury.

DC: How did Gran Fury come into being as a collective?

MICHAEL NESLINE: It happened by degrees. Bill Olander, the curator at the New Museum, came to an ACT UP meeting with a proposal that ACT UP use the museum's window on Broadway for a visual demonstration. At the end of the meeting, everyone who was interested met in the back corner of the Lesbian and Gay Community Center.

DC: The result was *Let the Record Show . . . This was 1987*. How did such a complex work get formulated by such a large group?

TK: I remember there was a kind of bullet-style accumulation of political points compiled from clippings people brought in from the *New York Times*. The main idea came from demos where we yelled "shame" at public figures who were doing nothing about AIDS. So we decided we'd single out public figures who had made outrageous statements about AIDS, show a photograph of each of them, and cast their words in concrete. And then these AIDS criminals somehow got connected to the Nuremberg trials. It probably went back to the SILENCE = DEATH poster with the pink triangle.

AF: This is the way ACT UP functioned on every level. People would bring news items to the meetings. They would throw out snippets from articles, and whatever resonated became the issue we'd organize around. It was an organic process, and Gran Fury worked that way for a long time.

DONALD MOFFETT: The form developed in the same collaborative way. The issues unfolded, and the form followed.



Gran Fury, *Let the Record Show . . .*, 1987. Installation view, New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York.

MARLENE McCARTY: Absolutely. Someone would say, "I know how to make a photo mural." Somebody else would say, "I have access to an LED."

TK: I remember volunteering to make the photo mural of the Nuremberg trials because I knew how to make murals by ironing paper to canvas with glue. I remember Don Ruddy at another meeting cutting rubber letters with an X-Acto blade to cast the

sentences in concrete. The process was additive, like a collage. It just turned out to have a coherent appearance, which made it seem much more planned than it really was.

MN: Well, Mark Simpson actually knew what was going on. He described to me what the window was going to look like before it existed.

MM: Each time we gathered to work on the window, a different constellation of people showed up. It wasn't until later that we decided to form a collective.

LM: When we were disassembling the window, there was a discussion about what to do next.

TK: We had a meeting and said, "Let's continue this." The poster *AIDS: 1 in 61* came out of that meeting. It was then that we took the name Gran Fury, which was the Plymouth model of choice for the New York Police Department. But that group was still larger than the one around this table: It included Don Ruddy, who later died of AIDS; Anthony Viti was involved in that discussion, I'm sure Todd Haynes was involved, Mark Harrington.

LM: Steve Barker. The group was variable up until after we made the posters for "Nine Days of Protest" that included *Read My Lips* [1988].

DC: How did a shifting group of people become a collective with a fixed membership?

JOHN LINDELL: Since initially the meetings were open, anybody could come, but it became frustrating.

MM: You couldn't move forward; you always had to backtrack and regroup.

JL: There was a debate about whether we should be open or closed, and we finally decided closed.

TK: We went from being wheat-pasting hooligans to suddenly having real resources and opportunities and a platform from which to speak. This brought about a crisis of conscience in discussing how to articulate the group because the stakes had been raised.



Gran Fury, *All people with AIDS are innocent*, 1988, New York.

DC: What was your first high-stakes opportunity?

LM: It was *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, which was part of a public-art project called "Art Against AIDS On the Road" [1989]. Within a year or so, our poster was on buses and subway platforms in San Francisco, Chicago, New York, and Washington, DC. Up until then, we were still having a dialogue with the whole membership of ACT UP. When we presented this project, suddenly there were three hundred people commenting on it; we just realized that we couldn't work with that much feedback.

MN: We decided we wanted to function independently, but we asked ACT UP for a percentage of the profits from sales of T-shirts with our images printed on them. Of course this didn't include the SILENCE = DEATH T-shirts, since that wasn't a Gran Fury design, but it included *Read My Lips*, which sold a lot. They agreed, but we didn't get the money from them on a regular basis.

TK: Well, there was a little bad blood.

ROBERT VAZQUEZ: I remember that well, because I was at-large representative from the floor of ACT UP, and I would hear discussions about Gran Fury: "Every other committee of ACT UP is open; why is it that with Gran Fury we don't know who they are and their membership is closed?" It was counterintuitive for the ACT UP membership to have a closed group.

DC: In other words, Gran Fury began as an ad hoc committee of ACT UP members, then broke away from the larger organization, just as, later, members of the ACT UP Treatment and Data Committee split off from the larger group to form TAG, the Treatment Action Group, and the PWA Housing Committee evolved into Housing Works. My memory is that other artists and graphic designers in ACT UP became resentful of the status Gran Fury had attained in

the art world. And in the end it is certainly unjust that ACT UP's graphic style is very often credited to Gran Fury alone, when in fact many others who were never members of Gran Fury contributed to the invention of that style.

MN: Just as a footnote to what you're saying, Douglas, one of the things that really made a big difference in the legitimization of Gran Fury is the article that you published in the AIDS issue of *October* [Winter 1987]. You made the argument for why what we were doing was legitimate in the context of art.

TK: Our work is also indebted to the appropriation work of the early '80s that you wrote about. But it's true, the *October* article eventually led to things like the Venice Biennale, to a kind of institutional exposure that probably wouldn't have happened otherwise. We went from T-shirts and posters to billboards and international exhibitions.

MM: The aftermath of that has been really weird. I'm still active in the art world. I teach in the United States and Europe, and I'm constantly asked how we put together our art collective. It always blows my mind, because we came together with such a sense of urgency, with goals that had nothing to do with wanting to make art or to change the way people look at art.



Gran Fury, *You've Got Blood on Your Hands*, 1988, New York.

DC: Probably very few people understand what it is to make art collaboratively within the compass of an activist movement. They seem to believe that Gran Fury was a group of artists who contributed to AIDS activism or to ACT UP, but in fact it's the other way around. All of us were members of ACT UP, and that's why we were able to accomplish what we did. More importantly, it's why we did what we did in the first place.

LM: We began at an unusual historical moment. AIDS was turning into a huge catastrophe, and there was no adequate public response. So there was a space for some kind of voice to raise questions. None of us had any doubts that we had to be there.

AF: But as soon as we realized we had a voice, we started to mock ourselves. Every so often we would be cackling, "Oh, that's so Gran Fury."

LM: We simply realized the extent to which we were using institutional power.

TK: I don't think we were being ironic. It was just a question of the tensions that arose from having a larger platform and still trying to speak effectively about urgent concerns.

DM: What goes unsaid is that the institutional support was instrumental for us, because from the very beginning, we decided we weren't going to say, "We can't do this because there's no money." We started out really small with things that we could afford on our own, and then the money started coming in for real, and it facilitated a continuation of our work, so this can't just be a discussion about the ironies of what we were doing.

TK: I only meant to address this bigger point. The collective proceeded from activist concerns, and the fact that we were in sync with the art world and able to use those resources was great. But at a certain point, we began to have the opportunity to address issues further away from what we knew best. For instance, in Montreal, with the piece for the opening of the new building for the Museum of Contemporary Art, *Je me souviens* [Never forget, 1992], I remember discussions about what it meant to make a piece in French talking about French-Canadian identity.



Gran Fury, *Read My Lips (boys)*, 1988, offset lithograph, 16 3/4 x 10 3/4".

LM: We also had a long discussion about whether we should be in the Venice Biennale at all. We had wanted to hang banners in the street, remember? And they said, "No, you can't do that." And there was a moment when we wondered whether it was enough for us to just be inside an art institution, but we decided it was a public enough venue to merit doing it.

AF: It was also an opportunity to talk about condom use in the belly of the beast, to confront the Catholic Church on its home territory.

MM: I want to go to bat for Venice. We cannot forget how much press came out of that piece, which was far more public than a billboard would have been. That work got AIDS on the cover of *Express*.

RV: But we're being disingenuous when we say that we planned to send a huge photograph of an erection to Venice, intended as a provocation to the Pope, and

worried that no one would notice. We knew very well what we were doing.

MN: The director of the Biennale tried to dismiss the controversy by saying, "Oh, the penis. That's just kitsch." In the meantime Cicciolina was back there being fucked by Jeff Koons.

TK: It was funny, we made Jeff Koons look just decorative and irrelevant next to something authentic that rippled through the art world—a situation that then got quickly reversed, sadly.

DC: Here's perhaps the inevitable question: After achieving such success, why did you stop?

JL: We stopped because there were questions that we wanted to address that we couldn't find a means to address. Toward the end we talked about doing something about the fact that after nearly ten years of AIDS awareness the infection rates for gay men were still going up. We found that our way of working was inadequate to the situation, and we couldn't change our way of working.

MN: We tried to invent new strategies. We tried to collaborate with the Guerrilla Girls and with PONY [Prostitutes of New York], but those collaborations didn't prove to be successful.

RV: I left the collective a while before it disbanded. One reason was that I was working in communities of color, and I remember a discussion about the bus-shelter poster we did that showed white women. I argued that if you use white women, only white women will pay attention to it. But we went with the picture of the white women, and I thought, "I need to move on now," because my politics had changed.

MN: It's interesting that you mention that project, Robert, because if somebody asked me what was the final project Gran Fury did, I would have said *Women Don't Get AIDS. They Just Die From It* [1992], which was the last snappy one-liner we came up with. And as disappointed as we were by that project, the fact is that the issue we were trying to address—the failure of the CDC's AIDS definition to include the diseases women were getting—changed after we did that poster; the definition of AIDS expanded to include many more illnesses specific to women. I'm not saying we can take credit for the change, but our poster was part of the activist work that pressured the CDC to change the definition.

TK: Our disbanding also corresponds to the growing efficacy of groups like TAG and the introduction of protease inhibitors. The horrible irony is that literally the day Mark Simpson died, I came home after taking care of his body and there was the *New York Times Magazine* with Andrew Sullivan's cover story about the end of AIDS. Mark had tried protease inhibitors, but he had a staph infection, and they didn't work. And now supposedly people don't die of AIDS anymore, so Mark's death sadly came at the moment of the final closing of that earlier chapter in AIDS treatment.

MM: The attitude toward AIDS changed when it went from being a crisis situation to a chronic, manageable disease.

DC: I think you're making a leap that is historically inaccurate. At the time that you did the final poster with the four questions, things were not getting better. It would be two long years before the introduction of protease inhibitors, and not only had things become extremely complex, but many of us were feeling terrible despair. The enthusiasm with which we had approached what we were doing in the early years of ACT UP couldn't be sustained, because death was taking too great a toll. Also, we had brought about a lot of change up to a certain point, but then stasis set in.

MN: If you remember what the initial goals of ACT UP were—to publicize the crisis, to get drugs into bodies, and to end the AIDS crisis—we accomplished two of the three. The third still remains to be achieved.

JL: I also want to make it clear that the dissolution of Gran Fury wasn't quick, and it wasn't happy in any way. Our decision to stop didn't come as a relief. It was the result of frustration with our inability to find a means to continue working.

LM: I think what we accomplished was to drive a wedge into public discourse and open a space where AIDS could be talked about in all its dimensions. By the time we stopped, that was happening. Maybe our function was just to initiate that discussion—to expect us to last until the discussion is over is absurd.

DC: On top of all the other horrifying events of the present—including the Bush administration's rush to war—AIDS here and now is still a crisis. And nobody talks about it.

MN: That's not entirely true. Just this week the newspapers reported that the rate of new infections among young African-American males in the United States has inched up by a percentage point. The information is there, and that's a huge difference from the time that ACT UP started.

AF: But the urgency is not there.

DM: What I hear now is a rhetorical neglect coming out of the White House that is very similar to where we were fifteen years ago.

DC: And many of the things that we accomplished as activists we would now have to fight for all over again. For example, ADAP [AIDS Drug Assistance Program] funding is being cut all over the country. And when was the last time any of you saw prevention information in, say, a gay bar?

RV: With the introduction of protease inhibitors we didn't see people die as quickly.

But in fact people of color are dying just as quickly as before. With the introduction of protease inhibitors the focus of people doing AIDS policy work shifted to AIDS in Africa, and with their attention elsewhere, horrible policies like mandatory name reporting began to happen here.

DC: To return to the question of irony, today Gran Fury is remembered less among activists than within the art world. It's not for nothing that this is an interview for *Artforum* and not for a magazine about queer politics. I guess we probably have to admit that the resting place of Gran Fury is the museum.

MM: But in fact the final resting place is not the museum, it's the Public Library.

DC: I meant the museum metaphorically. But yes, let's be clear that the Gran Fury Collection is in the public domain and available in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library.

DM: That legacy is an educational resource for another generation. After all, we didn't come out of nowhere. We dragged the history of this kind of art into the '80s and the early '90s. And it will be reinvented again.

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