

Nevin Robinson interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

San Francisco, USA, 5 February 2008

This is a complete transcript of a recorded interview. The text has been slightly edited to correct some grammatical errors (which are inevitable features of spoken conversation), but only where this was necessary to aid comprehension.

Paul Sendziuk: Nevin, [before the recording began] we were just talking about how you came to begin taking photographs; maybe you could tell me a little bit about that again.

Nevin Robinson: I was a very impressionable ten year old with a very wonderful uncle, who, he and his wife – my mother’s older sister – sort of took on the responsibility for many of their nieces and nephews, and so I spent a great deal of time with him and my eldest sister, who’s fourteen years my senior, so she was also a bit of a matriarchal figure, I think. This was because of my parents’ careers. There was a lot of time spent with those particular folks, the uncle and my elder sister. And the camera just sort of came into play. He’d introduced it to us and, pardon the cliché, I just sort of fell in love, and saw what I did, you know. At that time it was a slow process, you didn’t have the immediacy that you have now. And it [i.e. my enjoyment] just never stopped.

And you’ve had some formal training in photography as well?

Correct. Some very expensive formal training in photography. Which is not always necessary, you know; if you have a talent. I mean, if you can afford the formal training, great, but I think there are lots of other avenues in which to gain that knowledge.

I think I read somewhere, snippets about you on the internet, and I think I read that you’re not that keen on digital photography; at least until recently, not interested in digital photography.

True; you know, I don’t find the equipment it to be as spontaneous; technically spontaneous. I think that’s just a fact. I don’t think that you’re able to acquire as much engagement between two people – because photographing is about two people. Because I use an old camera there’s a lot of, you know, inquisition – “oh, what is that?”, you know – from kids to adults. I typically shoot black and white, although it’s not ‘antique’, but because digital technology made everything happen very, very quickly, now the black and white is considered sort of like, “Oh wow!” [clicks]. And so I think there’s more engagement with people because of that quote-unquote “traditional” photography. And everyone has a digital camera, you know. Not to say that people who use them don’t take great pictures. Obviously [with digital photography] if you have the knowledge you’re able to crop and to manipulate the images. But personally I really enjoy that what you see is what you get. So I always try to show the black line, you know, this is what my eye saw because of that person, because of that friend or lover or mother; I like the engagement between two people.

And I suppose it's more of a challenge for you as an artist, as well, to try and work out what's the perfect shot, and not to have to do that later on the computer, mucking around with it.

I think it's kind of very similar, because I shoot a lot of film and I just destroy most of it; you just don't like most of what you see. I think it's the same thing. I think it just costs more, the traditional manner.

What sort of camera do you use?

You know this old box camera, Rolleicord, German, best one that was ever made.

Ok, it's the best one that was ever made?

You want to hold it?

Yeah, sure.

It's an old medium format; I shoot the square negative, obviously. It's probably late 1950s, early 60s. I think Richard Avedon was one artist who made it famous. Have you never seen one?

Well, I've got a friend who has a medium format camera as well, and it shoots square film; but I think it was bigger than this.

Hasselblad [i.e. a Swedish camera maker] etc? This is very old. There's nothing electronic about it.

It's gorgeous.

Not even as far as measuring the amount of light required; it's just all guess work. But then you know, if you go to school long enough, you sort of learn how to do that.

I can imagine. I mean, your subject would be so fascinated with this as soon as you pull it out. I love it. Where do you find these sort of cameras?

I bought it from an amazing undergraduate professor who encouraged me to buy it. I've had it for almost twenty years. It's been all over the world; it's made friends, and yeah, kids especially are fascinated. But I think it's just, you know, the engagement because it's a large camera, I think it's foreign to many people. Foreign in the sense that you don't see many; you know, as I said earlier, everyone has a digital camera... Am I talking too fast? I tend to do that.

No, you're fine.

Ok, sorry. I have a digital camera, I just haven't, you know, been using the two. And digital, also, I tend to see like a movie; I want to see, like, the narrative with rectangular image. I just see cinematically, for whatever reason. But that could be my OCD [i.e. obsessive compulsive disorder], not willing to let that go. With this [i.e. the medium

format camera] I see story. But I see it going back and forth, you know, like a window. And with the rectangle I see, I don't know, a narrative. But that could also be because of the education, you know, and working with the film industry, I don't know.

How do you choose what you want to photograph? How do you find your subjects?

You know, it just happens. Sometimes you just meet interesting people. And then you put them all together, and you have, like, the influences that we have upon each other; and sometimes it's positive and sometimes it's negative; and... oh my God, this is going to sound clichéd, but even from the negative experiences you learn a great deal. I photographed this guy I met; I was with a friend at a beer blast [party], and I thought, "He's really interesting" and we had some eye contact, and so I asked him, "Would you be interested in being photographed, just Google me. I don't want to shoot you naked, you know, I just want to, like, have some fun with this." And he contacted me, and we had some fun, but they didn't work out, you know. He wanted to sort of pose and turn it on, and he was happy with the images, but I would never... it just wasn't spontaneous. And you know I would have say that all of the photographs, however many are on this particular piece [looking at some images], are sort of spontaneous, you know.

And so these people are your friends, or people you found on the street?

For the most part they're friends; some family members; a couple of acquaintances; one person that, you know, I would probably have no further contact with, just because there was no... you just know, when you're going to pursue a friendship with someone. A nephew, a couple of people with cancer, some other people, a couple that are living with a life-threatening illness.

Is that an interesting theme for you, people who are either ill or living with this...

It's interesting; I think everyone, whether they have a virus or disease or whatever, regardless of whether you do or you don't, everyone I think has had some sort of confrontation in life. So that is one element that makes us very similar, that we can share. Some people have worse confrontations. One of my sisters could say it's no different to have cancer once and to wonder if it were to come back - and for one friend it did, and she didn't make it - or for one person to have survived an automobile accident, where he and the rest of us who know him probably still wonder why he survived and the other five did not. He may not have a virus in his blood, but I think every day he probably wonders, "Why me?"

And he's still living with the consequences of that accident as well.

Yeah, he probably is. I don't know that he would want me to talk about this.

That's ok, absolutely. [Looking at the pictures] They're all... I mean, nearly every picture is really different. The posing, just the way they're looking, what they're evoking in each picture; they're really different. The framing is very similar, most of them are from the waist up...

That's because if I'm too far away I don't get the face, which says so very much. And, I mean, technically you learn what is appropriate and what is pushing the limits of composition. So I think there's an element of graphic design in the photographs as well. There are a lot of little elements which come into play, you know. [Pointing to a photograph] Her feet are not cropped, I actually had to crop all of these to get them to fit on this piece, which I call a diary. So her feet are actually in the full shot, and her other breast is in the full shot. But normally I can't just see part of the hand or there has to be, like, the half body or the full body [inaudible] and I think that's what is important. And the light is actually kind of bad in here [the apartment], but these are... I actually achieved the elusive graduate school obsession with "concept" with this piece, but unfortunately it can't go with me 'cause it's too expensive. But it was a board, 4 foot by 8 foot, which another artist actually sort of helped with this; just a continuous graphite line, that extrapolate upon the knots, that you treat.



It looks like a topographic map.

Does it? Yeah, exactly. You stand in front of it for a while and have a couple of glasses of wine, and it is one. Then my father was addicted to crossword puzzles, you know, so much so that I didn't learn how to play baseball until it was too late. And so this is sort of like my version of his crossword puzzle. And so it's like, you know, [inaudible] closes in

upon each other; I obviously know all these people in some way; either very intimately or not. [Pointing at one of the photographs] I only met this guy once, but he's the son of a guy, we attended high school together. These people don't all know each other, you know. They may have heard of each other, but I put them together and then I sort of wrote a statement. 'Cause I had this instructor from whom I acquired this camera who said, "All photography's a lie". So that's always stuck in my head; while I say I don't manipulate, I do manipulate to an extent, you know. But I'll tell you the truth; the mirrors are sort of designed to – obviously I'm really proud of this piece – and Julie at Visual Aid San Francisco gave me the opportunity to show this at San Francisco's Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. So the mirrors were sort of designed to incorporate the viewer, and it's just – I like it. Actually this one, this woman framed it for me, so it became sort of a mutual piece, you know; and again, like there was six degrees of separation, which I'm totally into. Do you know the... [sings], the American hotdog? Shut up! Are you serious?!

What is it, a jingle for a hotdog, or...

Have you heard of Oscar Mayer? How can you...

I don't think so.

Really?! Oh, wow, that's great. Ok so she's like...

I know Julie Garland. Judy Garland, sorry. [both laugh]

So she's like someone kind of infamous, you know, we know each other; and because of her someone else benefited. And [pointing to another image] he is part of my Sunburst crowd, my kids organization, my kids charity, kids with HIV/AIDS. Yeah, it's just like they're good people. And while they've all been maybe a bit of naughty in their life, there's, like, the influences we have on each other is really important to me. And so they could be photographs of; it could be absolutely anyone. And you might see this image in a Visual Aid show and seriously, wouldn't you wonder, "Does she have it, doesn't she?" you know? People are going to wonder about that.

In a Visual Aid show, absolutely.

Ok. So I put these photographs in the shows; Julie; those folks are the ones that choose the photographs. They've never really asked me, you know; it's just I think that we all... I don't think it's so much about being, "Are you positive or aren't you," and it's not a big secret, and for those who are I respect that. But I think that sort of perpetuates a problem; I think even for themselves, to have some sort of secret. So you see these photographs and you wonder, are they or aren't they. Some are, some aren't.

In what way do you think your status has become a part of your work; do you think it influences it?

I think that it has sort of allowed me to teach, in a broader sense, others that it's ok, you know. And it's my choice not to be... I lost my word... secretive or confidential about it is my choice; and it's just not an issue. Maybe you're living in, I don't know, Kentucky; but

in California... I think it just allows me to sort of, you know, to teach others; to help others believe that it's ok. I think if you really want it to be a secret, I don't know, I just think that it's not healthy... But that's just a personal...

But you don't think your HIV status influences the kind of people you want to take photographs of, or the type of stories you want to tell through the work?

No... well, actually it has, maybe in the past. The past twelve years, maybe it has to a greater extent determined the people I photograph. Because a larger percentage are people who are living, have lived through some type of life-threatening confrontation. Often it is HIV or cancer or a horrendous accident. Because I think those are the people that I have encountered. Or someone who is living with it, but is living a secret, and just doesn't seem very happy. And that's... you know, everybody has their reasons.

Maybe they're also more likely to be happy to share stories with you because they know that you've gone through something like that and you understand what you've got to say, either through the image or when you're talking with them. What I really like about these photographs on the wall here, on this sort of... what is that, 8 x 8 cm, or...?

Oh, the size?

Yeah. 10 x 10 cm? 15 x 15 cm?

This is about 5 x 5 inches [i.e. 12.5 x 12.5 cm].

5 x 5, yeah. What I really like about them, and even more so than the larger photograph you showed me there, is that it makes some... they're a lot more intimate, almost, in the smaller size. There's been in big move in photography I've noticed in the last five years to go huge, to go giant; like you can't be impressive unless you're huge and take up the whole wall. And this is...

That's true. And also, when artists do that and it goes into a venue; viewers are... they fear approaching it. Because people are watching, you know. A scenic photograph, you want to sort of go up to it and inspect it and investigate it; but [brief interruption]... I lost my drift.

You were talking about big images in the gallery; you want to come close to them but you can't.

And do you know, some of these actually; like, the current upcoming show, [referring to an image] this is a cousin, one of my many cousins, and for her it was her brother, our beloved cousin Brian, everyone's favorite; he, well, he sort of... he died. Not a great... drug addiction, unfortunately. A long fight. And this is my elder sister, who, like, did the Vanna White thing. You know Vanna White, right? Jeopardy, or...?

No, sorry. We had an Australian version of Jeopardy, but it went bust.

This is my eldest sister, she survived cancer, breast cancer. Not sure if you noticed the hat – Wonder Woman, do you get it?

Yes.

She's very much a Wonder Woman, yeah.

There's a really strong family resemblance.

You think?

Yeah.

And this was the story... the story, what am I talking about. She lived upstairs; her name was Isabelle.

Great face.

She was wonderful. Who would be her storybook counterpart: Mrs. Madrigal in what was it, Tales of the City, Armistead Maupin, San Francisco; she was very much the, you know, the box of wine, "Can one of you guys come open this fucking box of wine." She was pretty amazing. She cooked for us and then she died on my birthday.

Oh, God.

She was amazing.

Wait a second, all these people have fictional characters associated with them.

Well, I know, but you know, you grow up in this country and everything has to have...

Have a pop culture equivalent?

Well, exactly. It's a big part of our culture. Good point; that's a really good point. This is my eldest aunt, Aunt Katherine; many of her nieces and nephews spent time with her and the uncle, who introduced me to the camera. [Looking at the picture – reproduced overleaf] I just like the wall, with the phone numbers, you know? And yeah, she's 90 years old, she's still alone.

It looks like a graffiti wall in the 'hood.

Right, it's the garage. She's amazing, because she's approaching 90, she's still living alone on a huge property.

I love the contrast there, with the dark glasses and the really white, sort of over-exposed hair.

Yeah, right. This is another cousin, whose life is just terribly, terribly interesting. And then we have my mother, Margaret Ann King; she's pretty amazing. She's pushing 80,

she has a boyfriend; she's amazing. She's just pretty amazing, actually. She hates this photograph because of the wrinkles. It's a family thing.



What can you do when you're 80! Makes her look vibrant, that hand gesture coming up, like she's active. The one of your aunt – it was of your aunt, wasn't it?

Katherine?

Yeah. The one sitting just in front of your mother, sorry. The second picture, I think it was.

Oh, do I have to get it again?

No, I was just going to say, it really makes you want to know more about her, I have to say. She's got this kind of pensive look on her face, and it's fabulous.

This is a perfect stranger [see image overleaf]. A man in China; I lived in China for one year, studied abroad, and somehow I was able to help him to understand that I wanted to photograph him. You know, 'cause it's kind of forbidden, and he let me do it. And wow, this is really dirty, dusty. But he has sort of a lazy eye which is difficult to see, it would be his left eye; and they were re-stoning, refurbishing the stones in the Forbidden City. And I think it's a great photo. I mean, can you imagine, you know, doing this?



It's funny, because he's sort of surrounded by the dirt and the bricks it looks like it's almost a rural setting, it could be, rather than the centre of the city.

I know you did a series about a breakup that you had with a partner, I think...

This guy.

Yeah. And there was, I saw a picture of, it was sort of a half-empty bed, or he was sort of in the bed or something or other, and there was ruffled sheets and...[see image overleaf] To me, although that obviously has a story in itself; to me, that spoke of loss and anger, which you may well associate with a death through AIDS, or a loss through HIV, and maybe the way the community's feeling about that. Do you have any of those pictures here to show?

I have the one that, well, I have two actually. I have the one you described and another one that... [inaudible – leaves room]. You pretty much summed it up, I was unable to deal with that... one of us was unable to deal with that life situation. I also adore the work of Imogen Cunningham, an American photographer, and she has done a similar image, and this was the other one. The other ones, you know, I sold them, and I never replaced them.



So this other one is sort of like the pillow with the hand.

Exactly. It was a great time and he taught me a great deal, a great deal.

This one here particularly reminds me of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres billboard with the... yeah, the indentation on the pillow and no-one in the bed anymore.

I think, you know, he may have also been a... he was a huge influence during graduate school, I loved his work; it was so minimal and simple and yet so powerful. I think probably Richard Avedon was one [i.e. an influence] because of the kind of simplicity that his work presents; that gives the viewer much more opportunity to, you know, ponder and pontificate, "What's going on, what's the story?" I mean, we all have that voyeuristic curiosity; we create stories in our heads. And that particular series; I think because there were no faces involved, I think it allows even more thought. 'Cause I never [inaudible] for space; it was always the empty bed, or the mattress without sheets and the empty room.

Have you ever thought about what, if you were to sum up the purpose or even the point of your photography, what would it be? I know you have some photographers who are very political in what they do, trying to be activists, almost, in the kind of pictures that they take. Others are into being historical, they're documenting things; they wanted to show how it was, how it is, you know, those kind of... some are evoking nostalgia, or some are evoking loss, a kind of mourning or something like that. Can you see a single theme coming through your work in those directions, or are you more various in what you're trying to do?

Various, no. I think it's more specific to memory. My own, as well as hoping to elicit responses from others, to help them with their own thought processes. Their own thought processes involving drama, confrontation, disease, I think. So perhaps the category would be education? I think I can be overly romantic; I would probably say memory. But I don't need the photographs to remember, you know, those five years, or any of these moments. I think that they, the photographs and the series or the bodies of work – and I have very few bodies apart from grad school, but that's completely different, that's I think far more specific to living with HIV than anything else I've done, 'cause I wrote about it. I lost my train of thought again. So I think it's more just promoting conversation, you know, education through conversation.

When you exhibit the photographs, do they have titles with them, or are they in a sequence with a statement which talks about who's in the photographs?

The statements. Which I can give to you, or... I mean, there are just a very few statements, I can email them or whatever or I could give you the hard copies. Or actually I cannot email them because this computer's no longer... you know, remind me and I'll just give you hard copies before you leave. 'Cause I'm not able to email those particular statements, am I? No, I'm not. Wow, that's a good point; I need to make a note that I need to redo... So actually, yeah; what I did in grad school more speaks to getting up on the pedestals saying you know, "Here I am, this is what I have, I'm ok with it, you know. I drank the water in China for a year!"

There are other things you can die from!

[Inaudible beginning of sentence] I shouldn't have done that. I got real brave and I thought because I was a grad that oh, you know, whatever, I mean, my cousin swam across the Mississippi River; I thought I could drink, I could brush my teeth with water in China; it was a huge mistake. Huge, huge mistake!

Where were you based in China? Were you in a city, or...?

Oh, Shanghai, Hangzhou. Suzhou, three... Beijing, sorry. There were five cities, what is the fifth city? Shanghai, Beijing, Suzhou, Hangzhou and... you know what, it was in the countryside, I can't remember. It was very close to where they were beginning to flood the Yangtze, because of the Three Gorges. So the countryside was disappearing, so our host wanted us to see a lot of what would be underwater; which sadly – uh, sorry, I didn't mean to say that. We were not able to see because it was raining very hard that year, that summer. So we saw just a bit.

[Looking at a picture] So this was more specific to Felix Gonzalez-Torres, for one, actually, this photograph was because of him.

The work you did at grad school. And which school was that, again?

The Art Institute, on Russian Hill; San Francisco Art Institute.

Yep. You've got some text overlaid on the image. [Image reproduced overleaf]

Yeah, that's simple. Well, for me it wasn't that simple at the time. And the titles were evident within the photographs, every single day. So this was the first one. This was the final photograph of the 25. This was someone, you know, has a life expectancy of eight to fifteen years to live, which were the statistics at the time in 1998. Sorry, 1999, 1998? And it was, I think; I felt it was successful. It was a great learning experience and there were some interesting moments in the Nevada desert when I got very sick and insisted on staying; 'cause I really wanted to go camping in Nevada, right, for a period of ten days. And the tree that I remember climbing with – well, I don't remember – but with my elder sibling, and a moment in London because of Felix, you know. So I think memories are a very big part of it, but it's also, well, what was Felix thinking at the moment, or if I could go back and be five years old again, you know, what would you change. These conversations kind of happen because of those images. And think people who are shy to talk about their life story, whatever it may be at the moment... I think it helps, you know.

Was it sort of a cathartic process for you, to help you, you know, comes to terms with your infection?

Oh yeah, totally. Because of that brief, for me, short time period... the statistics were very powerful at the time. And yeah, I was one of those, like, [inaudible], "Me?" You know, I mean, "How?!" And so I had probably already done, you know, positive for a number of years, because the drug addiction had ended years before; four or five years before. And it was really, like, "No. Not me." I mean, I never actually went back for a second. And 'cause I didn't think I'd done anything wrong. "Wrong", like wrong. But I still wonder, sometimes, when I'm photographing certain people and I hear their stories and I think, "How? How did it happen?" But it didn't; it changed things, you know; but I think in my

“You’re very courageous, you’re very brave...” I think most of them are sort of proud that the work I had done...how I’d served the kids, you know, living with HIV/AIDS; because I would not have done that had it not been for testing positive myself, I think. ‘Cause it’s just too emotional for me. So again, I put myself in a place where I had to confront that feeling, that emotion, you know. And so all of that together; in grad school I did two things, two bodies of work. The Sunburst kids, Sunburst Projects, and my own story. So it’s synonymous, very similar; and it just seemed like people were proud of me, which made me feel good, you know, to be able to do something I would not have otherwise done, I think was the response. And then the written responses I got from people I think were far more interesting. ‘Cause people are able to sort of, what they can’t, you know, put into verbiage they are able to write. People that I was in school with at the time. I welcomed the responses to that particular exhibition and subsequently, with the authors’ permission, transformed those words into a journal, or diary, if I may...a diary which was designed to be immediately shared with the viewer, and again subsequently, elicit both an emotional and physical response. Hence, you have participatory art, much like that of Felix Gonzales-Torres. But my graduate community said ‘no way, that’s too much, you can’t expect people to stand there and read those, when they don’t even spend more than 90 seconds with one piece at a museum’. And I was like, “Come on, you know, I paid \$69,000 for this degree, I can do whatever I want, right!” [both laugh] But no, they wouldn’t go for it.

It does bring you back to reality when you see people walk through a museum, sometimes, and see how little time they spend with an image.

It’s true.

And often they just read the title, read the artist’s statement and move on; they don’t even see the image!

But if you’re not getting something, if it doesn’t strike some sort of chord within your own life, the storyboard within yourself; maybe that’s why they don’t spend time. And I hate to say it, but; I mean, I love art, I love to go and see new art, but I think there’s a lot of art, new art – not to dismiss it – new art and a lot of art that we see today, but I think there’s just a lot that doesn’t stand the test of time. And I’m also borrowing from something a grad school instructor said to me; that’s, “Why did you spend so little time with art?” Because it doesn’t strike a personal chord, or... no, actually, those are my words. That they don’t; it just doesn’t stand the test of time. You know, the new genres are... people don’t get it. And most people who go to museums, they’re tourists, they’re visitors. They’re looking to waste an afternoon, or they’re genuinely interested in seeing art. But they differ a great deal from people who put that art into the museums, and people who have the money to put that art out there. And you know, if it doesn’t... I mean, if there’s no, like, connection, they move on.

A lot of the artists I’ve been talking to talk about one of their priorities as being to make their images seductive, or to make their work seductive in some way, so that it will make a person linger over it, to think about it a little bit more; to get them in to look at it...

But if you spend too much time doing that, are you losing, are they losing, is an artist losing sight of what she or he is doing for himself? I'm really comfortable that I'm still doing it for me, and I'm giving a little bit of me, you know. But I also have a life teaching five year olds, which is wonderful. And this is kind of something also that makes me feel good. But for those who are trying to get their living as an artist – ooh, wow. But I understand that, also.

To try to, yeah... I mean, but I think your images do, I think they are very seductive. This chap here, in the dancer's pose with his head held high: it's just gorgeous, a gorgeous image. The girl walking with him, you know, next to him, walking down the sidewalk, you know, it's really interesting. She looks so grown up there, trotting off...

[Inaudible sentence, both laugh] ... funny about that; he hates this image. He has a beautiful neck, and he takes really good care of himself. But the larger version of that – it's actually over there – it looks odd, his neck is really, really long. And he doesn't have the bravado that the image projects, you know. He's kind of shy and reserved and...

He looks a bit like a superhero there, Extend-A-Neck!



[Showing a picture] This is Edouard, who has his own story.

[Referring to the previous photograph] I like that chin sort of raised, that's kind of...

Yeah, right.

Kind of arrogant.

And he's actually not my biological nephew, he was a student, I taught his first photo class. He was quite young at the time, and I was standing on his pants when the kids

were wearing, like, the bell-bottoms again; this was like in, what, the late 90s. I was standing on his pants in the darkroom and he fell down, so we sort of bonded, and once we got talking we found we share the same birthday. His parents met and fell in love where I had attended graduate school; we had a tremendous amount in common. So he began calling me Uncle Nevin, but he's not my biological nephew. And we always, like, our salutation to each other is "Long live Anna Nicole", because she shares our birthday – Anna Nicole Smith, the blonde bombshell. So this is San Francisco's Dolores Park. And oh, ok, the guy with the neck, right?

Yes.

He's all neck. [Pointing to another photograph] And her name is Séverine, a Frenchwoman who has a great life and also has her own story. Yeah, I'm sorry; I keep saying, like, "their own story" – I don't know that I...

Absolutely. No, you shouldn't, either; that's absolutely fine.

I don't know that they would approve of me [telling their stories]... most of them don't really care, and they're very open, but I don't know how they would feel about the whole world knowing.

No, absolutely perfectly fine.

Yeah, that doesn't offend you, does it? I don't want to offend you.

No, not at all. If we move away from your photographs now; I want you to talk a little bit about viewing other people's work, and particularly AIDS related work. So, here I'm thinking of other visual artists; you talked about Felix Gonzalez-Torres; can you think of other visual artists who have made you think about the epidemic or the experience of living with HIV in a different way, or a new way, or which has helped you through a moment in crisis, or anything like that?

You know, it's ironic because I wonder what artists whom I admire, who may not be on this planet any longer; what they would have done now, I mean, knowing they were gay, if it had happened to them what they would do now. That's sort of like what I dwell on. As far as current artists; well, obviously I really like Felix very much. I sort of wonder about a few who, well, Nan Goldin; oh my God, I forgot the other lady, the other woman.

Photographer, or...?

The photographer-artist.

Annie Leibovitz?

No. I'm actually going to see her, on the 18th of April down at the Art Institute. Nan Goldin, she's still living, right? I'm thinking of the other woman, who killed herself. Oh! Ok, sorry, I'll think about it. I wonder, the people they photographed, who were obviously... oh, David Wojnarowicz. Although he's not, I mean, he was a photographer

but I think more writing? I don't know how to pronounce his name correctly, and he's French, probably not well known in this country... Hervé Guibert, I believe.

He's a novelist?

Yes.

Yeah, he wrote *Savage Nights*,¹ was it?

Yes, yes, I have it. Do you need, like...photographers?

No, it doesn't have to be photographers – it can be, like I said, artists or... you know, even maybe thinking about theater or even movies you've seen about HIV that have struck a chord with you, that have...

Loggerheads, which is an independent.

I haven't seen that.

Oh, you must see it; it's an amazing film with a great cast and a lot of amazing women who've gotten very little credit. You know, I can't even remember... Amy... not Amy Irving... oh, it's about a young man who was chosen to not take the drugs [i.e. HIV medications], you know, and live life. It's sort of, again, the six degrees of separation thing – he meets someone who helps him; he's left his real parents but then there's the other woman who is his friend; it's a great film. *Loggerheads*. *Loggerheads* are the turtles that come onto the shore on the East Coast and they lay their eggs and they leave. Great film. You know, James Marsden actually did a film which was very interesting, I think *24th Day, 24th Hour*? That was a great film, actually. I sort of admired two films that he's done. I forgot the other one which was with Glenn Close and I think it was the British directors, writers... Helena Bonham Carter always did a lot of their films...what were their names?

Oh, Merchant Ivory?

Thank you! He wanted to die... ok, they did a film with Glenn Close and again James Marsden, and again it was the whole six degrees of separation, you know; this person knows this person; this happened because of this. I love the whole ensemble thing. And it wasn't... HIV/AIDS was not the immediate topic; but this guy was gay, he was living a straight life because he couldn't live this life in public, you know. *You Can Count On Me*, Laura Linney and Mark Ruffalo. That's an amazing film; but again, the brother actually has a lot of issues... it's an amazing film. Have you seen it?

No, I haven't, no.

It's a great film.

¹ Guibert actually wrote *À l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (trans. *To the Friend Who Did Not Save My Life*, 1990). *Savage Nights* was written by Cyril Collard. Both are autobiographical books written by Frenchmen who were dying from AIDS.

So why are they meaningful to you, how are they speaking to you in terms of...?

I think, like, I got something from these characters that really helped me. I admired the fact that, whatever, the blond in *Loggerheads*, he chose not to consume, to take the drugs. He chose to live life. I was like that for ten years. I had so many doctors who said, "Oh, you need to do this. You know, you need to take this, blah blah blah." And I even lied to a few of them, said, "Ok, you know." And then... take them and give them to some homeless person, whatever, I'd had a conversation with. [Inaudible beginning of sentence] conversations with homeless people [inaudible]. And then eventually I stopped resisting, and I think that was because of enough doctors like really kind of like putting the fear into me, that, you know, "If you don't do this..."

T-cells were down below 200, and...

Yeah. They'd always been sort of down, but nothing has ever happened. In twelve years, nothing. I get other things, because of a lifetime of bronchial history, but nothing has ever, I've never had to confront the HIV, never, you know. But then, so, doctors said well, "When something happens it could be devastating." So they... he put the right words into my head, so I let myself take. So I admire the character in *Loggerheads* because he chose not to. But Hollywood – well, not Hollywood, but whoever made the film, they made him die, because he didn't take the drugs. And I thought, "Ah, you know..." It may not have worked that way, you know. And I sort of wonder about artists who photograph the unfortunate, the downtrodden. Like, why? Why are they glorifying that life? I mean, how are they helping those people? Like, you know, it's bothering me. Not Nan Goldin, but I can't remember her name. She had the huge retrospective at SF MoMA which was... it was bad. Gray walls, the lighting was horrible, and you're trying to read this text which is that big... Yeah, so I can't remember her name right now.

That's all right, you can fill it in when I send you the transcript.

Right. But I still really like Richard Avedon, because I think he's very inquisitive about people. He has these eyes, and I just see him as a very inquisitive person. And showing these people that we would normally, I think, overlook or bypass. Because that's just I think what we do in society.

Some people regard the AIDS Quilt as one of the greatest cultural responses to the epidemic and view it as an art piece; either as individual works of art coming to make a whole or view it as the one complete art piece. So I ask this question, therefore, of everyone I speak to: what's your perception of the Quilt in terms of viewing it and maybe if you've made a panel yourself, or even if you haven't viewed it, what you know about it? What contribution do you think it is making and how does it make you feel?

I think that some folks just need to... I mean, that's their way of making, helping others to be aware of the fact that it exists; because I think for certain aspects of society, like maybe the art world, for example, HIV/AIDS is not important right now because there are other things. So it's sort of fallen by the wayside as far as what's trendy in the art world. I think the Quilt... well, people need something to hold onto, you know? I think that they also, really, that it is so very large, shows us that it can be anyone. I think that's

one of the purposes of the Quilt, that it can be anyone. I think actually one of my questions right now is, is it only people in this country that have lived with and then died of... I think it is, is it not? The Quilt, is it not just people in the United States?

Well they have ones in different countries, like there's an Australian one, for example. But they all started after the one here in San Francisco.

Actually, that man, I forget his name as well.

Cleve Jones?

Thank you! He's affiliated with the children's organization, or was. He's a friend of the founding director.

Nearly everyone I've met in San Francisco seems to know him in some way; I think he's apparently consulting on the Harvey Milk film as well.

They just shot a scene at this bar around the corner.

Really?

Yeah, and I think... I don't know if you knew the Castro before, but it's... well, it looks quite different, actually. They're trying to convert it back to 1979. It's very interesting, you know, and I saw Sean Penn over on the... yeah, but I think, you know, California, shooting a film is...

Is he in the film, or is he making it?

Sean is Harvey and the actor...

You're joking! Wow!

Isn't that great? You try to picture Sean Penn as Harvey Milk, you're like, "Eww..."

Well it means people are going to see the film. I think that's important.

Totally. And then the boyfriend is supposedly portrayed by the best friend in *Spiderman*; I forget the actor's name. James Franco. Who was also James Dean, I think, on TV; he won an Emmy... so he's supposedly the boyfriend.

Wow, excellent.

And then Dianne Feinstein, who became mayor, and then Moscone and, oh... the guy who did... have you seen *No Country For Old Men*?

Yeah, we watched it the other night.

Wow! That's a great movie. At the end I was really disturbed; I needed a few days to get over that.

I still am disturbed! [both laugh]

Very effective. Josh Brolin...

Oh, the guy who played the cowboy?

[In the movie *Milk*] He is the guy that did it [i.e. murdered Harvey Milk], Dan White.

Oh, really?

Yeah. I just read this a couple of days ago.

That sounds great. It's a great cast; it's a great cast.

I think the Quilt is a great thing; I think that unfortunately it doesn't include everyone; it includes the people who are willing, who have the time, and want to commit to doing this. But I wonder: I mean, has it become... pardon the pun, has it become too big? You know, when was the last time you heard of the Quilt being displayed? And I know, I've actually read, it's too big; where are we going to put it?

They can't put it anywhere. So they show bits of it... and it's interesting, it's more likely to end up in a gallery now, on a wall. They'll often do an unfolding and then it goes up on the wall rather than seen as it was originally intended.

Well, that was my last question, I mean, unless is there anything you can think of that you wanted to add, or that you've remembered and want to say, or something else you want to...

I really love what you're doing. I think, you know, it's a great thing.

Well I've started to do it; I have to make sure it gets done!

Sure. [both laugh]

But no, it's been a fascinating project. It's been fascinating talking with you as well, and it's great to see your work in person.

Oh, thank you so much.

[End of interview]

If citing this interview please use the following:

Nevin Robinson interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, San Francisco, 5 February 2008, *The Art of AIDS Prevention*, <http://www.aidsart.org>; accessed <insert date>