Eric Rhein interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

New York City, USA, 20 June 2008

This is a transcript of a recorded interview. The text has been edited to correct some errors of grammar (which are inevitable features of spoken conversation), but only where this was necessary to aid comprehension. Eric Rhein reviewed and authorised this transcript on 25 March 2009.

Paul Sendziuk: Tell me just a little bit of background about yourself before we really talk about your work; when was it that you were first able to devote yourself to making art in a full-time capacity?

Eric Rhein: Well, I grew up making art since I was a little boy. My father taught art education when I was growing up and my sister and I would accompany him to the university art department where we would work in clay and do print making. So art-making was always a very vital and integrated part of my life, it was from the beginning, from when I was a child. It's always served the central part of my life and creative process.

I know you…

And the world around me…

Sorry for cutting you off. I know you trained as a dancer for four years, and you were making, designing jewelry and things like that; is that incorporated into that…?

Yeah, it's all incorporated; visual art was always the foremost, central element of my experience around the arts, but I also was involved with musical theater and ballet, though this fairly curved once I entered New York. I had a scholarship with a ballet company when I was in high school, a little sort of regional ballet company in New Paltz, New York, where I'm from. The teacher gave scholarships to boys to study so that he could develop a dance company. So after school I would take the bus to the ballet school, like five days a week after school, and then I would perform in regional theater productions also. But the dance experience, for instance, was part of my coming to New York, in some part because I was doing puppets; some of the creations that I was doing when I was in high school, and the man who created Big Bird for *Sesame Street*, lived in the same area where I grew up, and had heard through a friend of mine who was a fellow dancer in the ballet company but had moved to New York a year prior to me, that I had been doing these puppets. So he invited me to meet him one Saturday afternoon in town and show him my puppets; and it ended up me leaving home to come to New York and do an apprenticeship with him, to create puppets and masks for some various New York City ballet productions, as well as there was a big Picasso retrospective, and one of my jobs was to help recreate the costumes that Picasso had make for the ballet *Parade*. Actually, this box sculpture, that I call *The Westcott Sisters*, I got out of storage, 'cause it needs to be repaired, I did this during my first year of college, but it's reminiscent of some pieces that I had done when I was in high school using old photographs of people laid

out as if they were sleeping, although they were dead. I don't know if you have that historical tradition in Australia, having people…

I don't think we do.

It was part of my mother's family heritage. This is kind of reminiscent of the puppets that I had done, also.

And how old were you at this point?

Well, I met Kermit…

Kermit's the guy that does Big Bird?

Yeah, his name's Kermit Love. He died this year, though very aged, and he…; Kermit the frog is named after him.

I was going to say, there's a direct link between…

There is. He was named after him.

Really?

Yeah, it actually, it was. I met him during my last year of high school. I realized that I had enough credits to graduate high school early, and he invited me to come and do this apprenticeship with him. I decided in January to forgo the school play and move to New York. I spent the summer developing these puppets for Kermit. These puppets are actually an early heritage of my AIDS memorial, *Leaves*, because like some butterfly puppets I created when I was with Kermit, *Leaves* involves the use of wire. I think of *Leaves* very much as three-dimensional drawings, because of the use of the paper that supports the wire rendering. But the butterflies that I made for Kermit were for, I don't know if I pronounce it right, but for the ballet *L'enfant et les sortilege*, "the boy and the sorcerer", I think is the translation; and it was for PBS. I made outlines of wings in wire, and then stretched silk chiffon over them and then rigged them so that they would animate by puppeteers. And this started overlapping with my experiences at the School of Visual Arts; I had gotten a full scholarship – at that time they were giving twelve scholarships to graduating high school seniors – and I happened to get one of those. From what I had heard later, through the teacher of the opera class that I took - someone named Abby Kray, she told me that she actually had been on the panel and that my suitcase of puppets was one of the things that…

That captured their attention.

That captured their attention.

So when you came to New York, were you just living with relatives, or friends?

I lived in eleven different apartments the first year; and it was before I accumulated the masses of things, artworks and materials that I have now. But then in '81 I settled into an apartment down on 14th, between Ave A and B. It's in a book called *New York Style*, I can actually show you; it's a tenement apartment with the bath, cold water flat, with the toilet in the closet and the bathtub in the kitchen. Have you seen those kind of apartments?

Oh, okay, yes I have.

It's one of those apartments, I have the book, I can show you if you're interested, or some articles… So that was my first New York apartment, probably at the end of my freshman year of college, I got that apartment.

And what year is this?

1981.

'81.

Yeah. And that…

That's a bit of a scary time to be living in the East Village, for an eighteen or nineteen-year-old, isn't it?

Well, my father helped me move into it, and there was a junkie in the stairwell just above me, he was living in the stairwell; and my father sort of told him it was time to move on. So I experienced very much the 80s art movement at the same time I was going to the School of Visual Arts, and then periodically working for Kermit, I became acquainted with a gallery called Artwear which was on West Broadway, that showed jewelry. And there was this overlap between people that were doing artwork and also fashion and more traditional design. Some friends of mine were very involved with the whole East Village fashion/art movement, crossover. So they took me to Artwear, and I was very taken with what I interpreted that phrase to mean; and kind of went wild with it and developed earrings and brooches and necklaces and hairpieces that were very related to nature, and natural abstractions; also using the wire and the silk chiffon and gold leaf. So they weren't very practical, really, in terms of wear-ability, but the director, Robert Lee Morris, took them. And so I began this period of doing jewelry in sort of a more of an artisan tradition of jewelry-making, while I was also at the School of Visual Arts doing the BFA degree, involving more of traditional painting and sculpture.

So those, the piece like the one on the wall behind us, the wire and the drapery piece, is that the kind of thing you're talking about, or does that come a bit later?

That came later; that was an outgrowth of the jewelry though.

That's all right. I love that cupboard, by the way.

Oh, thank you. This cupboard has travelled with me a lot; I have a lot of photographic, self-portraits of me in front of that cupboard that I took in 1991. So this book, *New York Style*, shows the studio I had in the East Village as it was in the 1990s. It is a great documentation of my life and work during that time. This page shows some pendants and cuffs I made and an array of different found objects, and old brocade fabrics, and things that I've collected… I was travelling a lot; I was living with a fashion illustrator, Mats Gustavson at the time, and we travelled a lot, and picked up materials at flea markets, from places that we would go.

And you would be making these yourself, or designing them and having someone else make them?

I was designing them and making them, but I had a number of assistants at that time. There were two young Japanese people that I had met, who came to New York, and then a couple of young people who were visiting from Germany. They were more like apprenticeships; though I'd pay them when I could, it was really more of a relationship of an apprenticeship. So they would help me do some of the constructions. But some of the – excuse me – this piece…

It's beautiful.

I call it *Blond Torso*. It came about during the year when Mats and my friend Rodger got ill and died. He was really the first person who, in our immediate circle who brought AIDS really to the forefront of our attention. And I feel like making that piece, like a lot of my work, was sort of a predecessor, or precursor to the course my life would take. 'Cause I was thinking so much about reincarnation and about time traveling and what happens with all the trappings of our human experience once we're no longer here in our physical bodies. So these pieces for me became very much about that investigation, and also the different periods of time that the spirit, if reincarnation is a part of it, would pass through.

Eric Rhein, *Blond Torso* (also known as *Lady in Waiting*), wire, fabric and appropriated objects, c.1987.

And that's why we've got; you know, on one side we've got this very Spanish looking suit of armor, almost, from the 17th century…

I call it *Silver Halberdier* after a painting by Pontormo. So the work became this evolution, as I'm sure that I imagined that I was already positive, but I was going through this psychological and emotional evaluation of myself, and also my work. And the next phase… and even the stretching of these older fabrics and materials I've been using, [using] a lot of discarded pieces of hardware and jewelry that might be dismissed if they're looked at, at a glance, but then using them in this way of paying homage to them in the carefulness of the placement of them, and the object, how you present them. And then from here they started... A friend of mine was transporting my work to a show at Artists Space; I have installation shots of these pieces together; he saw this piece I had in my studio, this man's britches… it's actually Kermit's Britches, after Kermit Love, and I thought of it as being unfinished, whereas he encouraged me to show it in the exhibition as well; it's a transition piece, and I'd been feeling that it would be an interesting place to go. So I did include it which encouraged my work to develop in a new direction, with the more skeletal figurative abstractions, with more of a paring down and exposure of the wire structures, and maybe more… raw, the essence of the workings of the body, and the different nuances of, like, corporal sort of material.

And so, at this stage, you're aware of AIDS, one of your friends has become infected; these works have something to do with AIDS, 'cause you're now more aware of the body, you're thinking about, maybe, death and what happens after in terms of regeneration, and that's sort of coming into the work, but the work isn't necessarily about…

I feel like this is about AIDS.

What's this one called, the bust?

It's called *Blond Torso*, or sometimes I call it *Lady in Waiting*.

About in which year would you have made that piece?

Like, 1986.

Ok. '86, '87.

About 1986. And I tested positive in '87. I found that with a lot of my work I feel like I'm connected spiritually and psychically into areas that I'm working with, and that the work helps to define and call to attention the things that I'm – I don't really know how to verbalize it – but it's like, it wasn't an intellectual thought on making that piece, it's something that just evolved; I'm dealing with these thoughts of human fragility and strength, and time-traveling. And Rodger… I mean, that doesn't look like Rodger, but he had very old-fashioned spectacles, so he had this little old-world kind of feeling about him to begin with. And then by the time I had done more of them, I had tested positive, it was the fall of '87, 1987, and my friend Mats, my mother and I… it was my mother's 50th birthday and we went to Paris (he's Swedish, but he did a lot

of work in Paris at that time as well as in Sweden, so we were taking my mother on a trip for her 50th birthday). And so the whole time we were on our trip we were thinking about what the test results would be when I returned. And it was the same time, like, you know, we kept going to the flea markets, there was one in Paris that I loved in particular where I got; I still have materials from that particular market. So when I had the opportunity to show them at Artists Space, which I think was 1989 and… it's easy to find out. There is this beautiful installation photograph of it in a corner of a room at Artists Space. I'm quite pleased with the way the work is described in the catalogue, though at the same time it was a time for myself when I was shy and scared to share the relationship that the work had with my being HIV positive, and the subtext to it, so none of this was included. Even though the work was about a lot more than that, that for me, as the artist and the person who was doing it, much of it had to with the fact that I was drawn towards looking at, having tested positive, the experience of AIDS from, like, searching to look at it through a metaphysical, spiritual point of view, as a way of how to process this information. So the work for me was very much about that…

And what did you arrive at, in trying to work out what AIDS means? At a metaphysical level or a spiritual level, what did you decide?

Well, that's still going on. It's still going on. It is ever an evolving process.

What are your thoughts at the moment about it, then?

I don't know, to be honest, that I would know how to put it in words, on tape, actually.

That's ok. And are these…

I can say that for me, I grew up in, I don't know if you know upstate New York at all? I grew up outside of New Paltz, which is like the foothills of the Catskills, and my father's house, my father still lives at the end of this old little mountain road, and my mother is from the hills of Kentucky, in the Appalachians. My father is from another part of Kentucky. To know that for me, being, like, brought up in this heightened natural environment where nature was so much of a part of it, and my father did Raku ceramics, and other Japanese techniques, ceramic sculptures, when I was little; and I would go with him and he would photograph them in streams, to document them in mountain streams, like against these sort of rock formations that mimic their forms. So I know that for me, having that strong connection to nature, and then referencing my body and feeling psychically and spiritually in tune with natural phenomenon has been a real saving grace for my experience. I mean, even just bringing in rocks and natural things into my living environment, into my studio, and having; actually seeing more of these natural forms mimic forms that men have made, whether, like, I'm always collecting things off of the sides of the street, you know, bottle caps and strange gears and things which I'm not really… I'm not really a mechanic in that sense, so for me these forms are sort of largely recognizable, but seeing how they mimic and reference each other, makes me feel you know, that they're very connected.

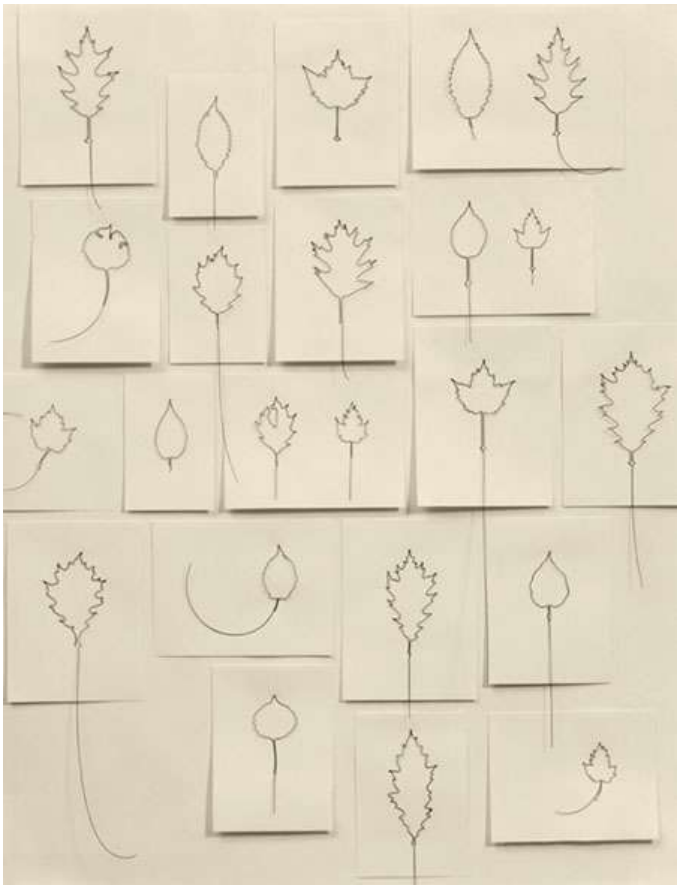
And do you find solace in nature by the fact that the natural world is a lot about regeneration, there's a life cycle that's involved? I mean, from the whole water cycle: it rains, it goes into the ocean, it evaporates back into the sky, it rains again… or trees grow, leaves fall, and the decomposing matter becomes a part of the nutrients for new trees, and…

Yeah, a lot of that decomposing is extremely beautiful. Some of the thoughts aren't necessarily clearly formulated, but then I think … actually, I was just up in Pennsylvania, in the woods in Pennsylvania on a friend's property, and we were hiking along some streams, and if I can bring the same acceptance that these, you know, beautiful elements of matter that are decomposing, that are so beautiful and going into the earth, then to try to bring that into my own consciousness about life and death and evolution of things. I'm not so much to the point where I'm not attached to things; I mean, especially at the moment with my AIDS memorial *Leaves* and its educational partner *The Leaf Project* I'm finding that I'm very… in some sense, perhaps there could be a space in me where it wouldn't matter what happened to the piece.[1] But on the other hand, it's been such an important, vital part of my experience and my processing the tremendous amount of loss and grief that I've had, but also witnessing what a lot of those people went through before they died; it's challenging for me to not be like, strongly, sort of, urgently desirous of it finding a home that will continue to hold it not only as an aesthetic creation of art, but at the same time as a historical documentation of experiences that we went through. So there are ways that I'm being challenged by this sense of detachment. When I think of my experience as an artist, I think of it as something that I've grown up with as an integral part of me. But *Leaves* for me has its own life, if you like, with me as the shepherd of it, because in the way in which it happened, and I started being involved with it. I was the storyteller between these two worlds; and then I'm also a part of The *Leaf Project* in the fact that I'm involved with it in showing it as a survivor, for as long as that is the case. I don't see it as a memorial project in the same sense that it's a memorial project that is completed and reached its definitive form. I see as it's a continuing living thing, both in the way that it can be shown, and the different kinds of ways that it can be shown, and the fact that whenever a leaf; like, the leaves that my friend George Towne has for instance, he has those leaves that represent his friends, but those two people are also represented in the project as a whole. The tributes re-enter the project in another form once they are placed in a home. It's not an art world concept of editions; like, there are only fifteen 'Sexy Joes and David the Poets'; if 'Sexy Joe and David the Poet' go to George Towne who is a friend of theirs, then those two men re-enter the project in another form because of the tracings that I have of them. So they can be; so *Leaves* and *The Leaf Project* can go out and be in, you know, the Gay and Lesbian Center; it also can be held, also could be collected by the Museum of Modern Art…

And if you're replicating one of the leaves that has already gone out somewhere else, you'll use the exact same outline of the original leaf?

[1] Eric is keen to re-establish the name of the work as *Leaves*, and views the ongoing educational exhibitions and presentations of the piece as *The Leaf Project*.

Of the original tracings, yeah. Even the patterns have become; a lot of them are these, you have the textures and the points; 'cause I use needle-nose pliers, and various tools to build the leaf up from the tracing of the original leaf, and then sometimes notations about who they were, or if I've made another one of them… so they are these scribbly, wonderful, textural pieces of paper.



Eric Rhein, *Leaves/The Leaf Project*, wire and paper, various dimensions, 1996-onwards.

I know a little bit about the origins of *The Leaf Project*, but, again, just for the purposes of the recording and for other people, can you tell us about where it came from, when it began, what you were thinking at the time and some of the things you hoped for it?

Yeah, the actual artwork is called *Leaves. The Leaf Project* is a term that I started to use when I saw that the piece could be an important educational tool if it would continue to travel and be shown in a variety of setting. *Leaves* and *The Leaf Project* can be used interchangeably. It came about when I was at the MacDowell Colony; it's an artists' colony in New Hampshire that's actually a very established and known artists' colony in the United States, where artists can apply to have residency for anywhere from, let's say, three weeks to two months; and I had applied for a residency at a time when I was still very ill. And I was just going into a study for the protease inhibitors before the protease inhibitors were approved, and I was…

So around '94, '95.

Leaves was conceived in the fall of 1996. I started the medication study during the previous winter. I applied for the residency at MacDowell at a time when it would have been very difficult for me to go if I had been in the physical state that I was in when I applied; but because I had gone into the study and had an extremely rapid response to having been given Crixivan and some other medications, my acceptance to the MacDowell Colony coincided with this rebirth, this physical rebirth that I had.

And this was a placebo trial; you could have just have well have been getting the sugar pill?

Yeah, it was a placebo trial, but it became, like, really rapidly obvious that I was on it, because I was 127 pounds and had either four or ten T cells; there were a lot of other things going on in my body, it was just very compromised.

So had you had an AIDS diagnosis?

Oh, I'd had an AIDS diagnosis for a few years; I'd had another previous experience. I had several experiences and then… I had Candida systemically into my bone marrow, and that was the last, like, major illness before the protease inhibitors trial. So I was treated for that experimentally with something called amphotericin, which is also nicknamed "shake and bake", because you get chills and shake...; it's intravenous, an hour and a half long drip. So the Christmas of '95 I spent most of the time in my doctor's office getting this treatment; right after that was the protease inhibitors study, so the successful treatment of the candidiasis being treated, and then the protease inhibitors starting to rebuild my system, in the course of six months by, like, the fall of September, anyone who hadn't known my previous experience would have just thought that I was this healthy guy.

What did that feel like for you, to be waking up every day feeling and looking better, and…?

It was very surreal, and challenging. I also was living; a man that was living with me, that I was taking care of, and we were… before we had been both really ill. And he's actually Ken, and he's alive now and doing well. But this is a photograph that I had taken… [see image on the next page]

Oh, I love this one.

I did a series of photographs of me and Ken, with him, doing his IV drip in my apartment, and then either beside him or sleeping beside him. So there was a juxtaposition between my rapid return to health and Ken, whose health at this time was seeming to decline.

He wasn't on the trial?

He wasn't qualified; he was able to get into a later trial, which helped. So the whole thing was, I mean, it was surreal; it was surreal for years, and it is still is. I started taking photographs of me in 1991, then one I'm thinking of on that wall…

Eric Rhein, *June Fifth 1:15pm*, B&W silver gelatin print, 8" x 10", 1996.

I've seen these at Visual AIDS.

You have?

Yeah, the slide archive.

And they weren't meant to be, but what they ended up doing was tracing the physical and emotional stages of the years that I was going through dealing with the virus in my body, with these being the first ones. And then these were in '94 when I was really pretty sick; I was hospitalized for a couple of months after they were taken.

And how much did you weigh here? Like, this is when you…

Maybe 130.

Pounds.

And so this was taken at the MacDowell Colony when I started the Leaf Project [see photograph over the page]; and so, I think I even called it; this might be called *Lazarus*… what's it called? Oh, it's just called *In Reflection*. I did a whole series of me, both working and also posed in the MacDowell Colony. And then this was, I think, from 2000, and I've done a few self-portraits since, but that was pretty much the last one of that period. This is called *Rainy Day*. This is a friend of mine who's no longer alive, he's in *The Leaf Project*, named William Weichert, and in *The Leaf Project* I called him 'Sweet William'. And I have a letter that his mother wrote me when I sent her a whole bunch of photographs that I'd taken of him on the beach in Martha's Vineyard.

And she appreciated them?

Oh yeah, her note certainly indicated it.

Eric Rhein, *Self Portrait, Adams Studio, The MacDowell Colony*, silver gelatin print, 8" x 10", 1996.

He looks quite like Ken. Well, from a…

A bit, yeah. And this is a guy named Dodge, he's alive. He was one of the first people to become part of the early intervention study, to see if the virus could be eradicated if somebody was given the drug in a really early intervention period. He lives in North Carolina.

It obviously worked for him.

Yeah.

Is this Dodge?

That's Dodge, yeah. So when I met him he wasn't positive, and then through the course of our friendship he tested positive through another man. This is Joe, that's Joe in George's collection.

You took all of these photographs?

I did, yeah. I wish…

They're beautiful.

Thank you. I have other portfolios at the studio. I wish I had taken more of my friends during the time; but, you know, again… I don't think I would have wanted to have taken them… This man, he's HIV negative, so not all of them are people who are positive. But I think that it would have been, obviously, maybe painful and a lot for me to have taken photographs of other people with the context of them perhaps not being here one day. So maybe that's why I didn't do more of other people. But I wish that I had.

This fellow, Ken, and the other fellow, they all look the same.

You see a little bit of similarity.

Beautiful. Ok, so we were just talking about the origins of the project, and you were saying you were at MacDowell, the artists' college…

Colony.

Sorry, colony, and…

Well at MacDowell each artist is given a studio of their own that's out of sight from other studios, so the idea is that you can really, you know, work on your own, in an isolated environment. And it happened to be turning fall, and so the juxtaposition of my own change in my physicality, and I also was feeling rather euphoric, and having the vibrancy of the leaves encompassing me, 'cause it's, you know, it's this old farm in New Hampshire. It was such a really beautiful environment and existence to be in. MacDowell's a rather egalitarian place. There were people that are less established and also very celebrated had been there as well. I felt like I was going through this creative initiation and welcoming into this creative world and at the same time feeling, you know, a sense of new beginnings, or a new beginning, though an indescribable one. And I really sensed, like, the spirits of people that I knew who hadn't survived the epidemic; so it seemed to me like an epiphany. It was just extremely moving, and it was like they were going with me as I would go from my studio to the dining hall to meet with other people for meals or communal activities. Then over the time that I was there I started picking up leaves and as I would choose a leaf I would think of somebody that that leaf represented, or reminded to me, sometimes in terms of species, but I tend not to think of the leaves in that way; I think of them more in terms of the friends that they remind me of by, you know, the form, or what color they were originally. Like, one leaf was silvery green, and this guy called Scott Greene had bright green eyes, and it reminded me of him. And then there were friends of his, next to him, who we had shared a weekend cabin with out on Long Island one summer. So I spread the leaves that I gathered out round the art studio, and on these old tables that the cabin had outside of it. I had started doing some writing in wire, so I traced the leaves first with India ink, with black ink, and then just writing their names next to them or on them, and then use these lengths of wire, like, anodized wire to start drawing them, in the shapes of the leaves. And then as I would do them, I would pin them to the wall so that they would have this, be linked together in this sort of community installation. So I have what I call the original piece *Leaves*, which is an unframed version, which floats against the wall; and then also, when I was asked to do a showing of them for a project in 2006 at Lincoln Center, it was for a much more formal space, so I basically revisited the project and constructed pieces which would be housed in frames.

I suppose, they look more professional when they're put into the frames, but I imagine your original vision was that they would flutter like leaves, and they would have that movement through it.

You know, it's actually such a different feeling, and I like them both. The unframed version of *Leaves* has Velcro on the backs of the paper so even when they're on the wall you don't see how they're attached. So there's this movement and this fluttering; and even now, I see this installation being able to be adapted in many different ways. I mean, it could be hung in one row, if one wanted to; or they could be hung in a small room so that one could go and sit in this room and be enveloped by the leaves.

And so when you're at the…

And this is how it was at Lincoln Center. This is one of the installation shots of the exhibition at Lincoln Center. In some of the pieces that I call *Fly Leaves* I use the first and last pages of books, whereas originally they were all on drawing paper.

Why did you use the first and last pages of books?

Well, I started doing these medical illustrations, using drawings from medical textbooks, and superimposing [wire] leaves and hummingbirds over the texts, then seeing relationships between the printed images by the previous illustrator to what I was doing three-dimensionally in wire. So from what I can remember, that's how the blank pages of the books started becoming part of *The Leaf Project.*

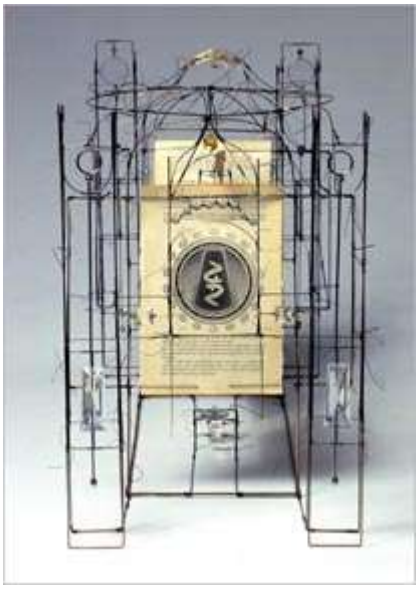
But there was no symbolic meaning between having the first and last pages from the book?

Well, someone pointed out later that they're called flyleaves. So there's that association. And some of them are also, like, pages that would separate chapters of books, so that there's a story, correlations between stories both told and untold, or unfinished. And then a lot of families, including my own, have the tradition of putting leaves and clovers and butterflies in books; my grandmother, Corinne Clarke's, as well as Uncle Lige's books were filled with things they had gathered and pressed in their books. I did an exhibition that was named in tribute to my Uncle Lige Clarke, who was a leader in the early gay rights movement. The show was titled *Uncle Lige's Sword*. I'll give you a card from the exhibition, and there's information on my website about the show. It commemorated the tenth year anniversary of the protease inhibitors and I showed, basically, a ten year survey of my work in response to AIDS at the Gay and Lesbian Center. Some of *The Leaf Project* was incorporated in that show, as well as pieces like this one, which I call *Viral Structure,* which houses pages of a textbook of the HIV virus. [See image on the next page.]

Yeah I've seen these…these look like temples, or little shrines. Was that the intention?

This one very much does, it was for a show called Millennium Messages, which toured through the Smithsonian travelling exhibition services. The curator's idea was to have artists do representations of things that they would like to see buried in time capsules and revisited. This is another piece I call *Uncle Lige's Sword*; I did a lot of these that I called blood works; using text pages from books talking about blood work, and this; I did actually a lot of… here's another one that's using red blood cells,

and I incorporated red blood crystals, and this is called *Automated Blood Counts and Differentials*.



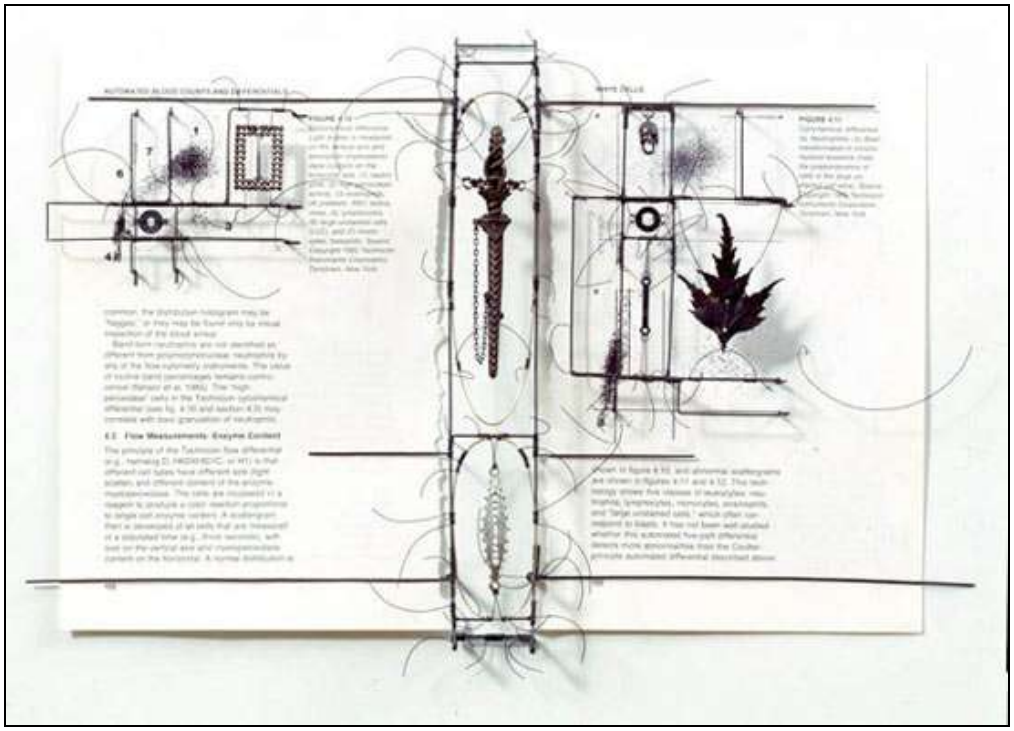
Eric Rhein, *Viral Structure*, wire, paper and appropriated objects, 18" x 34" x 14", 1999.

And what is the point of these works; what's the message that you were trying to convey?

It wasn't a conscious thought at the time, but I think that if my doctor gives me printouts of my blood work I might not necessarily understand them myself, but these pieces are kind of improvisational; I see them as being kind of improvisational works of chance meetings of things coming together, and riffing off of the biological images that are printed on the page in some of the texts, and then building my own structures off of them; it's sort of my creative, artistic world merging with the scientific. And then so much of what I was getting, in seeing what my body was going through, through AIDS, but also those of my friends; that everybody's bodies are so different, and react so differently; and then there's this kind of investigation and merging of concepts of spirituality along with scientific concepts, and that somewhere within those worlds, and the meetings of those worlds, is the experience that we're having.

And so would you say that the blood work was almost your way of trying to understand that medical terminology and the medical charts and the medical data; it was you trying to put that into your own language?

You know, I wasn't consciously trying to understand that as much as have fun with the graphs, and have fun with the imagery; what I was seeing and how it related to the materials in my studio that I had collected, like a leaf and a found object in *Uncle Lige's Sword.* This is a brooch from a flea market, and this is some old, like, piece of hardware drill that I picked up somewhere, some little washer, a belt buckle and then the wire structure is sort of mimicking the illustrator's graph. And the sword actually belonged to my Uncle Lige; it came to me after he was killed. [See image overleaf.]



Eric Rhein, *Uncle Lige's Sword*, wire, paper and appropriated objects, 16" x 22" x 3", 1998.

And that's like a pendant, is it?

It's some kind of a brooch. Some of the other pieces in my *Blood Works* series are more abstract, and seem almost like pinball games, almost as if they could move and animate; or some kind of a toy or musical instruments.

This is the time capsule one.

This is the profile of it in an installation shot of an exhibition of my work at The Leslie/Lohman Gay Art Foundation. I also included some of the works from *Leaves* in the show.

So it really is quite big.

Yeah. And then few pieces from *The Leaf Project* were shown in that show as well, to help fill in telling that story. The show was for the 25th anniversary of the discovery of the AIDS virus. So I took an interest in using the showing of my work to contextualize it within a larger sort of context, so that it was a show of my work and at the same time contextualizing the HIV and AIDS experience.

What kind of responses do you get from people who see *The Leaf Project?*

I get a lot of varied responses. What would you think? I mean, what would you…

Oh, I just want to hear from you first.

Oh, you want to hear what I have to say? [Eric goes to get more water] I get varied responses, almost always, well, let's say much of the time; most of the time people respond to them viscerally as being very beautiful, aesthetically; beautiful and engaging, and then depending on where their experience lies they may respond in a variety of ways, when I tell them what they represent. I mean, genuinely, viscerally, people often share with me, whether they know me or not, that they find them aesthetically very beautiful, and they seem to want to do something with that beautiful or that visceral reaction. When people find out that it's an AIDS memorial, depending, I get a whole variety of responses from people who are, yeah, other responses.

What form do those comments take, particularly once they know that it speaks about AIDS.

The Leaf Project is conceived to be able to continually exist no matter whether or not work is acquired from it, and I'm entitled and able to continually re-enter tributes to people whose leaves find homes. I like that the work can go out into the world and be experienced in other people's environments, either, you know, in institutions or museums or in people's homes. And to me, that has been an actually really nice part of the project. So I've had different responses. Some people seem to enjoy the fact that they're paying homage to people that have died through the AIDS crisis; and other people seem to be taken aback. That's something that would be too much for them to personally have with them in their environment. I had a dealer that was wanting to work with me in another state, and she was having parties to introduce artists' work, and she shared with me later than the women who had come to the gathering were engaged with the leaves, but once they found out that it was an AIDS memorial, they didn't feel that they would be able to take them home with them. And I've had people ask how I would feel about having somebody come and purchase a leaf piece for its aesthetic appeal without knowing the subtext, and I've said that I would feel all right if they were responding to it viscerally and aesthetically but that I would want them to know the subtext behind it, it would be an important part, for me.

You started off with 70 leaves, 70 or 80 leaves?

Yeah, and I estimate it more to be 180 now. That's just theoretical…

That's how much we've got now?

Yeah, but not all of the leaves are made. Some of them exist as names that are written on paper for people that have yet to have leaves made for them. It's a project that's been challenging for me to keep track of, especially with there being more than one version, a framed one, and the original piece which floats on the wall when it is installed. It's important for me to try to keep track of who is represented in which piece so that when *Leaves* is exhibited the names of those it pays tribute to are included in a descriptive text. The names being included add to the piece, for people to be able to read the poetic references of the names.

And in the framed ones, the actual name is in… they're in the front of them, aren't they?

It's on the back, rather than on the front. So it's a challenging project to manage, in terms of keeping track of things; probably because I'm an individual, primarily, working on it. I have a lot of names written down in different folders of people that I remember having met at a certain time, or known, but haven't made a leaf for. And then there's other archival things that I would find interesting to do with it; like the original version is damaged, because it was travelled and shown a lot, and there are a few tributes that have become missing; and I could either record the ones that are there and accept the fact that that's what's that, and record those. When I started making the leaves, it was a project of remembrance and recollection and association, and also a democratic, egalitarian project. I think part of it was also, you know, honoring discretion that with few exceptions I didn't include last names in the titles. I also wanted it to be an open project that a lot of people could relate to, so including last names wasn't a part of the project. I like the poetic references… and there's one exception of a piece that I call *Artistic Heritage*, and that's a piece that it's artists that I knew…

Keith Haring and Mapplethorpe; I saw that one.

Yeah, yeah. And that seems fitting, because they're artists that I was in touch with to one degree or another; Robert Mapplethorpe being the most because he was in a neighbor of mine. These are artistic kinsmen that died through AIDS.

In a way, having their names near the piece as well is a good test for people, because when viewing the work, quite a lot of people, particularly if they're going to an art gallery, know who these people are and what their personalities were; and in looking at the leaf, particularly the outline, you can imagine them thinking: "Does this fit? Does this smooth-edged leaf really fit my perceptions of Keith Haring?"; or "does this jagged, misshapen one really fit my impressions of…?" You know, whatever. So I think that…

But within the whole project now, there's a lot of people who were unknown and a lot who were known; that personally I would think it would be interesting to go back, and like, who was this person, what is his or her association in the world. And if one wants to look at it as a sociological documentation of the loss of AIDS, the multitude; I mean, there are people in here who were real contributors, more visibly and publicly, to you know, what's thought of as shaping a cultural sort of identity, as well as people who were making other kinds of contributions. So that's in my mind, but for me, like I said, as the shepherd of the project and an artist who wants to get engaged in other work; it's where do I draw the lines, and when. You know, I don't have to make any kind of definitive, like, now it's placed here so now I don't have to do anymore; but it could be a beautiful book or even if it's housed or not, if the framed version or some version is housed in an institution, to have a catalogue of it that corresponds with the cultural history of all of these individuals as a part of the …

But like you mentioned to me earlier, it's a thing which, although it looks like it represents well as two dimensions, really having the three dimensions where

you can see the light making a shadow on the paper from the leaf; that really does add an extra dimension. Or, if it's not framed, seeing the paper gently, subtly moving with the air does add that extra dimension, which you won't always get on the paper.

Yeah.

And just to clarify, did you know personally every person who's represented by a leaf?

Yeah. There are exceptions; it's not that I knew them all well, but at least I had met them, or engaged with them. There are exceptions; there are different people, specifically different partners that I've had who've helped me with *The Leaf Project*; like my friend Jay who was very involved when I was getting the piece ready for showing it at Lincoln Center. He would tell me stories about the man that he was with who died, and a few of their friends. So we included a few of his friends, as extensions of me, knowing him.

It's nice.

It made sense to do that; because of his level of engagement with the piece, and then me knowing him, and knowing his stories, that put it into a context. I did one piece for some friends of mine, it was a commission; one of them wanted a leaf piece for his partner, and I decided that it seemed more fitting for them to tell the stories about their friends, to make them leaves that represented them, so that's what we did. They put down about six friends of theirs and then wrote down stories and recollections about each one. And then I spread out a canvas in my living room with a lot of leaves I had gathered that fall, and then they picked out leaves to represent friends of theirs.

For people who are commissioning a piece to represent their friends or lovers, what do you think *The Leaf Project* means to them, and to have one on their walls? You know, 'cause they're quite different from just walking into a gallery, not necessarily even knowing the context of AIDS; these people want this work for different reasons.

It also depends on how one responds to things. Like, one of them was a more cerebral kind of person, and he shared it with me later that at first, he responded to the work visually and ideologically, is that a word?

Yep.

That a leaf could represent a person, but he didn't quite get how that could really happen. So he enjoyed the work more as an intellectual concept than as a visual one. But he shared with me that after he went through the experience of talking about his friends and picking out leaves for them, that it helped him to see that actually one could see a representation of someone through a leaf. So I think it very much depends on the person.

Do you know if it helps them remember the person, or feel comforted?

They're there when they have coffee in the morning; they have it in the sunroom where they have coffee, so…

So that's where they've put the…

There are times when they view it as, you know, a work of art, a visual art; it falls into the background, I'm sure. Yeah. I have the large pieces; this large piece and the other one that was showed at the Gay and Lesbian Center. I had one on this wall in my living room when it came down from the Lincoln Center, and I had the other one in my bedroom over my bed, and it was too much for me, personally, it was very depressing and very heavy. I felt like I needed to not have them so close. I usually have smaller ones here; but to have that much….

Well, these walls are, they're quite small, as well; it would have been difficult to hang them.

Right. And they represented people that I knew who had died; and to have men here that I am interacting with physically and sexually, in the present, while having the large pieces on the walls was just very heavy. I enjoy my interactions with the project, and to see it in a room where it's together as an experience is most ideally how I would like it to be shown.

Can you tell me just a little bit more about the hummingbird series, as well? I think you called them the *Medicinal Gardens* series?

Oh yeah, these are the Medicinal Gardens, they're the medicinal plants [points to series of pieces on wall]. This one is called *Blood-root*.

Oh, so they're different, aren't they? They're the plants.

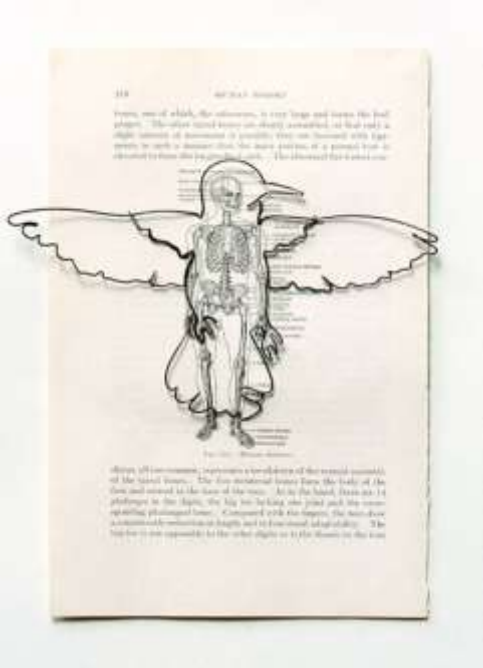
Yeah, they're chapters in a book from… some of them, actually, this piece here is from the same book as those, it's like from the 1800s. For me, again, they represent a merging of the scientific and the mechanical world, and the world of mysticism and animal spirits.

So the book is a commonsense medical advisor. It's a text about anatomy, and biology, and medicine.

Yeah, I think that this is the kind of book that would be like an encyclopedia for home use, talking about anatomy and medicine; and the chapters with the medicinal plants were one particular chapter… And then I've got a lot of these versions of hummingbirds superimposed over the human body, so there's a merging of bird and animal form. Actually, I did, last summer I did one of a deer as well, of a deer superimposed over a human skeletal drawing, which I call *Deer Medicine*. I could send you a copy of it.

And in your mind, what are you trying to represent by putting this beautiful outline of a hummingbird over the top of the anatomical drawing?

I guess somehow a marriage or interrelationship between a scientific sort of clinical way of looking at the world, or looking at the human body; as opposed to the spirit of things, and the metaphysical of things; and that if we bring together and merge them, then there's a fuller picture or view even, entering into realms of the unknown.



Eric Rhein, *Human Biology*, wire and paper, 8" x 6" x 1", 1997.

Eric, I want to ask just a few questions about some of your responses to other AIDS related artworks, moving away from your own. I want you to think about when you either view visual art concerning AIDS, but you can also, if you want to, think about films about AIDS that you've seen, theater works, dance, whatever. Can you think of some particular artworks, cultural responses, that have made an impact on you in some way?

If you asking about my response to artwork that is being done about AIDS in the contemporary world today, I really don't see that it is on the radar right now. I know that other artists are still making art about AIDS through my friends who are involved with Visual AIDS, but 'legitimized' institutions seem to be keeping their distance. I had somebody who was a more traditional dealer come to visit my studio just after I had shown *Leaves* at the Lincoln Center. I was interested in finding further legitimate, let's say legitimize – I mean, I don't like those terms, don't like those types of terms in these conversations, I find it offensive – but I'm looking; well, he's part of a world who could help my work get recognition within institutions, which I feel it needs in order to survive. I've concentrated mainly on showing work within social, other kinds of atypical settings, which has a very short-lived life, too; which is valid, but in order for the work to really survive and recognized, sadly – well, not sadly; actually, I don't want to say that either. But I think you understand what I'm saying…

Yeah, I mean, it needs to be collected by a major institution in some way in order to make sure it gets archived, and make sure it's preserved in the historical record; and so it can be potentially loaned and shown, and someone else will have the resources to look after it.

Yeah, and our world is built up on these sort of hierarchies of what legitimizes things. So anyway, this man is someone who could play a part in doing that. He shared that he felt that, well, that the gallery who he works for is mainly known for doing political art, and it kind of surprised me, 'cause he was saying that my work wasn't political. And I'd just shown *The Leaf Project*, as an AIDS survivor at the Lincoln Center, which I thought was extremely political. So I explained to him that I thought that my work was actually very political. I actually think it's not without anger, though I don't necessarily come across that way. I even think that this piece hanging above the day bed has anger in it. It's a self-portrait that was shown during the First Ten show of Visual AIDS, and I don't think it's an angry piece, but I think that there's anger in there, and distress, and remorse, and also beauty and acceptance and resolution. I don't know if you have the article that Robert Atkins wrote about *Leaves* in *Poz* magazine in 1999 – he said at that time if there was any art being done about AIDS at all, it was more in terms of elegy; he saw the project within that context. But traditionally I think artwork about AIDS was much more in the vein of ACT UP, that used sound bites and anger, which I actually have a very strong affinity for, now more retrospectively, than I did in the beginning. Because initially my affinities were more towards groups that were interested in exploring their interior lives and how to manage HIV differently than people who were going out on the streets and expressing this understandable anger and rage. So I wasn't as attracted to that during the ACT UP days; but at the moment I'm feeling extremely angry [laughs] in terms of feeling like I have… that work is still not being shown in the United States, and *The Leaf Project* for example is under-recognized within the mainstream art world. I'm very appreciative of the AIDS educational literature that GMHC puts out, which might not necessarily be seen as art… like, it's not going to be directly identified as art about AIDS, but you have those palm cards that they pass out… Have you been to GMHC?

No.

GMHC they'll have cards that have safer sex slogans, or a picture of someone and some kind of saying; they're kind of in keeping with Visual AIDS's… what do they call them, their…?

Their Broadsides.

Their Broadsides, yeah. I don't spend a lot of time in the traditional art world, going out and looking. Or I haven't, except for the last couple of years. And actually, I don't see work about AIDS in the traditional art world; I don't see it.

Well, as you talked about, it's not really getting shown at the moment; it's hard to make work about AIDS and get it shown in galleries. It's not seen as saleable, it's not seen as…

It's also hard to get work that has been made about AIDS in the… I mean, I would like for the framed version of *The Leaf Project*, at least, or some version of it, to be received by an institution, and I don't know when that's going to happen. There was at one time artwork about AIDS being shown that I liked a lot though it wasn't necessarily presented in that context. The work of Felix Gonzalez-Torres for instance, which was also very poetic, and referenced…

And this is what I wanted you to talk about; it doesn't have to be now, it can be in the 1980s, the 1990s.

Yeah, his work I feel a real affinity for.

What about it makes you…?

There's one piece that he has, that he did, which was shown at the Guggenheim, that was made up of electrical cords with light bulbs And I forgot the title of it. I think it is called *Untitled (North)* [1993]. But my understanding of the piece is that when the light bulbs burn out, the piece burns out. And there's a sort of sense of Daoist sort of philosophy, or acceptance of things, and that this is a part of something. The light bulbs going out is also a technological aspect of the piece; I mean, we could replace it, you know, we could do something about it, there's something that can be done… resolve this piece to have, you know, more life. There are people like Keith Haring and Mapplethorpe who were famous and had voices before their HIV status was known and were able to use it as a result of having had a name. I think that they played an important part… I think that there were a lot of people who did work about AIDS who were not positive themselves, who were known who were celebrated for it, and really were, in actuality, quite detached from the subject. Also that makes me feel sad.

Can you think of anyone in particular?

I don't want to say.

That's ok. What about…

But I think that that happened a lot. And I think that it also speaks of the economy, of a more traditional way of showing art; if you're showing art as someone who was dealing with AIDS as someone who's already famous, and your art becomes sought after and valuable, but if you're showing art as somebody who doesn't have that recognition, you're… people don't know how to; it's too close. It's ok to write about or do a painting about having spent your summers in Nantucket, and that's why you're doing boats, but if you talk about, you're making work in relationship to the AIDS epidemic as an HIV positive artist or person with HIV, then it's thought of as being victim art. And there's this sense of people not wanting to know things that are personal, I think it has held back not only a recognition of work about AIDS, but work about other things; can touch the soul.

So is there any work in the Visual AIDS slide archive that you've seen and that you admire, or that moves you in some way? I'm not sure how familiar you are with the whole body of work.

Yeah, I'm pretty familiar, but I'm so extremely involved in trying to keep myself going that there's a lot that I miss, which is just more a reality of trying to keep things going. I appreciate work that I recognize as being from someone's soul; there's certainly a lot of work that the Visual AIDS archive has that I admire. To start naming a few wouldn't seem fair. There's a photographer, Michael Harwood that also Nelson included in his Sparky project, show, that I liked a lot. Did you tape that show? Were you the guy who was taping the Sparky project?

No, I didn't have a recorder with me. I was there at the opening, and I went back the other day and took some photographs. I helped install it, actually; there were two or three of us. It took two days, believe it or not, to make sure that the works could actually fit on the wall; we had to keep rearranging them; but it was fun. I think it was a great show, as well.

I liked it; I appreciated the archive tremendously. I like the egalitarian aspect of it, I like that if you're a self-identified artist, that that's the criteria, that it's not other than that.

It's proved a double-edged sword for them, because some people aren't willing to take anything in the archive seriously if there's work in there that was done during the first art class that the person took. Or if it's art therapy, again, or if it's not quite finished; that is, it clearly hasn't been edited down, or if it's a first draft. But, on the other hand, it's also incredibly empowering for those people to be included, in terms of their own self-esteem; to be in the same archive as a Felix Gonzalez-Torres, or a…

I think that there are things about documenting the work of artists with AIDS that historically go beyond whether or not that artist has developed to a certain degree or not. I've given quite a lot of talks and lectures about my experience of making art in reflection of living with HIV and AIDS, and I often will include slides of other people's work who are included in the Visual AIDS archive. And that's for a number of reasons. One, because I feel like I'm linked to a part of that heritage, and it's also often because they're people that I knew who are no longer alive, who I have represented in *The Leaf Project*. Two of the artists are David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar. In my lectures I often include some images that David took of Peter's hands and feet when he was in the hospital and talk about how the photographs are not only of Peter but a portrait of his and David's shared experience at this indescribable moment of their friendship. There are also several artists that you may have heard of whose estates don't want them represented in the archive. You know, so if I show a slide of their work in my lecture, at least I'm representing them in my lecture, regardless of whether or not their estate felt that this was going to hurt their career or not; for their work to be associated with AIDS.

What about moving away from visual art, then, and thinking about some movies, or plays, or pieces of music that you might have experienced in the 1980s or the 1990s that particularly spoke to you in a particular way…

I liked Derek Jarman's *Blue*, when I first saw it. But then I saw it again and thought it was kind of boring. [both laugh]

I think it's a one-showing kind of film.

Yeah.

"Haven't I seen this before? It's blue!"

And I did see it in the theater; I think that made a big difference.

I think that's really important.

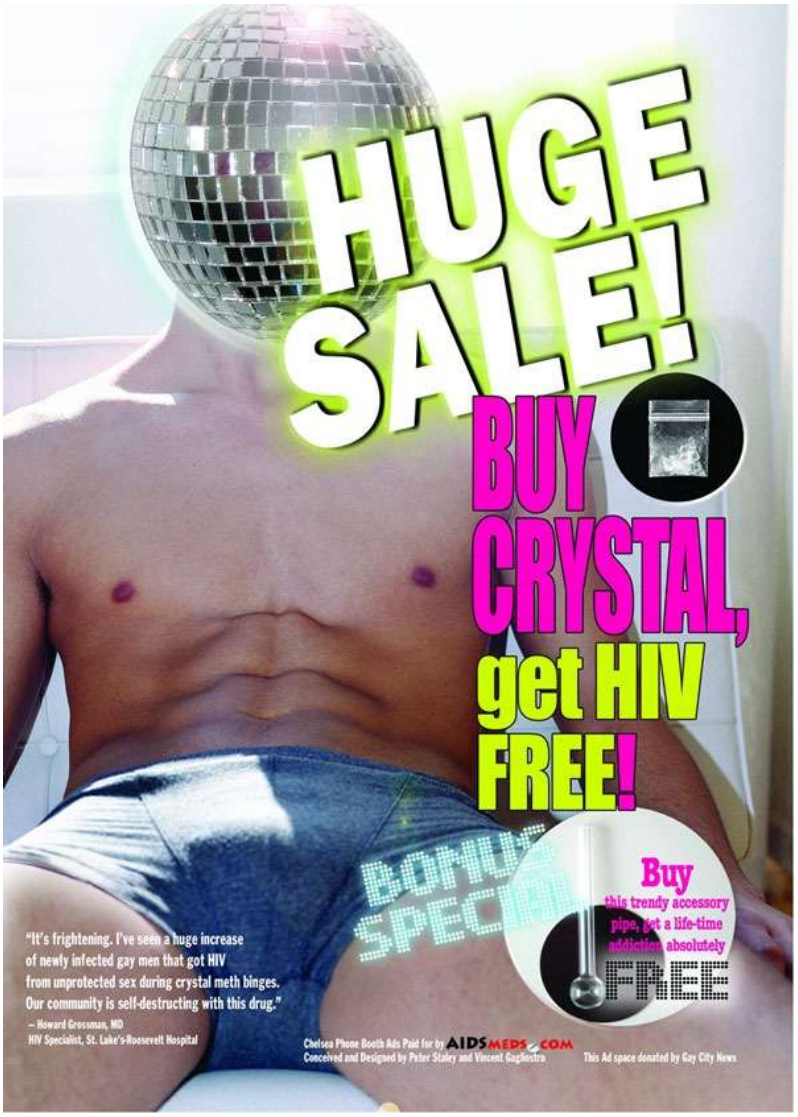
Yeah. And I also liked, was it *Red Hot and Blue*? They were a series of music compilations that I thought were very… 'Cause there was a campaign about the same time about condom use, and celebrities talking about using condoms. It might have actually been during the airing of Red Hot and Blue on TV. I think some of the crystal [meth] ads recently have been interesting.

The ironic type, in which the use of crystal meth is satirically portrayed? They were done by Peter Staley, I think. [See image below.]

Yeah, I liked those a lot. I think in advertising, you know, advertising there were these two young guys, I think it was in San Francisco, and these two young guys held up an American flag, I liked a lot.

Yeah, these were like Abercrombie & Fitch models wrapped up in the flag and a slogan about condom use and safe sex and being proud, yeah.

Generally I don't think that there are enough ads or stories about people who are positive that present them as being… I mean, I'm not really for sexualized advertising, the whole sexualizing of gay culture; but I think that within that field there could be more sex positive imagery regarding people who are living with HIV. I did the show *Uncle Lige's Sword* at the Gay and Lesbian Center, because my uncle was a really early gay rights activist, and very, very famous. He and his lover Jack were in the gay rights activist movement. I wanted to pay tribute and an homage to him and his early activism within the gay rights movement, and draw a correlation to HIV and AIDS activism expressed in my art. I also wanted to present myself as an AIDS survivor within the context of the protease inhibitors' tenth year anniversary. There's this lost voice of long-term survivors, which we could use some help with.



Poster designed by Peter Staley and Vincent Gagliostro, pasted on the streets of New York City, 2004.

What about the AIDS Quilt? What's your experience of the AIDS Quilt? Have you ever made a panel yourself, or…?

I made a panel for my friend Rodger, the guy who the sculpture *Blond Torso* was inspired by. I went to the AIDS Quilt with my mother, my friend Turk, who's in *The Leaf Project*, and Jack Nichols, my uncle's lover, was also there. And it was very dauntingly powerful. And yeah, I feel a big connection to the Quilt.

Did you travel to Washington to see it?

It was to Washington. I don't know if it was the last time it was shown, or not.

What year, can you remember, would it have been?

It would have been… '91, maybe?

So in terms of the last year it was shown as a complete work, it would have been, yeah, the early '90s.

Yeah. Actually I think I used that in the case; I used that in the case I did for… Yeah, here it is. This is a picture of the case that I put together for the show of *Uncle Lige's Sword*, this is I think the candlelight vigil when the AIDS Quilt was shown, like the last time the Quilt was shown. This is the letter from William… this is me and William on the beach; Martha's Vineyard. And that's the letter that his mother sent me. And these keys that, when we were together, these keys that we wore round our necks. And this is my uncle who helped organize the first march in Washington at the White House during the early gay rights movement, so I put it together with this candlelight vigil at the White House lawn. And that's the pattern of the leaf for William. And these are books that my uncle wrote with his friend, one was called *I Have More Fun with You Than Anybody* and then this is sort of a call to arms to unite the gay movement after Stonewall, they were the editors of *Gay Today*. They did a gay column for *Screw* magazine.

So what about the Quilt did you find powerful?

The sheer overwhelming emotion of it, along with the quilt-making tradition and the magnitude of it; the fact that people who had loved and cared about these people had put the care and stitching into the designs; the elements of people's lives that were included within the quilt. I hadn't thought about this, but I think that also the fact that it was on the White House lawn, which was still ignoring the epidemic to such a big degree. I mean, overwhelmingly painful and moving and… we were saying that, you know, here we are; and yet you know, look at us and look at what we have created, and still nothing's being… the helplessness and hopelessness of the situation in face of the joy and the honoring. Because it was a joyousness as well, but then there was just a flood of remorse and pain. And I was with my mother and Jack and I remember it being overcome by this flood of emotion very, kind of unexpectedly.

I see the *Leaf Project* as an equivalent of the Quilt in that…

There is.

Each leaf is embodying an individual person, and having its own shape; but also when you show it as a whole, and you see it as a whole, there's an enormity to it; you understand that a lot of people have died. That there is a great deal of loss, but there's also that joyousness as well, as you've talked about.

Yeah. There's also this untold story behind, like, if one looks at it as a leaf representing someone, and then, like, often people ask me what kind of leaf it is, and then I tell them who it was, and there's this story that comes up about who this person was. And some of them I knew more than others, and often it's ones who I might have known least might have made the most personal impact, for one reason or another. Like there's this one leaf that's called 'Graced Tom', and I called him 'Graced Tom' because he had a K.S. lesion where his third eye was, and he looked… I mean, he held himself rather regally, with having that K.S. lesion, and the placement of it was as if he'd been graced by some deity, from the cosmos. And there's a guy 'Red-Headed Luther' who uncovered the story of Chernobyl, in Russia.

Really?

Yeah. And Rudolf Nureyev… I just call him 'Nureyev', 'cause I met him on the staircase of the Metropolitan Opera one evening. And then 'Sexy Joe and David the Poet', the friends of George's. I actually met George because of going to Joe's memorial, that's how I met George.

Really?

Yeah, yeah. So we had this whole community of friends that came together and did this very alternative memorial for Joe. I don't know if he told you about this, but it was held in some abandoned part of a park and people had built these wooden structures with effigies of things that had belonged to Joe, and set them to fire. And then we went back to Joe's apartment afterwards, and then; I'm sure George has shared with you his own experience, that has happened many years later… So it's actually interesting, just like taking about it now, that they're stories that continue. And a lot of you know, why I have names of people written who I hopefully, eventually will be entered into *The Leaf Project* with an actual leaf, 'cause you run into people that you've met or you knew maybe ten years ago but had lost track of, and sharing with you remembrances that it comes out that your friend that you had in common isn't alive anymore. My mother's cousin, Jimmy, is in it; is in *Leaves*, he's 'Cousin Jimmy'; he's a Gynko leaf. And when I had my open studio this last time, we'd just come back from Kentucky for Mother's Day and I brought sassafras tea to the studio. But drawing a correlation with the Quilt is definitely, I think, a fitting one; and I think why for me as an individual it is challenging to hold *The Leaf Project* and still live my life and to do other works. I've had friends and other people in the arts who have encouraged me to put aside *The Leaf Project*, whether it be for a time or whatever kind of period of time; as it's something that halts me in a place of loss and remembrance, rather than going forward in my life. There are times that I feel that that's valid; so it's not just something to listen to, it's also very challenging. 'Cause even as I'm talking to you about the… like, I know and my friend Jay knows that 'Red-Headed Luther' discovered Chernobyl, or broke the story at Chernobyl; but I think that that's an interesting component within the context of looking at this project…

Those underlying stories.

Perry Ellis, the fashion designer Perry Ellis… and then you notice as well, this guy Wilfredo; I don't know if he was a known fashion designer or not, but he always came to our doctor's office dressed to the T; he was extremely ill for a really long time, but part of his coping mechanism was to dress up and make an appearance to Dr Bellman. So I called him 'Stylish Wilfredo'.

I've got one more question; well, two more questions. I'm interested to hear what you think about the significance of the AIDS Red Ribbon, which is a Visual AIDS project. And, like the Leaf Project, it's taken on a life of its own. I don't think they imagined that the Red Ribbon would turn into this huge international symbol. People feel quite ambivalent about the Red Ribbon now, they see it as kitsch;

they see it as being ineffective; but some people still think it has a purpose. Do you have a view on the Red Ribbon?

I have mixed views of it. I don't wear it myself; sometimes I feel like it's… [pause] I think if anything, I think it's historically extremely significant, and it did a lot. It's certainly been co-opted, but everything gets co-opted, unfortunately. You know. [pause] I have some feelings about some of the people who developed the Red Ribbon, as well, in terms of, which I can understand, that they… There are people who… I don't know whether I should say this or not… I have mixed feelings… I think the Red Ribbon served a big purpose and to me it seems like a historical thing. It makes me sad. Yeah, it makes me sad. I feel like... I feel a little betrayed.

By the Ribbon, or the way…

Just, I think that it's very complicated. One, there's a lot of people who developed the Red Ribbon got burnt out and left New York; some of them friends of mine at a time when I really could have used them, you know. People who; one friend in particular who was very involved in that time period, I would have liked for him to have helped me with *The Leaf Project*, helping it get used and get recognized… he wouldn't have been able to do it. I understand that, you know, but at the same time I feel abandoned.

Were you ever a member of the Artists Caucus that was involved in coming up with the design…

No, I became involved with Visual AIDS when, from what I understand, it's when Visual AIDS; were they going to fold, and not exist anymore, or were they going to revive themselves. So I was one of the group artists that got together, that Frank Moore and a number of other people brought together to talk about… I think I had just shown this piece, my *Self Portrait*, at Sculpture Center, as an AIDS piece; because when I exhibited my work at Artists Space earlier, I showed a group of sculptures that related to my being HIV positive and was afraid to talk about my status; but then afterwards, I don't remember what, but some things happened where I ended up showing this piece at an AIDS forum at the Sculpture Center. So I was invited to come and be part of this group of artists to talk about what could Visual AIDS do to help artists living with HIV and AIDS. And one of those we developed was the slide archive project. I was part of what they call the First Ten show, which was the first ten artists to be given an exhibition out of that slide archive. So I came in at a time when the organization was looking to be revitalized to be inclusive of helping and supporting and utilizing artists with HIV.

And that was '98, or 2000? I'm not quite sure.

It was… '98, no … [consults papers] The First Ten show is '95.

Ok, so it's earlier than that, then.

Yeah, 'cause I first showed part of *Leaves* in '96, yeah, so the First Ten show was 1995. So with the Red Ribbon, and my thoughts about the Red Ribbon… I think I feel

exposed if I wear it; I don't feel very safe, emotionally, if I wear it myself. I feel, yeah, it kind of makes me sad.

'Cause it's tied up with a whole bunch of personal histories and it means something very different for you…

Yeah, and I also think it was, I think it did a lot of good, but I also think it was an easy thing for people to do. I think it still stands out as the Red Ribbon; I mean, people, regardless of whether or not there are pink ones that represent this; that it's still an icon; iconic. I also like that things go out into the world and are free. I like that. When I had a showing of *Leaves* at Richard Anderson Fine Arts, I made prints of a detail of *Leaves* that I gave out as a tribute to Felix Gonzalez-Torres. I can give you one.

Like one of his, yeah, his stacked paper series.

Yeah.

All right, well, one last question, and I've asked this to everyone… I'm interested if you think that art can save lives.

What do mean by that? I mean, it saved my life.

How so?

I would have been dead if I hadn't been able to have my art in relationship to creating work about my experience and processing what I was going through. So it saved my life.

Just in terms of helping you deal with the emotional issues, or…

Emotional, physical issues; and it also gave me an outlet of something to do and engage in while I was not well. I could always make, no matter what I was going through, I could always make a piece of artwork. And most of the time it was reflecting something that I was thinking of, or being affected by psychologically. I think you're asking more like if it can save lives, like a viewer's life?

Yep, yeah.

I'm not sure. I think it can help; I think it can help people process things and live lives differently, or get some kind of clue about their lives. I mean, can books save a life, or a thought or a conversation? I think maybe in the same way it has a potential, altering or shifting things.

Shifting consciousness?

Shifting consciousness. It saved my life.

Yeah, it's interesting, that idea of shifting a mindset or shifting a consciousness. You can imagine if some of these works that had been shown in Washington, [perhaps] the Quilt, or they've had art exhibitions there, and you're a

Congressman and you're walking through an art gallery (as they do, they're quite cultured people). And they come across works which make them think about the epidemic in a way they've never felt about it before; perhaps seeing *The Leaf Project* and making them see, understanding that sense of loss; and that there's someone making these leaves, and the kind of loss that that person must be feeling. And prior to that you thought, "Oh, AIDS is just a gay disease and it doesn't matter if gays die." Or, whatever. Suddenly it makes you change your views about this. And you go back to Congress and you put your vote for funding for a vaccine, or funding for a new medical centre, or more funding for Gay Men's Health Crisis; and I think that happens, and I think that's important.

So it depends on the person's receptivity, obviously. I mean, I know that that's part of why I continue to want to do things with *The Leaf Project*; I mean, it's also been helpful to have you come and talk to me about it; that it's something that has a validity currently, that it's not just a nostalgic piece; it's something we continue to think about. Because there are times when I wonder if it's time…, what is the validity of it at this time? I mean, I'm glad that it has gone on to be shown in Uganda…

That's amazing.

And it's nice. I know that the man who contacted me for the ambassador said that it was because she wants to be able to address HIV and AIDS, and also gay issues in Uganda. So for *Leaves* to be represented there contributes to that voice, and that means a lot. And I'm sure that the project has a whole different context in Uganda. I could only begin to have a dialogue and understand what it means for to people to see it there. I mean, whether or not I'm gay or straight might affect their perceptions. There's also certain wordings that I'm careful of when I write statements. I say that it's people who died "from complications from AIDS", rather than "died of AIDS"; and it bothers me that the statement in the catalog says "died of AIDS", so they misquoted me. But you sort of have to let it go, or write a nice letter to the ambassador, you know, just for information.

I mean, if in terms of my personal opinion about how does the project function now and where it could go…

I would, actually.

I think you have to take…; if you've had friends and colleagues telling you that for your own personal health and psychological health that it might be good to put it aside for a while and move on to something else, then that could well be valid. I mean, they would know you very well. And I think it's important that the work still gets shown; but I think it still has the same impact whether you're still adding to it, or whether it's now shown as a piece which is, for the time being, finished. You know, I think [it's important] that people know that it started off as a piece with 70 or 80 leaves into it, and it's now grown into a piece of over 180; but you get the sense that it continues, that it has continued to grow as the epidemic continues to grow. So I think it will still have the same impact, whether it stops now – as long as it still gets shown – or whether you still add to it.

Right. But, see, you don't view it as a historical piece that, now that it's over because the AIDS epidemic has changed.

No, I think, on the contrary, I think the fact that it keeps growing; it's speaking to the fact that the epidemic is still going. And that people still feel loss. And, I mean, people who are still surviving now still feel loss. You still feel loss for your friends that have died.

Right. And how to make sense of my world in relationship to this tremendous loss. When I go out into the art world, into the worlds that I would like to see open up more to *The Leaf Project*, and they ask me "What do you do?" I tell them I'm an artist, and one of the projects I've been working on for a long time is an AIDS memorial called *Leaves*. And it doesn't go anywhere. And that happens from enough people who I would think would be more interested, but for some reason aren't; that I don't quite know what to do or how to navigate moving it along. Also being that it can be many things; it wouldn't stop because the Museum of Modern Art bought it, because it's not one piece. But the Museum of Modern Art buying it could help it go on to go to the University of Memphis, Tennessee; or… I have this sense of what I need to do for *Leaves* to live the life that I would like for it to live. But I'm not sure. Like, do I need to step back and get known more for other things, so I develop relationships with dealers who could do something with the project.

I think that's a really good strategy. Almost to put it in through the back door, behind something else that's going to capture the attention, and is maybe, in terms of the art world, more 'here and now'. I mean, the art world is fickle; it goes with trends and fashions. And they're saying, well, AIDS is over, or AIDS is passé, or AIDS doesn't sell, or whatever. So they are interested in…

Right; or the more seasoned curators are still traumatized, so they don't want to think about AIDS. It nice for me that part of *Leaves* is up now, for the 25th anniversary of the Gay and Lesbian Center here in New York.

Oh, excellent.

Then you'll have this card from the exhibition that you'll be able to send out.

You know, I really understand your wanting it to be taken by an established arts institution, and to get the recognition in terms of the art world that it deserves, but in terms of utility, in terms of what it could be doing, in terms of 'can art save lives?', I think it's wonderful that it's at the Gay and Lesbian Center, and at some of the other spaces you've shown it at.

Yeah, I agree.

[End of interview]

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