

Barbara Hunt interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

New York City, USA, 7 May 2004

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: I was wondering if you could tell me about the *Bodies of Resistance* exhibition that you curated? I think it was first here in 1999 and then it went to South Africa. Can you tell me a little about the motivation for that exhibition and how you went about putting it together?

Barbara Hunt: Ok. There were two issues with that exhibition. One was I felt that we were struggling at that point in time when I started to curate it, which I think was 1998. I decided that I needed to do a show that would be at the [International] AIDS conference immediately after the conference that was in – was it in Zurich? – the conference before the one in South Africa. I knew that there'd been a big show and I thought that it was fantastic that [we would have] a captive audience of doctors, activists, people who were engaged in the AIDS debate, and that [we] might be able to start new discussions in some way or use the fact of the AIDS conference to get through to people.

I'd only joined Visual AIDS in 1997. I'd joined just after protease inhibitors had come out and there was a lot of frustration here in New York that people [mistakenly] thought the AIDS pandemic was over in America, that there was a cure. There were actually misleading articles in some of the newspapers and on TV. And there wasn't the thrust for AIDS education that there had been because it was felt that there was this new medication. Certainly it was much harder for us to get the press' attention and we felt really frustrated. There was a sort of movement away from activism. It was very hard for us at Visual AIDS even to get our own community activated and there was a sense of...I just remember feeling this when I had that job, and I've talked to Amy (the current director) about this because she's a friend of mine – she was a friend of mine before she got the job – we talked about the despair that you can have in that office in Visual AIDS, where you're constantly getting these emails, you're very tapped in, you're getting alerts from the Centers for Disease Control [about rising infection rates] yet the rest of the world doesn't know it. You feel kind of overwhelmed by a burden of responsibility as to how you can transmit this information. My friends with whom I would socialise didn't know the information that I knew and didn't seem to care, and that's kind of where the exhibition came from. I felt that the western world really couldn't care less about Africa and Asia.

But here is this conference that was going to take place in Africa, and here was a way for us – y'know this little tiny office in New York and these artists in New York – to engage with something, even if it meant taking some of the artists to South Africa. How could we try to do an exhibition which publicly – even if it just says we're in partnership with South Africa – on one side tries to raise discussion about what's happening across the world and move

away from this kind of very privileged place, which is New York, where people do have access to drugs and medication?

There was a sense also, even within the community, that people were starting to look healthier and people didn't need help anymore and people were going back to work, coming off disability. It sort of felt like this bubble was about to burst. There were all these things going on, it was very complicated.

I also felt that it was very problematic that people felt that AIDS was now of interest only to people who had AIDS and so only artists who had HIV or AIDS could make work about HIV or AIDS, and that it was no longer a subject, or that we [i.e. Visual AIDS] should only represent artists with HIV and AIDS. A lot of people would say that to me. So I wanted to move away from that and draw attention to the impact in other ways, on a more complex level, that HIV and AIDS has impacted this society's, western society's, view of the body - that everything about how we operate today in terms of sexuality and gender and the body has changed because of AIDS. What happened in the '80s [in terms of the way that AIDS changed artists' conception of the body] was so important, it's so under-recognised. So I felt that I wanted to do a show that couldn't be ghettoised as an 'AIDS show' because I felt that was the problem. I felt like I was banging my head on the wall as director of that organisation, so I wanted to do a show which operated really fully within the art world. So conceptually it was about the body, it was about the impact of these debates.

What do you mean by 'the body'?

Representation of 'the body', a very plain concept that you can trace in art history from Greek statues to Cindy Sherman, John Copland, everybody, any artist working today. I wanted to show that how we look at images of nudes today has been influenced by HIV - the impact of artists working with HIV and AIDS - and the impact of AIDS on how we think of the body. There's been a massive shift in how we think about sexuality, sex. All of that is sort of just a done deal. People don't even think about that, that western society changed its view of the body. The body suddenly became a dangerous thing.

How do we know that AIDS brought about that change in conceptions of the body and that, say, feminism didn't, or cultural studies per se didn't?

Of course feminism, cultural studies, the TV age, changes in technology and the dissemination of information all impacted on representations of the body in our culture. But for my generation the AIDS pandemic, and how it changed sex education, had a tremendous impact. There was a shift from the 'free love' of the 1960s and the swinging 70s to the 80s where monogamy was encouraged because anything else was 'dangerous' and morally reprehensible. Feminism has not made much impact on Western society's views of women who are not monogamous or sexually active outside marriage (male/female) or very conventional relationships. I also don't think anything else had such an impact on shifting views of sex as being something potentially dangerous or harmful, which is how the majority portrayed it in sex ed in the 1980s. Remember the PSAs [public service announcements] from that period about STDs and people with HIV? They were campaigns

of fear to warn teenagers away from becoming sexually active. Certainly in the UK I don't remember the term 'safe sex' being around in the 80s. Sex simply wasn't portrayed as 'safe'.

In terms of the body, the question might be 'well, is it more gay artists that have challenged that in terms of their representations, particularly of the male nude, or more assertive representations bringing more erotic representations of the body into the public sphere?' I mean, that's a massive debate, but I just personally feel that it's not just artists; it's also HIV and AIDS education. I remember a distinct change when I was growing up. I graduated high school in '82 and so that shift when I was in college and this whole thing about 'oh, you're going to catch something, it's not safe, you have to wear a condom', that was a massive thing that was going on in England at the time.

In Australia as well.

I do really feel that that was the influence of AIDS as opposed to, y'know STDs weren't life threatening. You could catch the clap, it was kind of a joke. It was known as something that was maybe problematic in England when King Henry had his many wives, or syphilis and gonorrhoea and all of that, but it was seen as a medieval or historic thing. It wasn't something that would ever touch young people. But the impact of AIDS and the massive government campaigns of terror that were done (which they've now reconsidered in terms of sex education and educational health programming - they've realised that those campaigns of terror don't work), I do think that that caused a major shift in the '80s about how we view our body and how we view sex and sexual acts and bodily fluids. So that was kind of where I wanted to go. I wanted to combine that with art history and art and look at the way that contemporary artists are working. So I wanted to make it an art exhibition which had a very strong message [i.e. about AIDS] as opposed to being this really strong message that was using art to convey itself. So it was a slight twist on what we'd done.

And you've got the two pronged approach where you've brought international artists to America, where the exhibition was first shown in 1999, to tell Americans that there's this other epidemic out there and that AIDS isn't over, and then you take American artists to South Africa and show them there. Did you have the intension of giving some kind of message to the political leadership in America, saying: 'look, the artists are reaching out and recognising a problem overseas, is there something you need to do?'

I think it was an attempt. Ultimately I think that with the resources we had it wasn't as successful in that sense as I had hoped. Also, I was offered another job and moved on and didn't see it through, which was just one of those strange things. I don't know how successful the second part was in terms of reaching out to South Africa. Even if I'd been in post I think I could have done more with it when it was at the conference. I think if I had been still in post when I was offered this job – which was my dream job so I had to take it – I think if I had gone to the conference, if it had come to it, I would have stood outside the conference and flyered those delegates and made them, persuaded them, to come see my exhibit and try to persuade them about the power of art, and how they could use art in AIDS education or AIDS awareness. I would have done a little bit more that way.

Given that the World AIDS Conference is a massive talk-fest and there are papers given on every topic by people from every possible discipline, you still thought that you were gonna tap into something new and make them see the problem in a new way by having an exhibition.

Yeah.

So you're a strong advocate for the power of art.

Yeah I am. I still believe that if you invest all of this effort and all of this energy, if you get through to one person it's worth it. It's not about quantity of numbers for me it's a kind of a pyramid effect, or a ripple effect. You affect one person, they might go away and affect – it's almost like *infection* – you manage to get through to one person, they might then go away and they've had a revelation so then they might go away and manage to convey that message to three people and it spreads that way. So I'm all about viral marketing in that sense.

And particularly if you're targeting opinion makers, and you've got journalists going to that conference, you've got health delegates from every country and key doctors and medical personnel.

Right.

You mentioned that the exhibition contained HIV-negative artists, and I'm interested in HIV negative artists as well, but they're bloody difficult to find because there are no organisations like Visual AIDS that can put you in contact with them. And it seems to me that it's difficult to find, to pick up traces, of HIV-related themes in their work.

Well, Visual AIDS has a drawer full of artists who've made work about HIV and AIDS that are HIV-negative. That's a separate drawer that they might have forgotten to show you. Those artists can't be in the archive project because, obviously, the fact of being in the archive project is a form of disclosure.

I think just being in that world, working for an organisation whose primary mission is to educate about HIV and AIDS through the visual arts, made me really switched on [to HIV-related themes]. When I go around in the art world I'm constantly aware of artists where I might pick something up in their work, and I'm privileged in that I can get to talk to that artist so that I can pursue that conversation with them and ask them where it came from. I think artists work in such sophisticated ways often it may not be blatant, they may not want it to be blatant, but if you ask them or if you get into conversation with them they might say 'well this piece was influenced by this' or 'I saw somebody else's show', 'I saw David Wojnarowicz's show and that made me rethink things'. I've had loads of conversations with artists who had their eyes opened by David Wojnarowicz or Felix Gonzales Torres.

Even speaking with Steed Taylor this morning and he was saying that initially he was trying not to address HIV in his work, that was a part of his life and he didn't want to have to deal with that in his artwork, and yet he kept painting or drawing himself crying. He thought 'well, why am I doing this', and he said that it kept 'seeping into' his work in these different ways.

And his work is really powerful. For *Bodies of Resistance* he did the road tattoo [*Birthday Knot*] which was a very personal piece for him because it was to mark his fortieth birthday and he never thought he'd make his fortieth birthday. And so to celebrate his fortieth birthday he celebrated the birth in that community of forty babies. We got the local hospitals to supply us with the names of the first forty babies that were born on or after Steed's birthday, and from the dates and times given he selected the first forty and then he incorporated their names into the road tattoo. We had local community groups helping to actually paint it and a local interfaith pastor who blessed it. So it's actually a really moving thing. You could drive down that road and if it was raining you might not even see it or you might drive over it and you might not know what it is. I kind of like that, that it's not necessarily hung on a banner, like, 'this is an AIDS project'. There were articles in the local press also, so it kind of infiltrates in a different way. Or passers-by may just see what it is and they may go into Real Art Ways and say 'what is that thing?', 'why have you got a tattoo on the road outside?'

I said to him it looks a lot like someone's done burnouts with their car up and down. [laughing] I can imagine the local hoon...

It was beautiful because it stayed there for quite a while and when it wasn't wet you could really see it. It was a beautiful thing.



Steed Taylor, *Birthday Knot*, paint on asphalt, the names of newborn babies, and a prayer, 1999.

What about yourself. I want you to try and take yourself back and tell me what it was like to be a consumer of art looking at AIDS-related artworks in the 1980s, early 1990s. Can you remember any instances of being moved by the work that you were seeing? This could be film, theatre, television, visual art that made you think differently about the epidemic, about your responsibilities in the epidemic, your responsibilities to others?

Yeah. Definitely. The people that really did stand out for me were David Wojnarowicz and Felix Gonzales Torres, and then in England, Sunil Gupta. He curated a show with Tessa Boffin called *Ecstatic Antibodies*, which was a seminal show in England. Bear in mind that in London the debates about AIDS were less public, I think, than the debates in New York. Everything is very stiff upper lip, behind closed doors, it's just a different culture I think. I really remember Sunil Gupta's show *Ecstatic Antibodies*. A young artist called Alistair Raphael who used to work at Photo Fusion in Brixton – I don't know where he is now, he works out of London – he did a beautiful, beautiful piece that I remember being very moved by. There was a lot of work about the body at that time in London. There was – I've forgotten her name – the woman who made all the work about breast cancer.

The photographer...Jo Spence?

Yes, because I ran Camerawork. I ran a photography gallery, so I was very engaged with all that photo-text work. Donald Rodney made all this work about his body because he actually had a very rare blood disease. He wasn't HIV positive, but it was about the body.

In regards to David's and Felix's work, what in particular moved you? Can you name particular pieces? Did you see their work in galleries or in books?

I think at that time it was mainly in books. I remember the bed piece by Felix Gonzales Torres, reading about that and seeing the billboard and finding it very sad and poignant. David Wojnarowicz's pieces I just loved how in your face they were. The texts were almost too much when you read them in England. I always liked issue based work, as it was called at that time.

That was where I was coming from. I was an activist in different areas. I was doing exhibitions and I was involved with the RNIB, the Royal National Institute for the Blind. I was doing art exhibitions, some of which were for people who couldn't see, which was kind of strange thing. I was all about *egalite*, whether it was disabled rights, which was a big issue then. I was working with a lot of disabled artists, and artists of colour, so they were my pet peeves. I was already known.

Is it John Berger who was doing the camera stuff as well?

Yeah, John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*.

Was it him or Jo that did the *Thankyou for Putting Us in Colour* photograph, with the people with disabilities?

I think that was Jo Spence and David Heavey. He was on my board and we did a big book with him and a big show. That was my first exhibition at [Camerawork]. I didn't curate it, I had just been appointed. Camerawork was in the East End of London, which was also the home of the National Front, the British National Party, the extreme right-wing, the skinheads.

Oh God, yes!

We went out afterwards [after the show]. David, who was a big disabled rights activist, and – as he referred to his friends – ‘a bunch of crips’ [laughs]. We went to the only local pub which didn't have stepped access, the only local pub which had wheelchair access, about twenty of us in wheelchairs, crutches, people of colour, a sort of motley crew. We went to this pub in the East End and we didn't know that it was the headquarters of the British National Party. They'd had a big march in town and then they came back and we were in the back of the pub, having a drink and a really good time. And in came about a hundred skinheads [Paul laughs]. It was an interesting moment. Basically, the disabled rights activists decided to stick it out. I stuck it out for a while but by the end I was the last person with a hint of a tint [i.e. ethnic background], so then I had to be escorted out of the pub by somebody on crutches [mutual laughter]. It was a really weird moment. The skinheads parted and we just walked out through the middle of the pub. They literally didn't talk to us. They very silently parted, it was very intimidating. That was my first week at work.

Gosh. ‘What an interesting life this is going to be’.

Yeah. So we're the local gallery of that neighbourhood and we're putting on all of these exhibitions that *that* local community wasn't necessarily interested in. I've always been interested in those notions of community. Everyone talks about community. But which community? There are so many. Even in the AIDS activist world there are different communities and there are different fights, or factions within that. I was very aware of that when I came to New York, that there were these different factions and you had to be very careful who you spoke to about who, and there was a lot of infighting, which was very negative.

I went to see *The Normal Heart* last night at the Public Theatre.

I haven't seen it.

Go and see it. It's wonderful. Bring your tissues.

Really?

Everyone's weeping by two-thirds of the way through.

That's why I haven't been to see it. It's too much. I don't want to relive certain things.

Well, it's interesting. I'm interested in comparing when it first premiered at that theatre – almost 20 years to the day – and the response that it is getting now. I didn't envisage that people (last night) would be as angry as they were when it first played. But after each political speech was spoken, everyone was clapping and being very aroused by that. And, as I said, the grief...I was surprised by that. These people who say that AIDS is over should go and buy a ticket. It's not.

Not at all. People are still dying.

It might be on for another week. I recommend it, but like you said it can be a bit harrowing.

A bit raw, yeah.

With the *Bodies of Resistance* show – sorry to go backwards – did you get any feedback from that show? Was there a visitor's comments book that was kept? Did you receive letters?

There was a visitor's comments book. Real Art Ways kept one. Anecdotally, I can only say that they said they had an amazing response. We held a press conference with local students. That was one of the most moving things that I did as director of Visual AIDS. I don't know how we managed to do it, but we persuaded the then Miss World, who was Miss Botswana, to appear, so it just worked out for us. She was being interviewed in something like *Seventeen*, and I knew that we were doing this conference with young people and so we somehow managed to contact the Miss World organisation and we got her to this press conference that we were doing with young people of Hartford. So it was in all the local schools' newspapers. We had some of the artists from the show up on a platform with Miss World, Miss Botswana. She was just fabulous. Again, she provided the hook into a different audience, like how do you get through to people? We had agreed that we would talk about the impact of HIV and AIDS on young people, the same age as this group, in Africa. She talked to them about how many funerals she would go to and how many young people they're losing and how young people in Botswana – then, we're talking about 4 years ago – were losing their families. You could be orphaned very young, the impact on the workforce, the knock-on effects. She gave a really personal talk which was just fantastic. Here's this beautiful woman engaging them in a certain way, but she'd been briefed very carefully, she wasn't allowed to talk about any form of sex education. This constantly came up whenever we did anything with young people. But we'd done enough work in schools by then so that we could lead the kids [to ask particular questions]. Because in America, in certain instances, you're not allowed to actually raise the issue of sex education and you're not allowed to mention that you should use condoms because in America you're meant to be promoting abstinence.

You get special funding for promoting abstinence these days.

You can't promote safe sex because 'oh my goodness you should be promoting no sex'. So you're not allowed to talk about safe sex because they shouldn't be engaging in sex. It's this

difficult thing. But by then, through our work in schools, we knew exactly what to talk about, so that as long as a kid in the audience asks the question, you're allowed to answer. Miss Botswana wasn't allowed to answer. So we had this whole press conference set up, and it was fantastic.

What was the artists' role in the press conference?

The artists' role was to talk about their work: why they made their work and what they thought their work did, and how did their work convey something or encourage people to get involved in the debate about HIV and AIDS. So we had Barton Lidice Benes who told some really funny stories too.

I spoke with him on Tuesday. He's wonderful.

And I think we had Sammy Cucher. I think we may have had Eric Rhein but I may be getting Eric confused with – Eric and I have done a lot of press conferences together. The same with Steed [Taylor]. You get certain artists who are good spokespeople and who young people can relate to. I tended to work with people that were good public speakers. We also did a thing with the young people, where we had them all stand up and we gave them all a number – 1,2,3,4 – and every fourth person had to sit down. Rather 1,2,3 sat down and 4 stayed standing. Then when we had done the whole room – and they didn't know why we were doing it – we said to them 'well, you heard Miss Botswana tell you that the infection rate in Botswana was 25%, 1 in 4. So all you people standing, if this community was in Botswana, all of you would be infected and you wouldn't have access to medication. So what do you think about that?' It was trying to bring it home to them that it's something they, as young people, needed to write about, they needed to be concerned about, they needed to actually think about. They wrote some pretty amazing articles. I don't know if Real Art Ways still has them. But it was interesting.

How can I get in contact with Real Art Ways? Do they have a presence on the 'net? They're still going?

Yeah. They're in Hartford. Will K. Wilkins would be able to tell you about the impact of that exhibition. He was fantastic, he's the director. I've personally given out loads of catalogues – so many people have asked me for the catalogue. We tried to make it not an art catalogue. I don't know if you've read the catalogue, but it's a strange mix. There's an essay about the artwork, there's an introduction by the then president of the AIDS conference, there's a doctor from South Africa writing about the situation in South Africa. And there's a literary piece, which is more of a fictional piece about what it's like now – a personal account of living with AIDS on protease inhibitors and taking the 'cocktail'. We did the catalogue with the knowledge that most people wouldn't see the show. We tried to make it reach into different areas.

Where did that get distributed, and who were the kinds of people asking for the catalogue?

Mostly researchers, curators, other artists. I've had a lot of international researchers actually come here and I hand out the catalogue. I've obviously got my own box in my office. I think it was pretty widely given out when it was in Durban.

I think Amy was saying that there is a teacher in a university who's setting it as a course text. It's definitely widely circulated.

Any idea of how many people would have gone through the exhibition in Hartford and then in Durban?

They would probably be able to tell you that. It was a very moving community experience. They had a big community turnout for the opening [in Hartford]. It opened on World AIDS Day. We had one or two coaches going up from New York. We broke down on the way home which was awful.

How far away is it?

It's about two-and-a-half hours. It's a trek, for New Yorkers. New Yorkers hate to leave the island.

[laughing] They can't swim.

I live in Brooklyn and nobody wants to come visit me.

I was out in Brooklyn yesterday.

Great. Did you take your passport?

No. Us Australians, we're good swimmers, we get out.

I'm noticing that currently there seems to be an absence of discussion – within the art world and artists themselves – about the recent spike in new infections and in this idea of bare-backing and unprotected sex.

I don't think the art world probably even knows about it now. Again, I think that is something that is part of the high stress level of working for Visual AIDS, because you predominantly have come from the art world and so your primary community is the art world. So it's very hard when this world that you're trying to engage and raise awareness within – which is a very privileged, educated world – doesn't want to know. They don't want to know. I also feel that's partly tied to institutionalised homophobia, not wanting to know about gay sexual practices. That is something that I completely forget: that I work in the AIDS sector. So my view of what is the norm is skewed – y'know I'm working all day in an office where I'm having in-depth conversations with people about how they're protecting themselves or how they should be protecting themselves and what kinds of behaviour they are engaging in and what are the implications for that, what are the agencies that they might go to. In relation to that I know the social scene. We had benefits at the Lure

which no previous Visual AIDS director had ever done. They appointed a straight, mixed-race woman from England, and suddenly we're having benefits at the Lure. My community was horrified.

The Lure is a bathhouse?

Leather, uniform, rubber etc. No, it's not a bathhouse but it's a fetish, it's a leather club. They came to me and said 'do you want to do a benefit' and I thought 'well, why not? This is a community, they're gonna raise money for us, we need money, I'm not gonna turn down money' and so I said yes and didn't ask the board. Then I discovered that two previous directors had constantly said no and were worried about what the other [Art] community would say about that.

But this is a community that we need to educate as well.

Yeah, and we'll raise money and it'll go to our programs and it'll be fine. But then I invited friends from the art world who were a bit taken aback. So, if you're working in the AIDS world you have to know about everything that's going on and you have to be engaged at grassroots level. You hear things which break your heart, so then it can be very emotionally stressful and distressing when you're also working in the Art world that doesn't want to know. It's no different from anyone else in the AIDS sector, or people living with HIV and AIDS: the door is constantly closed. You're so outside of society and you're trying to shout through a double-glazed window and nobody can hear you. You've got something important to say and they don't want to hear you. It's very hard. That's a kind of stress that people living with HIV and AIDS have and also people working within that area have.

I've seen something that you've written which was published by Robert Atkins on the internet, in *Artery*. You were talking about how artists are regular people and they're distracted by the latest thing that's come along and by media and their attention gets focused somewhere else. At the start of the 1990s it might have been AIDS, then it's the space shuttle being destroyed, then it's Iraq.

Yeah. Until something happens in your realm it's an abstract thing. You don't want to wish that upon anyone. But I think for most of the non-HIV infected artists who have made work about AIDS, it's because of somebody they love. They've come into contact with HIV and AIDS through their personal relationships and then they've felt driven to make work, to try to educate people. I suppose it's like anything: white artists don't really make work about *inegalite* for people of colour because it's not their experience. They might make work about poverty or whatever it is that affects them, or being from suburbia. That's the power of art too: you make stuff from your personal experience.

It was a problem and Visual AIDS, when I was on the board, had a town hall meeting to actually say 'should we close? Are our artists doing well enough now? Are we even needed? There are other bigger, better AIDS agencies who can do this job, who can do AIDS education. Who should we be targeting with our education programs?' There was a point a few years ago when we were thinking that we should move from doing general AIDS

awareness work to doing only AIDS awareness work with this age group, in schools, because our figures show that this age group is most at risk. If we can do work with them at this age we might actually have an ability to effect change or do good or get through to somebody in time. That was a debate that we had. We also had a debate when Frank Moore was on the board, around the time of *Bodies of Resistance*. He felt that all we should do was try to educate western society about Africa and Asia. That we had to raise awareness about what was happening in the rest of the world and that we should be doing fundraisers now, to send money to do visual arts education programs in Africa and Asia. Then he died.

Is that where LIFESIGNS came from?

I don't know how that started.

It's Angie Eng and Simon Ransom.

I don't think she knew Frank Moore. She came to Visual AIDS, I think, to be an umbrella [organisation]. I think they started to find out about what was happening and just felt this despair. I think that is the hard thing. It's so horrifying, and it can really do your head in.

I can see why you came to a point where you needed to move out, to take a different job with Artists Space.

I think it's a real problem in this society, generally, and it's gotten worse with Bush.

We'll move away from the depressing topic of George Bush. I wasn't aware that Visual AIDS was working within schools and trying to do school based education.

I don't know if they are now. In the end I came off the board of Visual AIDS. I'm a huge supporter of Visual AIDS, but having been its executive director I'm not necessarily the best board member. I can support the directors, especially in terms of budgets and finance because that's one of my strengths, but it's very hard to have a previous executive director on the board. I can only talk about what we did when I was there. We did do a lot of work in schools and we had a peer education system where we trained the archive artists in how to do public speaking and then we would try to get them gigs in local schools. We actually had somebody then who was the assistant director and that was her background, so that was why we did that program – Rebecca Price. She came from Hetrick-Martin and had done peer to peer training. We would do talks in schools where we would get asked to send an artist to a school. Before we did any of this she actually sat down with a lot of the artists and talked to them about some of the legal and ethical issues about disclosure. [Brief interruption in the interview as Barbara handles a staff enquiry.]

So that was when the archive project was really getting off the ground because the archive project, when I started as the director, consisted of a filing cabinet. You opened one of the drawers and inside were about 60 boxes of slides, none of which were labelled. That was the archive project. So our first job was to go through all of those boxes of slides, which had been beautifully photographed, and then do detective work to find out which artists they

were by and then go back to that artist and label all of the slides and create what is now the archive. And in getting to know those artists, we found out which of them were interested in public speaking, which of them could do public speaking. We looked at the issues of going into public schools: the legal issues of going into public schools, what you could and couldn't say, and how you might show your artwork and actually do education. Not just 'oh, here's my story' but to use personal interaction to actually deliver a safe sex message that fell in line with school requirements. That was something that we were very keen on. The director that came after me didn't continue that program. My whole thing – in terms of educating – is that if you can educate one person, if one person in that class learned about transmission, really understood about transmission and learned about how to have safe sex, or learned about how to get information about it – we would give out the phone number - then it is a success. We weren't allowed to say certain things, so there were ways that we could get across to them where they could get this information if they really wanted to know because we're not gonna go there. It was really like guerrilla warfare when we went in. That's how we saw it. We would go into Catholic schools. It was interesting. Usually it was because a subversive teacher invited us.

Ferried you in the back door.

Well they managed to get you in through the art history program. It's always down to individuals, that's always been my experience. It's down to the headmistress or the headmaster or that teacher. It's always down to the individual in the school. So you would have a school where you'd go every year for December 1st, but then that teacher would leave that school and you couldn't go back again. The same with museums. We'd have certain museums which would program talks with us. The Folk Art Museum always does a program for World AIDS Day. Most of the education around school tends to be in that semester. We would also do talks with college age students. I would actually go and do slide talks at the local schools as well.

It must have been very time intensive, for you.

It was but it was also very fulfilling. You know why you're doing it. Sometimes here the staff have said to me 'it's really great when something goes wrong, when we mess up, you don't really get upset about it'. Something happened the other day and two of the staff came to me and said 'it was really good because we felt we'd really messed up but you didn't scream at us and you didn't make out that it was a really big deal'. And I actually said to them 'when you've worked in AIDS it's not a big deal. You have to get a grip. This is the art world. Nobody died or will die as a result of your action. So what if something is a little late. Big deal. What a shame. Can I turn the clock back and change it? No. Is anyone actually hurt as a result of what you did? No. Will we learn a lesson from it? Yes. So let's just move on from there'. I think that's because if you've worked in that world where someone doesn't get a grant from Visual AIDS then his electricity might get cut off, or he doesn't get his eye-glasses when the main thing that's left for him – his enjoyment in his life because he's house ridden – is making his art and he can't see anymore because he's got CMV retinitis and he really needs these really expensive eye-glasses...Those are the things that really matter. It gives you more perspective.

What did it mean, do you think, for the artists to be included in an organisation like Visual AIDS?

Big. It's really big. It's that whole thing, like you said before, about being excluded by society, about not having anyone that gives you any recognition, and here is an organisation that's saying 'let's make a record'. For some artists that first thing – where a photographer, a professional photographer, comes to my studio and takes 20 slides of my work and I don't have to pay for it... This organisation is saying that I am an artist and I'm valid and I'm valued and what I'm doing is important enough that they sent a photographer. That's a really big deal. Also, when you're struggling with everything else – can you keep your food down?, can you make five steps to the toilet?, there's all this other stuff that you're trying to deal with – I think there's something really important about being valued in some way for something that you're doing, that only you can do, nobody else is doing that for you.

I have incredible memories of exchanges with artists. Joyce Washington, for instance. She's Joyce MacDonald now. We got a call from – what were they called? – the Jewish Family Association or something in Brooklyn. They had this young woman and she was making these clay sculptures and she wanted to apply for our calendar, but she didn't have any means at all. Rebecca and I were like 'ok, we'll come there'. We took my camera and we went to Brooklyn and we met her and she showed us them. We took them and her and we went to Metro Tech in Brooklyn and we sort of illegally used the gardens to put these things in the foliage, looking around for security guards, and took photographs of these pieces because we couldn't actually get anyone else that day. We took the photographs so that she could have photographs for a competition that we were running. Then she won. She was one of the winners, the first calendar.

Were you judging the competition?

I don't think I was a judge. I was a moderator. Those competitions got a lot of flack because they were sponsored by pharmaceuticals. We got into so much trouble, but the board and I felt very strongly 'why not take their money? They're taking our money, they're taking your money, let's have some of it back'.

For the price of a little logo at the bottom of the poster.

It was a bit more than that the first year. We got into huge fights with them. We were so green, we had no idea. They did do awful things. They edited our mission statement, we had to fight with them. This little grass roots organisation, we learned the hard way about corporate sponsorship. We didn't have anyone helping us, we didn't have contracts, we didn't charge them enough money. Afterwards we learned that really we should have charged them way more money and they kind of ripped us off. The artists had all got paid, wonderfully, but we at Visual AIDS had not really asked them for enough money for our organisation. We were just so intent on the artists getting grants that that was really what they paid for the first year. So we learned and then we did a couple more but we lost friends in the AIDS world because people felt that we sold out. But then those artists would never

have had fabulous colour calendars and \$1000 each and we got to put on a show in the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago for a night, for a big party, and they flew a few of the artists out for it and we all stayed in this fabulous hotel. It was a way for these artists to get something.

It's really facilitating their self-esteem, isn't it, being included in this community and having their art recognised?

It is, but I think there is an underlying aspect of assisting art history, which sometimes makes mistakes when an artist isn't discovered until it's too late. For instance, Joe Brainard. It's horrible that he never saw his success, and it's only because people took photographs and documented the work and he had a diligent family and friends who kept check of where everything went and the estate went to the gallery Tibor de Nagy that he managed to gain his rightful place in art history. He didn't have that rightful place in art history when I joined Visual AIDS in 1997; it was like 'Joe who?' A very small handful of people knew who Joe Brainard was. It's the same if you look at what Visual AIDS and the estate of Robert Blanchard are doing with cataloguing his work. That's where I think Visual AIDS [assists]; at some point hopefully down the road, there is this archive of these images that are available for people to use and see. The web project is really fantastic. They get these curators and writers and people in the art world: every month someone new comes and creates a show, which means they have to go through all those slides. So again it's getting the work out in a different way. There's kind of, hopefully, another aspect to it.

It used to bother me: are we just catering to 300 people and is that enough, is that okay? Are we managing to dent the art world or society in their perceptions? I mean, on the one hand, I think if we can change one person that is enough but at the same time that's like swimming against the tide. Is it then just okay to make sure that this group of 300 people are looked after? Is that okay? I could never quite answer that. Sometimes I felt that was a little too indulgent in some way. But the good thing about Visual AIDS is we were asking the question.

I imagine that in that town hall meeting those would have been two very strong perspectives held.

The artists were, like, 'you can't close'. That was what came out of the town hall meeting. I think you've seen the notes and you know it was like 'how could you close, what will we do without you?'

I've seen an article written about the town hall meeting, but I believe there are minutes?

I'm pretty certain that Nelson took notes.

I'm popping back in there on Wednesday so I might have to ask them about that. It would be good to see who held what opinions.

It was quite well attended. There were other ideas too. One idea we had was that we would have a national road show in which we would arrange for the executive director to go on literally a national tour of America. In every town that we went to, we would get the local non-profit art gallery – because there are non-profit art galleries all over America – to send out in their mailing ahead of time that the executive director was coming, was going to give a talk on the archive project, and was also going to talk about how local artists could set up a similar project to help local artists with HIV and AIDS in their area. Then there would be, like, chapters and they would all send their slides and there would be this massive, truly national archive. Because there are hubs where artists have banded together, I don't know if you know, like Boston...

San Francisco I think.

More than San Francisco, I think, Colorado too. There's a whole bunch in Colorado. Word just gets out amongst a group of artists and they arrange something and then they get in dialogue with the office, from one geographic area. That was also an idea at one point: spread the word nationally and make sure that HIV-positive artists across America are really well covered. But that didn't take off. It's this teeny, tiny little organisation.

Well, I've seen the office. It's really one or two people. Given the profile that Visual AIDS has, its web presence – its web site is really terrific; I imagine that it is the first point of call for people like me, we know about it and go straight there. It's remarkable what it has achieved and the promise that it has.

I know. It used to make me laugh, people used to call up and they thought that we were this big headquarters, and there'd be me and Rebecca.

I felt really guilty because I'd sent off these emails to them and I got these replies within 24 hours and 'yes, what else can we do for you? We'll contact these people' and I got there and went 'I can't believe you did this for me'. Even now I'm getting some slides duplicated, and they said 'we'll do it' and I said 'no, listen I'll pull them out and I'll scan them for you, you've got other things to do'.

They're very dedicated, but there's high burnout. That's what I worry about with the staff. So you have to pass the torch.

I've got two other questions for you, I know we're coming close to time. I was wondering about ACT UP's influence, and particularly Grand Fury's influence.

I forgot to tell you about that. Grand Fury was massive. I saw the Grand Fury kissing bus when I came to New York, I think in 1993, '94? I was so amazed by Grand Fury. They were really a strong influence, I think, in the late '80s early '90s.

Do you think they've had a legacy, aesthetically, in terms of the contemporary art world?

More than just the contemporary art world. Design – we did a whole discussion one year at the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum, which is part of the Smithsonian, on World AIDS Day about the impact of AIDS activists on design. We looked at a lot of the early ACT UP material, y'know Silence = Death, the Triangle, a lot of the activist propaganda, literature, y'know the Bloody Red Hand, 'You've Got Blood on Your Hands', the use of image texts that AIDS activists were using in such a sophisticated way. I feel that if you look at advertising today you can trace, quite often, the influence of ACT UP. I think that's because, in that period, the community in New York that was hit the hardest was the arts community, so the community that rallied and became activists were artists, set designers, people who worked in the theatre, actors, so a lot of the ways they knew how to lobby was performative, visual. Look at all of the things that came out at that time, Silence = Death, the Triangle, the ribbon, taking over the suffragette thing of chaining yourself to railings. Even some of those ACT UP things where they mocked-up fake ID cards so that they could get into – was it Merck...which pharmaceutical was it? They made fake ID cards because there wasn't computer scanning...

They got into the Republican convention, I believe, at some point as well.

They got into one of the pharmaceuticals and then they hung a banner out of the window and photographed it. They did such incredible things and that was because a lot of the people in ACT UP were designers, so they knew how to do cut and paste and make things and laminate things. I think that their impact is massive. I really do. I see adverts now in magazines and I can trace the advert to the art world work that it came from. So Gillian Wearing and her sign piece, where she asked people to write down what they were thinking...what exactly did she ask them to write down? Her piece was early '90s, I think? They were like seminal pieces of people standing in the street holding...

I think I've seen some postcards of them.

There have been loads of adverts based on that. Levis did a series. I keep seeing different adverts. There are loads of adverts that have the Barbara Kruger – you think it's a Barbara Kruger piece – y'know, text in red and black or grey blocks. It's just become a part of advertising now. There's recent fashion advertising of young women with flowers, really tropical flowers that look like they're invading them, and those photographs didn't exist before the work of this young woman called Naomi Fisher who did this whole series about herself in Florida with all these tropical plants where it looks like she's being raped or molested or that she's engaging with nature in a quite horrific way. Pretty soon after her work became well known you started to get these Jill Sander ads. It just kind of trickles down. The people who are doing these designs for Ogilvie and Mather and Saatchi, where did they go for their inspiration? They're going around the galleries. I do think that it's another one of those things. When you're switched onto it you do see it, but it just goes unsaid.

Is there anything else you'd like to add which you feel is relevant, a question that I've asked already and there's something you'd like to add?

I don't think so.

Would it be alright for me to email you with a follow-up question if I need to?

Sure. I'll do what I can.

Thanks so much for your time.

[End of Interview]

If citing this interview please use the following:

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