Steed Taylor interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

New York City, USA, 7 May 2004

This is a slightly edited transcript of a recorded interview. The text has been edited to correct some grammatical errors (which are inevitable features of spoken conversation), but only where this was necessary to aid comprehension. Sections of the interview that were unrelated to the discussion of AIDS, art or Steed's background have been omitted. These sections are denoted by [snip]. In reviewing the final transcript, Steed generously provided some additional comments which were not originally recorded.

Paul Sendziuk: Steed, can you tell me about where you grew up? Where did you go to school? How did you become an artist?

Steed Taylor: That's a big question. I'm from down south, on the North and South Carolina border, about an hour from the coast. My father was in the airborne special forces of the army, kind of a Commando. We moved around a lot but would go live there when he was on tours of duty in Vietnam. I was always exposed to death, or, if not death, then [the idea of] mortality, the possibility of life being ended really quickly, and all the change that would bring about. A lot of people that I knew – their fathers would come back handicapped or killed or that kind of thing.

My undergraduate degree was at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, which is a big, nice school.

What did you study?

My undergraduate [degree] was in Studio Art and Creative Writing, mainly prose writing. Specifically, my studio work was intaglio etching, a very old and traditional form of printmaking. It was a really traditional education as well. You had to focus really quickly in an exact discipline – you couldn't get out of it. So I did more acid baths and plate etching than I ever want to do again in my life. [Paul laughs]

Then I went to Graduate School and got an MBA, Masters in Business, Marketing and Finance, because I was concerned I would be starve as an artist.

That was in North Carolina as well?

No, that is in Washington, D.C., at American University. They have a really great international business program where they can set up internships with, like, mahogany farmers in Thailand, that sort of stuff.

I did the art back and forth: the art and the corporate stuff, art and corporate stuff [i.e. between working in business]. The corporate jobs I had were with multi-national entertainment companies. I retired from my last corporate job with disability from having

AIDS. Since then I've had the time to concentrate on just the art work, because before then I had always gone back and forth.

Why did I become an artist? I think it was because of a drive to make things…the idea of constructing reality…making and producing things. A lot of my work has been public art, or work that has been put in the public realm. A lot of that is about putting work where people are. I like that idea. One thing I have always been ambivalent about is the commercial aspect of the art world, making art a precious and expensive commodity. The reverse is putting work where people happen to be. So I love the idea of art in a subway station or on the road, or that sort of thing.

It is the great communist idea. When the Russians built their subway stations in Moscow they turned them into palaces, because that is where most people would go during their day. I don't know if you have ever seen them? They're made out of crystal, the best marble, the best stone. They got the very best artists to make mosaics on the ceilings, of scenes embodying communist ideals. They were termed 'palaces for the people' as opposed to the Tsar's palace, which was just for a very few. They are gorgeous.

Can I ask when you were diagnosed as HIV-positive, and when you received your AIDS diagnosis?

Sure. I was really young: I was 22 or 23, so it would have been 1982 or 1983. For most of my adult life I have been HIV positive. I've had an AIDS diagnosis since very early on because my T-cell count has always been very low. This was really before they knew that much about AIDS and the immune system. It was considered a death sentence. The doctor told me I was going to die in two years and that I needed to set up everything, my finances and my estate, that sort of thing. I was living in Washington at the time; but, I held on to rumors that people were living for four years in New York. So I asked my doctor and he said, 'Nobody lives for four years; you die in two years'. I felt, like, maybe they don't know. Maybe it is true that people live for four years. So I held on to the idea that maybe I could live for four years.

Part of my dealing with being HIV positive was backing away from conventional medical treatment. In Washington D.C., the National Institutes of Health, the Federal Government's think-tank medical facility, were treating patients there. They were just butchering people. The experimental drugs had horrible side effects. It was grizzly, just to see if some kind of drug worked. One early drug caused permanently deafness, another changed-skin pigment to grey-blue. They didn't know what they were doing. People were suffering and dying. I mean, early on they just didn't know if you sneezed on someone, would they get it. It was a really harrowing time.

[snip]

What is your first consciousness of AIDS-related art, and did it have any impact on you?

Once I became aware that I was HIV positive, I didn't want to put AIDS into my art. I was trying to avoid it but it was still in; like, I would paint a self-portrait and I would be crying in it. So clearly it was getting into my art, but I was consciously trying to keep it out.

All through the 1980s I was only slightly aware of AIDS art. It didn't really filter down anywhere outside San Francisco and New York. I had very little contact with that in [Washington] D.C. Anywhere more provincial [than New York or San Francisco], it just didn't play well or it wasn't really discussed. There were other issues in art at the time that were more salient.

I was aware of the Gran Fury folks. Some of their bus posters filtered down. A lot of the Gran Fury stuff I didn't think of as fine art per se, but more as advertisements. Propaganda in the form of advertisements, which I really liked. There was something really satisfying about that.

The people that formed that group were graphic designers, so that makes sense.

Do you think that the aesthetic that came out of ACT UP, Gran Fury – the agit-prop posters…do you think that aesthetic infiltrated art more widely, or influenced people who were making art about AIDS in terms of making their images more explicit or their political themes more strident?

No. I think that is just more of a general change. Art is becoming more graphic – you can especially see this with younger artists. They are really savvy graphically. They are so exposed to advertising and [stylized] graphic content, whether it is pornography, sexualized advertisements etc. So I think it is just part of a wave. You can see it in feminist art of the same period. Feminist art was also becoming much more graphic…protest art from the 1960s and 70s – it was already out there, the idea of art as propaganda. I think [Gran Fury] were one of the first groups to produce it in a super slick way by presenting it as a true advertisement, like a bus poster. But if I remember right, that was already occurring with Guerrilla Girls whose work was also being presented that way. But Gran Fury would copy, like, a Benetton ad, exploiting what was already there and that is how they were unique (but, I think, that was already going on).

There was obviously a move away from abstraction as well, at the start of the 1980s, to an aesthetic that was much more literal and figurative. I originally felt that was a response to AIDS and the urgency of having to represent real bodies in crisis in order to communicate explicit information. But the more I think about it, I can see that it was part of a more general move within contemporary art.

I think so, yeah.

Let's have a talk about some of your works that deal specifically with HIV. I don't know if I'll get the chronology right, so feel free to fill in the gaps. I have some photographs of your work that we can look through. I'm not sure if this piece is

related to HIV or not. We're looking at the cut-up photographic images of male bodies that look to be painted over, which date from 1996. [See image overleaf]

These are actually prints. They are dye-transfer prints. I was looking at the idea of how you can distort the human body. I'm sure it was partially informed by people being [physically] distorted by disease. I was exploring how to use images of somebody to make them look totally different…to make their arms really long, or to make them look really thin.

Are you using computers or cut-and-pasting photographs?

They are made by photographing people, playing with the photographs and then making prints from what I have assembled.

Steed Taylor, *Untitled*, dye-transfer print, 30" x 20", 1998.

The 'Gay Icon' series, with the large billboard-type paintings of k.d. lang and others, popping over the fence etc. [see image overleaf]. Tell me about those. You seem to be speaking about gay visibility and saying 'these people were accepted by mainstream society before they identified as gay, now they have come out: deal with it!'

Well, yes. I was doing these in 1996, 1997 – something like that. There weren't as many openly gay and lesbian public figures at that point who were willing to say that they were gay in a public forum. I was looking at the idea of honoring these people. My goal was to do gigantic cut-outs of these people from the nose up looking down, placed on the top of buildings in the gay neighborhoods of New York City. I've forgotten how many, perhaps there was ten of them. It was snowing when I started the project and they were installed in the summer. I had Greg Louganis over the Chelsea gym, the first gay gym in the city. k.d. lang on the building my studio was in; Ru Paul over at the gay and lesbian community centre. Martina Navratilova was over at BOSS models, which is a big modeling agency. It

was a fun project. I really liked the idea, and putting the work out there in the public forum. It is a thing where you would either see it or you didn't. Some people would notice it, some people wouldn't notice it. Some people would notice and obsess about it; they would just love it, you know? Like: 'Oh my God, Greg Louganis. Why is he at the Chelsea gym? Did he buy the Chelsea gym? Oh my God, is he coming here today?!' [Paul laughs] That was kind of fun. I am now also thinking about my enthusiasm in doing that project. It was basically all out of pocket. Me, negotiating to get it to happen.

I was going to ask: a) how did you finance it, and b) how did you get permission to mount the billboards?

I went to building owners and businesses and talked to them. I originally wanted them all on Christopher Street, which is the original heart of gay New York, home of the Stonewall Inn where gay and lesbians first started fighting back etc….I went down Christopher Street. Most of the buildings there are two or three stories, which was really ideal for seeing these; higher up they become to difficult to see at street level. I had to expand the display area because I could not get enough buildings on Christopher Street. They were about 10 feet by10 feet and came apart into 2 or 3 pieces. I had to make them in the hall of my studio building because I could not fit them into my studio! I was working on the idea that the figure would be looking over the edge of the building at the people on the street, sort of like a guiding force or somebody who was a public figure who had already come out looking out over you in a protective way [saying] 'you can do it too'.

Steed Taylor, *k.d.lang* from the Gay Icon series, installation in Chelsea, New York City, c.1996.

I think it works better that it is scattered around the city rather than being concentrated in just one street. You could issue people with 'passports' that they would tick off as they found the different images. How long did they last for?

Right. We made a map as part of the project. They were up for six weeks, I think.

It reminds me a little of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres billboard of the empty bed. Do you remember that?

Yeah, I loved those.

A lot of people that I have spoken to have said that, in terms of AIDS-related art, they were the most moving embodiments of loss. And they were examples of public art, rather than art in the gallery.

Let's look at the 'Bodies of Resistance' exhibition that toured the United States and was shown in South Africa. You made the *Birthday Knot*, one of your road tattoos. Can you tell me about that?

Sure. I started the road tattoos when I was in Maine for a residency. It was an honorary kind of thing to be there with this group of talented artists but it was a total cat fight…you know: 'I'm going to climb over your body to get to the art curator who is showing up this afternoon' – that sort of thing. So I was feeling kind of trapped. I was thinking about the idea of personal, emotional significance placed in a public space, something that has always fascinated me and was one of the ideas I was kicking around with the Gay Icon series. Driving around in Maine I noticed a lot of plastic flower piles by the side of the road to mark accidents, a very personal expression in the public space beside the road. At the same time I began to think about how roads are the skin of a community. They travel on the surface of a place connecting everyone together yet people have a very personal relationship with them as in 'my street' or 'our road.' I thought it would be interesting to use roads for this personal/private idea like how the side of the road was being used with roadside memorials. Thinking of roads as a form of skin made me think of tattoos and how tattoos can be use to commemorate something. I decided to use cultural patterns appropriated by tattoo culture for this project, in the hope that by re-using these familiar tattoo patterns they would emphasize the commemorative aspect of what I was doing.

The first time I did the road tattoo, it was to mark the road to get to me at this residency. I drew the design out, and to make it personal and specific I cut myself and bled into the design. Then, I painted over it to seal my blood into the piece.

There is a silver-lining to this story. When I was doing the first one, people were coming by and saying nice things, bringing me a can of Coke and that sort of stuff. But what I didn't know was that there were also people passing by on the highway who called the police. The police eventually came and said they had gotten a call about a Nazi skinhead painting

swastikas on the road. [Paul laughs] Then some reporters heard that the police had been called and they came and did a story about it.

And this was in Maine?

Yes.

Can you remember what year this was?

It was in 1997, I think. Summer of '97. *Birthday Knot* came later, in late 1999. They were going to have a show in Hartford, at Real Art Ways, and I wanted to do a road tattoo. I was thinking about what I was going to tie it to. There are all kinds of historical things in Hartford, but I wanted to do something simpler. It was around my 40th birthday, so I got the names of the first 40 kids born in Hartford Connecticut on my 40th birthday. *Birthday Knot* was 30 feet by 165 feet, about 9 meters by 50 meters. They are designed to be viewed from a moving vehicle, so they have to be long enough for the driver to register that there is something on the road and experience it, which means they need to be pretty big to allow that amount of time to happen.

Do you stretch the design because the traffic is moving quickly?

Do I distort it visually? No, I don't. I want them to visually work for foot traffic also.

Once the design is outlined, I paint the names – in this case, the names of the children – inside the design. A prayer is said, and the outline is colored in using black, high-gloss, latex paint, which seals the names into the design making them no longer visible.

Hartford has a grand past as a proper, well-to-do, white, New England city but has fallen on difficult times and now has a much more diverse population. The cool thing about *Birthday Knot* was the variety of kids' names. There are a lot of African-American communities where they either use or mimic African names, going back to a much older history, so there were names like Tequan and Kenyatta. Some were more typically popular American names like Jason and Brittany; also, we had Hispanic names like Luis and Graciela. The variety of kids' names was so sweet, so touching. The fun thing about doing that piece was also all the community involvement. Because it was using little kids' names, there were people who came with their little children to help with it. It was really sweet.

As these people turn up to help, are they aware that it has something to do with HIV or AIDS?

Yes, because there is a prayer. The prayer for *Birthday Knot* was written by Reverend Barbara Mase and in the prayer she specifically talked about death and birth and beginnings and endings. I think people were aware that the idea behind mentioning that in the prayer was my own sense of mortality and AIDS diagnosis. I talk about it a lot that day also.

Birthday Knot was informed by AIDS, but I wouldn't say it was as specifically about AIDS as, say, other pieces that I have done. I just did one, last month, in Columbus Ohio, *Survivor's Knot*. It specifically commemorates long-term AIDS survivors in the Columbus area.

Your tattoos remind me of the 'Lifesigns' project which is run in Ethiopia. Local artists design public murals based on an AIDS awareness theme, and they recruit local townspeople - especially kids - to paint them. As they are painting the mural, the artists ask: 'do you know what this is actually about?' and they begin to talk about HIV. So it is a way to educate the population. The resulting mural becomes a lasting visual reminder about HIV or condoms and whatever they talked about. I wonder whether a similar exchange might be taking place as local people help you paint your tattoos? You might not be aware of it, but they might be taking about AIDS amongst themselves.

I think they could be. If anything, it puts the topic out there in a public way and makes it all right to talk about it openly.

One thing about making the road tattoos is that the road is blocked, which means that the municipality has supported the project enough to block the road. But I can usually only get it blocked for 24 hours, or a short amount of time. Once the road is blocked, we are there, cranking away, to get the whole thing done as fast as we can. The drawback to that is that I don't really have time to do anything but just work, work, work, work, work. Knowing that there is going to be a Reverend showing up at 2 o'clock to do a prayer puts pressure on me to get the piece completed to the level that the prayer can be done. After that happens, we have to get everything absolutely finished so that the paint is dry, the chalk used to draw the design has been washed off the road, so the road can be reopened to traffic. Time is really, really harsh. Usually the municipality is paying to have the road blocked, so they don't want to have to pay for another day; and the police are waiting to make sure it is all going like clockwork. So, unfortunately I don't have time to interact much with the volunteers. Sometimes, if I do a really big one and get a lot of volunteers showing up, I'll actually hire someone to deal with that aspect, especially if there are a lot of children involved. The children need to be contained in their involvement, so we can get the work done.

So what role does the Reverend and the prayer play?

It emphasizes the commemorative nature of a road tattoo and helps to give that part of the road tattoo the importance it deserves. The prayers are often very generous and wonderful statements about what I am trying to doing by making the piece. When I have to list the materials used to make a road tattoo, I always mention a prayer. I want the commemorate part of this work to have every chance to be noticed because once these pieces are completed only the road tattoo is visible. Also, the road tattoo is made for the community where it is located so a copy of the prayer is a part of the piece I get to take with me. I think of it as a part of the essence of what I made and it's a great thing to re-read

from time to time. The road tattoos are temporary. They wear away in a couple of years at the longest, so oddly the prayer is one part that lasts.

So they'll stay on the road for a couple of years?

They do, but it depends on when they go down. I did one in Florida last year, and it was a hot and sunny day. It is probably going to last forever, or easily ten years, because of the perfect conditions. By the time the paint went on the road, it dried. It totally adhered really, really well. But the one I just did in Columbus, it rained four days before [we started], it snowed the next day after we did it. I hope it is still there now! [Paul laughs]

Steed Taylor, *Survivor's Knot* [work in progress], black high-gloss latex paint, names of long-term HIV/AIDS survivors in the Columbus Ohio area, and a prayer, 24' x 162', 2004.

Well, I'm amazed. I saw them as very temporary works. That's great.

Also there is the traffic and the salt and the road wear, stuff like that. The winters are pretty hard on them.

Back to the question, then: why specifically a minister and a prayer to go with it? I'm asking because I know that you're now doing a mail art piece, where you mail out a prayer by a preacher…so there is something going on there. Why are you so keen to incorporate this spiritual element in your work?

Well…let's see. When I mentioned earlier I had pulled away from conventional medicine when I was first diagnosed as HIV positive, I turned to other things to understand what had happened, and was going to happen to me. You could say I went on a spiritual quest of sorts. It helped me to see my situation and myself as part of a bigger picture. It also helped me to accept the hand I had been dealt without becoming angry – and sorry for myself. I was really young. I was at the time in life when you think you can take over the world. You think you

are invincible; but I was being told that's it for you, game over, you're out of here. It was a desperate time. People were dropping dead left and right, no one really knew what to do, other than to help people die with dignity. It was a time of nervous desperation and sorrow. The religious ideas and dogma I knew seemed pretty lacking. I was able to find ideas and teachings that discussed illness and spirituality without religious framework and I think it saved my life. Maybe not as in time, but as in quality of life, I learned to love myself, my body and the life I had. It enabled me to feel alive however long I would live. At that time, I developed an appreciation of prayer: how it could be really simple, the intention of speaking your heart, the act of verbalizing fear and hopes or asking for help, acknowledging good things and being thankful, and just the focus of it. It's one of those things that resonate with people. They understand what it is and appreciate it, as long as the religious crap is cut out of it! It seemed like it would be a natural fit with the road tattoos.

I've been approached by galleries and art dealer characters with, like, 'Oh, can you paint one of those in my driveway'. And I say, 'I can, but why?' I really want the road tattoos to work in a couple of different ways; I want them to be seductively beautiful and decorative in the sense that it is something unusual in a public space, but they are actually about something else. The prayer helps keep it from coming down to, 'Oh, he is painting pretty things on the road'.

So it makes the commemorative aspect more literal or more specific.

Yeah, which is good for me because if you are not there for that part of it [writing the names or saying the prayer], then you don't really know about it. It allows that to exist a little bit longer.

Let's turn then to the 'Missing' series of photographs, which I found just *heartbreaking*. I found them really moving – and that was just seeing the images on a computer screen.

That was my first solo show. People wanted me to be really aggressive about the AIDS content – so I thought I'll just go for it. That was half of the show. Basically it was photos from my birth announcement until about a week before the show. I marked myself out in all the photographs. And I asked people what they would miss if I died. So there were also these quotes mixed in with the images, like my grandmother saying, 'Stop asking me a question this foolish; now come inside, its time to eat', different comments like that, 'You're my only little brother', comments like that. They were really sweet.

All of the photographs are small and they were all within a chest-high view range, going along the wall of the gallery. What I didn't count on is the response that was over-the-top; people were crying, they were upset, and running out of the gallery to cry on the street. I thought, 'Oh my God, what did I do?' But I realized that it was a golden thing to get a response like that.

Then it was about boiling it [the larger series of photographs and quotes] to make it work, figuring out what I could reduce to make it work more effectively. [Looking at an image] I

think you have one of the early ones there, where I put one of the quotes around the images, and used a checkered table-cloth kinda effect… [snip]

The final results with those were translucent prints – black & white and slightly color-tinted. And I've also done some of those that are really big, so they have an epic feel to them. Six by eight feet.

So they would be life-size?

Yeah. What I was after was for the figure to become life-size, which kinda forces you to confront it.

Steed Taylor, *Me and Sudie*, digital print and black marker, 20" x 16", 1997.

Why did you color-tint the prints? Was that an aesthetic concern, or to get away from the mortuary starkness of black and white?

I think that is it. It [the theme] is kinda aggressive, so slightly tinting them makes them a little more palatable for people…[snip]…The final 28 photos [in the series] that I work with are the most romantic and bucolic of the series; you know, me in front of my birthday cake, me when I'm really little…they are the most romantic images but I am marked out. So tinting the images means that you [the viewer] are not quite so knocked out.

If you were exhibiting the series now, how many images would compose the series?

There are a little over thirty but I'm still adding to the series. I did a new one last year, a beach scene of me and my brothers and sister coming out of the waves when we were little kids. Because I usually show the largest versions of these works, I don't show more than 10 to 15 at a time.

Is the series arranged so that the viewer encounters a particular set of images at the end?

No, no. People are drawn to particular images in really specific ways. It is also a baby-boomer thing. The images are from the time of their childhood as well. They see themselves in it by noticing things, like the car in the background; 'Oh, we had a car like that', or the dress my sister is wearing, 'I had a dress just like that'. I get that kind of comment a lot. [*Postscript comment by Steed*: A few years ago, four of these images were borrowed for a display window in a New York department store for an AIDS awareness campaign but when I saw the windows they were also being used to sell retro-style shoes like the ones in the images!]

Does the fact that they can put themselves in the picture also force them to identify with you, as an HIV positive man, or being gay?

Well, maybe. But I would say that more generally it brings up issues of mortality. I don't know if it is specifically AIDS, but it brings up their own ideas about mortality.

What other feedback about this work have you received, apart from people breaking down and running out of the show?

Often people want to talk to me. It can take a positive form, where people want to meet me and talk to me because they have had some personal contact with AIDS, such as having a son who died from AIDS. But I also get these kinda weird responses [where someone says]: 'You shouldn't see it that way; you need to see it this way so that you'll remain alive' or even 'Here is [the number of] a doctor; you should talk to him, he can help you', or 'Have you tried drinking collated-silver water', or 'I can heal you', that kind of thing.

I showed this work once in Chicago, at a university, and somebody who worked at the university, an employee, saw the show and she got really, really angry about it. When I was there for the opening, they set it up so that she could talk to me about it. What could I say to someone like her: 'It's just art work; calm down'!

What were her comments?

When it came down to it, she was a mother of young children, and it hit home a little too strongly that she could lose her kids. And the concern that maybe I wasn't honoring my own life.

Have people ever written to you about it in letters? Did you have a Visitors' Comments book?

Yeah, Visitors' Comments books that were harsh and said 'this is horrible' and 'this makes no sense at all', that kind of thing.

Well, that is standard Visitors' Comments Book fare isn't it?! You would expect a bit of that kind of thing.

Yeah. 'Yuk!' [Mutual laughter] and then they put their phone number and address!

What else have they written?

They're usually kinda good, like 'brave' or 'it's good'. Sometimes people don't get that they are all me, they sometimes think that I have randomly marked out children in photographs; so they're thinking that I have a vendetta of some kind against people that I hated as kids and that I've found their pictures and marked them out.

So they probably don't read the description of the works at the start of the exhibition. What do you think about that? Do you believe that you need art in context, or are you happy for people to float free-form through a show?

I have found, in my own work, that when there is text on pictures, people rarely read the text. Of the people who see the show, less than 50% will read the text. They might start to but they never actually read the words. The words are perhaps too literal, way too specific when there are visual things too. The words are literal and exact, whereas the picture evokes a feeling. People will go towards the feeling because it is easier. Somehow it seems that the image always wins out over the text. As for the write up [the artist's statement at the start of the show], I find that very few people will read it, unless there is something compelling about the work and they go back [to read it].

That tends to be what I do.

Yeah. I would love for the road tattoos to work in a similar way: for people to see it on the road, find something seductive about it, and want to look into it further, and then realize that it is a commemorative piece, that it is for a really specific thing. Maybe for this work too [i.e. the 'Missing' photographs], people find it seductive and want to know what it is.

When you took the photographs back to your family and friends, and you asked them that question – what will you miss when I'm gone – how did they respond? Did it make your illness hit home?

Yeah, it hit home, but keep in mind that they aren't cold at this; they know me so it's like another weird art thing that I'm doing. 'Oh God, here he comes again. He's going to ask us what would we miss when he's gone!' But they were great. I come from the nicest people. They're used to me.

Once I gave a slide lecture about my work in a place near where my parents live, so they came to it. They were at the back of the auditorium and it was announced that the artist's parents were attending. So when it ended and I invited questions, nobody wanted to ask me anything, they all wanted to talk to my parents! [Mutual laughter] My parents were really great about it. They summed it up by saying really sweetly that they felt it was an honor that I still included them in my art practice, and that my experience of my family still surfaces in the content of my art. That was really cool.

Were you able to get copies of those Visitors' Comments Books, or would they still be held by the galleries that showed your work? Or do you still have any letters that include people's responses to any of the works that we have discussed?

I might, but before I moved here I had a studio and a place and when [I moved] I put everything together and I got rid of a lot of stuff. But I might have some of those. Do you want me to hunt them down or something?

That would be really helpful, because it is really difficult to find tangible evidence of the effects that art works have on different people, and whether art about AIDS might actually make people feel and think differently about the epidemic and people with AIDS. Historians love this kind of documentary evidence that might back up the claims that we make.

Do you want to take a break for a little while? I've got a few more questions to ask, but a break might be a good idea.

Sure.

[The interview is suspended for a period.]

During the break we were talking about the road tattoo that you did in the Bronx. For the purposes of the tape, can you tell me again how that came about, what it is called, and the story behind it?

It's called *Carnal Bend*. It came about because there is a curator that I have known for a long time and he was interested in me doing a road tattoo. He was doing a show called 'On the DL…the Downlow'. It was a show about African-American culture and urban culture, and about how minority men don't necessarily identify with gay culture. It is also that cross-over of how some straight guys will sample or participate somewhat in gay sex or aspects of gay sexuality or homosexual activity – I'll put it that way, because they see gay as, like, Chelsea, white, mainstream concept that they don't really…they don't identify as that. For the show, I thought I would do a piece about that. Not too far from where the show was going to be in the Bronx is an area that is notorious for HIV transmission – it is one of the red zones in the city – notorious for illicit sexual activity, and that is why it is a red zone for HIV transmission. It is under a big overpass, down near the Bronx terminal market, which is where they process food and vegetables for the city. At night in this area, which is a total dead sort of wasteland, a lot of straight guys go to have sex with gay guys.

It is also where the lowest end of prostitution happens, women on crack or transsexual prostitutes, or that kind of thing is going on. So I decided to do a piece down there. I found a great location on a sloping hill right next to the Bronx County Jail, in the shadow of the Yankees Stadium. We couldn't get the road approved to be blocked, so I decided the best way to do it would be during the day, starting early, when that area is a bustle of activity: people processing the trucks delivering fruit and that sort of thing. So we started working really early, working away. But then by about 3 o'clock, all of the businesses shut down and everyone leaves and it is like a ghost town, it is really empty. But we were still working away and we realized, 'Oh fuck, we've got to get outta here soon', because we started to notice, like, a fire burning in the distance, crazy people wandering out of the woodwork carrying big clubs and stuff. It was, like, 'Ooh, we need to leave' [Paul laughs]. So we wrapped it up and left.

The design itself: it is two identical curves but reversed that come together but don't quite touch. I named the piece *Carnal Bend* with the idea of how some people are trapped in the desire for illicit activity but yet there is another part of themselves – they're married, or a father, or an upstanding member of the community – yet they're trapped in this idea of less appropriate sexual activity. The cost of that is that there is a higher rate of HIV transmission being noticed in women who are the wives and girlfriends of these guys; the guys are exposing themselves to being HIV positive and then their wives and girlfriends are becoming HIV positive from them, which is sad.

Steed Taylor, *Carnal Bend* (looking towards Yankee Stadium), black high-gloss latex paint on asphalt road, names and a prayer, 20' x 165', 2003.

So it is because they don't identify as gay that they think that 'AIDS isn't a problem for me – that is something that happens to guys that have sex with men all the time, who are in the bars…that it is not going to happen to me if I only do this one Wednesday a month'?

Right, exactly.

Okay. I've got a few more questions that take us away from your work. I want you to make some comments about other people's art, and to think of yourself as a consumer of AIDS-related artwork.

I went to see a play last night at the Public Theater called *The Normal Heart*, written by Larry Kramer. It was 20 years almost to the day that it was first performed here in New York. I have never been in a space where there was such an outpouring of grief, apart from watching *Schindler's List* at the cinema. There were people crying. The fellow next to me broke down two-thirds of the way though and I had to give him a rub on the back just to get him to the end of the play; it was really traumatic for him. It was amazing to see that a play written 20 years ago still had such an emotional resonance. And obviously it really would have spoken to people back in 1985. It is a very political play, but it is also a play about loss and grief. I'm wondering about your experience of viewing similar kinds of works, be it theatre or cinema or fine art works? Has seeing films or plays or viewing visual art works about the epidemic brought you to a different consciousness about AIDS or your own personal identity, or the community that you're living in?

Wow. [A very long pause.] Well, first of all, I think there is a big difference between different forms of art or creative output in how they can effect a change in consciousness. The way that American culture, and maybe culture in general, works is that we prefer to have our lives analyzed through sustained narrative: mainly movies, TV, but you could also include plays and that kind of thing – what you saw with *The Normal Heart*. Ultimately very few people are going to see that play. In a broader sense, *Will & Grace*, which is a sitcom on TV here in the US, which is a classic cheesy, half an hour of TV – great laughs, but they wedge in there some good comments about gay life and what it's like, and what the foibles and uniqueness of what that is. That is more how our culture wants to look at itself. They are comfortable using that as a tool to be analyzed and examined.

The drawback with fine art is that you're talking about a really small group of people that are going to see it and be open to it, be interested in it. But what you also get with that, which is kinda great, is quality contact – you're getting people that are the taste makers [i.e. the trend and agenda setters], that are the people that will then parlay that insight into the bigger realm. A drawback with a TV show is that it has got to be made so that the 5.6 million people watching the show all 'get' it, so it needs to be – if not dumbed down – then made generic enough that everybody gets the idea about what is being brought up. With fine art, you don't have that problem; it can be hyper-concentrated and specific because you are only talking to a small group of people who are usually fully initiated in looking at

fine art and are aware of what that is. The drawback is that you are dealing with a really small group of people.

I really don't think that art can save the world or do that kind of thing. I think that is a foolish way to look at it. It is more a drop in the bucket, and the goal is that the bucket is going to flood over eventually. It is all about consistently putting a drop in the bucket. I am mature enough to realize that the work that I do is not going to save lives, it is not going to change the world, it is not gonna…but it is going to put that drop in the bucket, it is going to make somebody stop and think, and that might lead to self-awareness which might lead to cultural awareness. I think that is a healthier way for me to look at it, because sometimes when you feel that there is too much potential in the work it negates the real potential in it.

It is interesting that you mention fine art shows having a limited audience because an AIDS art show in Australia – which was held in our national capital and was accessed by our top politicians – attracted an audience of over 130,000 people. It was the National Gallery's most successful show in its history. So that is interesting. Although it was a group show, and not a sustained body of work by a single artist, that is impressive.

And maybe a single work of art can have more of an impact than we realize. Take the film *Philadelphia* that was released in 1993. I read in interview in which the film-maker, Jonathan Demme, talked about a private screening of the film that he gave at the White House, for Bill Clinton, before the mass launch of the film. So what kind of impact did that have? The film might not have been the summer's biggest blockbuster, but if you have key people seeing it, it surely makes a difference. It's the same with that AIDS art show in Australia, in our national capital, where all of our federal politicians are. I think art has greater potential that people give it credit for. That is my theory anyway. Of course, it is difficult to collect evidence to prove the kind of effect that art has.

Right.

You wrote a piece for Robert Atkins and the Artery forum, which is on the internet…

Jesus, you've done your research!

[Paul laughs] You don't come all the way from Australian without doing your research! Your article was on the 'unfashionability' of AIDS, and I think you were talking about a subtle shift in AIDS art, in the way that it has become more low-key, less loud, or less aggressive. Can you talk more about that, and how you have seen AIDS-related art evolve over the last 20 years or so?

Sure. I think those remarks are true for the whole AIDS epidemic. It is not as immediate as once it was. [Now] it is seen more as a chronic illness, that it is a manageable illness, especially in this country. With that, a lot of the support has dwindled away too. Because of

that, AIDS art work, which used to be more immediate, more graphic, propaganda, more in-your-face with its content, has perhaps become more generalized about mortality, or assertive about the struggle with health than about untimely death.

You mentioned the 'Downlow' exhibition in the Bronx. That is an exhibition ostensibly about African-Americans and non-identifying homosexual behavior, but it is also speaking about HIV and HIV transmission. So you don't need to have an exhibition about AIDS or AIDS art for it to deal closely with AIDS. It is more subtle.

Yeah, yeah.

With the fairly recent spike in new HIV infections and the phenomena of bare-backing and the increase in unprotected sex, I'm a little amazed that we haven't seen a lot more art work dealing with that. There is also an absence of work dealing with HIV transmission through needle sharing or drug use, which I think is now the major mode of HIV transmission in the US and New York City – it definitely is in Eastern Europe and Spain and Scotland. Can you account for the absence of art work dealing with the spike in transmission and the dangers of needle sharing?

Well, in terms of needle use, you are talking about a different segment of the population. I don't think there would be a lot of people who inject drugs and use needles that would also be artists. They are different populations. I just don't think you'd find many artists shooting up, especially gay artists; they are different groups of people.

In terms of the increase in HIV transmission among younger people, I don't know. I wonder if we will see more [art work] about that. But, also, one major thing among younger artists is that there is a desire, or an understanding, that their art doesn't have to have any conceptual weight, they have no compunction that it is only pretty. [They might say:] 'Yeah, it's only pretty, it doesn't have to have any meaning to it'. That is almost their reaction to work that has too much meaning, like AIDS art. It is that push and pull of the art world; they're responding [to an earlier generation of artists] by saying 'I've just made a pretty picture. That is all that I fucking made. If you want to make it into more than that, go for it, but it is a pretty picture'. So I wonder if the reaction of the next group of young artists – the ones forming now in art school or coming out – will mean a re-engagement with the politics of AIDS and putting that into their work.

That is really interesting. In your response to the drug use issue, you were implying that artists will only make work about their own individual experience, that they were not prepared to look outside of their own experience to examine issues such as drug use, because they didn't use drugs…[snip – unrelated aside]…Does that mean that you don't think artists should be looking outside of their experience, or that this isn't possible?

No, I think that they can, but there is a certain degree of weight in speaking about what you know. It is like, for me to do art about AIDS in Africa: sure I could extrapolate my understanding to say something about it but I would imagine that the artists who are

there, for whom it is totally their life, they would bring an extra layer, or oomph, to it. This is not to say that artists shouldn't talk about what they don't know [i.e. haven't directly experienced], but maybe it is more important for us to support and champion artists who are there, so they can talk about what is important to them. [snip]

One final question: Robert Atkins once made a statement about how we should judge AIDS-related art, and, rather infamously, there was a dance critic who refused to review a piece by Bill T. Jones, because she said it was 'victim art' and that is was 'beyond criticism'. What is your opinion? How should we be judging or assessing art about AIDS? Can we critique it? Is it beyond criticism?

Well, you're getting into the territory of…let's say the work of art is not totally strong, but the educational message really works, then is it beneficial to critique it, to say 'this art sucks but it is getting the message across'? It is like the distinction between propaganda and fine art. With propaganda, the bottom line is that it is a political message first, and it is being couched in a fine art format. It is visually appealing enough as fine art but it is ultimately about a political message. Pornography works in the same way; the ultimate goal of pornography is erotic, sexual excitement, then – if it is coded in fine art or presented in a more attractive way, then it has a veneer of fine art. But ultimately it has got to get you off! That is its bottom line.

Well, with that nice pun, I think we can leave it there! Thank you very much.

It has been fun.

[End of interview]

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