

Thomas Sokolowski interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

New York City, USA, 16 June 2008

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

Paul Sendziuk: So, I had two things I really wanted to talk to you about; one is the founding of Visual AIDS and the way that Visual AIDS worked, particularly for the first three or four years. Because that history has probably been inadequately recorded thus far, and it's becoming a long time ago, so I thought we'd try to get this down on record.

Thomas Sokolowski: There's been a little bit of revisionism in certain people's eyes, too! [laughs]

Yeah, that's right, it is always interesting, you know, to hear different perspectives. And then the second thing I want to talk a little bit about is *From Media to Metaphor*, and putting on that show and how that worked, being one of the very early large-scale responses to the epidemic in the United States.

So, you started Visual AIDS with Gary Garrels...

Gary Garrels, who is, in case you ever want to go back to him, he's soon to be, in a few months, the Chief Curator at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. He's been at a number of places; he's right now at the Hammer Center at UCLA. [The others were] Bill Olander, who was a curator who was at the New Museum; he's since died. He died very soon afterwards. Robert Atkins, who I believe you spoke to, and myself. And basically it started out with a number of us beginning to see people who were ill; Bill was ill at the time but none of us knew because he was not dealing with it well. Although, well, he just wasn't publicly dealing with it, let's put it that way. I remember having dinner over at my house. I'd invited over those four people, and I said, well each of us in our own ways have done small things, but what might we do to garner things together? So we said: all right, we'll start this. And I remember we then composed a letter, and the idea was to invite lots of people in the art world, other art institutions, critics, educators, and we came up with this idea of Visual AIDS as a name.

So did you invite them to be a part of a committee, or...

Well it was a consortium, and what we basically decided we were going to do, and I can't say that we really thought that on that first night; but certainly after we had our first public meeting, we decided we did not want to take money, at that time, away either from activism, that was doing all the things that activism should, people like ACT UP and whatever; and at various points we had some acrimonious relations with people like ACT UP because they thought we weren't being activist enough, and we were sort of being pussies, so to speak, and, you know, they were doing what was important, so we didn't want to take money away from that. Nor did we want to take money away from people

who were putting money towards research or patient care. But what we said we could do, because it was just at this time – and that was probably also what I think catalyzed us – was all these articles were starting to come out; I remember *Time* magazine did this article with like a thousand people who had AIDS; then it was all of these images as well as; oh, what was this French guy's name? I'll refer to him there. But he did the first photographs; he sort of ran into hospitals in France and the United States and would take people's pictures without asking for their permission, and there were these photographs of these people *in extremis*, all of whom had Kaposi's sarcoma, so they all were covered with lesions, and they just looked like cadavers. And the notion was, you know, those photos just immediately said "aaah!!", you know; who wants to be around, near this person, even if you're sure it wasn't contagious, but who'd want to be near them?

So we said what we were all good at, both because we dealt with visual art but also we were pretty damn good at getting publicity for our various institutions, so let's do that. Let's become the public relations department for the AIDS crisis. And I remember then when the letter was getting written; I remember Bill was sort of really uncomfortable, because there was this issue, which probably came out, none of us really knew until a little bit after that he was ill, and that was all very complicated and whatever. And then he really sort of pulled back; he then moved away from New York and pulled back; and, well, then we moved on. But anyway, we had the first meeting at Grey Gallery, my place at the time...

And what time... that was 1988, but what time of year, can you remember?

Yeah, oh yes, no I do remember this dinner; it was January, I think, or it was February [1989]. And so I invited people and we must have had fifteen or twenty five people there, and our notion was we wanted to do this public relations thing; and we all said, "Oh, well this public's doing this, you know, at such and such, and this little exhibition is happening here, and this little mini thing about AIDS in Australia is happening here; and if we put them together, the *Times* would notice". And maybe at certain times, like Gay Pride etc, they'd be able to say, "Well these fifteen things are happening". So everyone sort of said "Ok, that's a good idea". So we put out our first press release. Our first press release had maybe, oh, I don't know, twelve or fifteen different things in it; and not many people took much notice. But we kept meeting. And then, one of our members at the time was a guy by the name of Philip Yenawine, who at that point was the Head of Education at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art]. And we had the next meetings, 'cause we had one more at Grey, I think, and then the next was at MoMA; and just because it was MoMA, more people showed up. So we said, "Well let's keep on meeting at MoMA!" Philip was one of the top department heads. So we said fine, you know. And they always were able to have good munchies for free, you know, that kind of stuff; munchies are very important! So, more people started to come. Then we said, well, should we start doing more? And one of the people who was the eldest of us at the time was a man by the name of John Perreault, who now writes a blog called *Artopia* on artsjournal.com. And he was older than all of us, he now must be, oh God knows, his late 60s. And he said "Oh, I think what we should do is have a moratorium like..." – no, in fact, let me step back. What started me off, specifically, having that dinner, was that I was in London for the first, December 1st World AIDS Day, in '88, uh '87.

'87?

'87. [NB: The actual year was 1988.] And, well, two things; let me step back again. The first thing I did, in terms of, I think, well, no, the first thing might have been that little show with Australian AIDS posters, but then in the fall of '87 I did this show called *Morality Tales*. And it was about contemporary painting, and my notion was that what older art would have called 'history painting', as a genre in art which would have been, you know, still life, portraiture, animal painting, architectural draftsmanship; and then history painting which was thought to be the most potent of the genres; this was back in the fifteenth century. And it meant stories that had potent meanings or exemplars in them; so it would be stories from the Bible, or they'd tell stories from ancient history; the Wisdom of Solomon, or Hercules killing the dragon or something, 'cause they were moral exemplars for humanity. So I had this notion that in contemporary art, the same thing was happening; but they weren't traditional stories from the Bible anymore, but they were images ... So a couple of the images I picked – no, I did the show, and I wasn't finding anything to do with AIDS, and I said "There's gotta be something!" I found a couple of guys who were doing things and brought them in, and we did a window; we did these huge window displays - Grey Gallery, right on Washington Square, it's still there – we used to do these things in the window, like a big department store. I found someone, a guy by the name of Juan Gonzalez, who did this image which he had taken from a Holbein painting of the dead Christ, and manipulated it to not be Christ, but a young man who had died; you know, beautiful but emaciated and all that. And then there was this thing of white roses that sort of fell off his higher, his bier, and then there was a placard in the other window which would... every time someone would, like, what was it, fifty people more would die with, than a stroke; and we got well-known people every day to come and add to that; and we'd ring a bell. So that was really one of the first public things that happened.

And what was his name? Juan...

Juan Gonzalez. He used to do a show as well. And then the following spring I did a show devoted to the photographs; but that was the first time that really, somewhere – I mean, I'm looking for people dealing with AIDS, and then in the spring I did a show; a woman named Roslyn Solomon whose work was in, you know, who again went photographing, but in a much more humanistic way; talking to patients, and gave money, etc. There was some controversy, some people felt, like in ACT UP, that her work was totally... what's the word, oh, I can't think of the word: someone looking at the things just from their own point of view, oh, I'm...

Voyeuristic?

Voyeuristic, thank you. But they weren't; I didn't think they were. Anyway, so then I was in London for the first World AIDS Day, and I remember it was interesting, because it was just nothing but numbers. You know, two thousand, two million, two hundred million [dying of AIDS] in 20 years, blah, blah, blah. And then this *Time* magazine came out. So that was sort of what led to the dinner, what I was talking about. So then, what are we going to do? So John said, well, in 1968 – this was, like 20, years before – there was a moratorium on West Broadway, which at that point was the real heart of the art world; and there was a banner that was strung up at 420 West Broadway, which was the main

building where Leo Castelli had his gallery, all the main type artists were showing; and people literally closed their galleries on that day.

In a protest of Vietnam?

Yeah. And it was the main thing, and people went out in the streets and what have you; so we all said... and he said, and I have a title for it, "Day Without Art".¹ And we all said "Oh, that's fabulous, we love it". So then, because all of us were administrators as well, we just sort of said, well, before we really jump into this, let's see if it's possible. Because, you know, we can all say "Let's do this, let's do that", but if our various boards... [brief interruption - talking with waitress]... Because this whole thing, this was going to be nationwide; and if none of our colleagues are going to do it because their Board of Trustees won't allow them, or closing a day meant, if it was the Metropolitan, probably sixty, seventy thousand dollars or more of income, you know; so we sent letters out. No, we sent everyone – no, by that point there were about 30 of us meeting; everyone called three or four people in their [contact books], like, whether you were a magazine editor or whatever, and so we came back next meeting, which was, I think, two weeks later – we had a meeting fairly frequently – and it was very interesting; and we got all sorts of responses. "No, our board will never let us do this"; "It's income-generating"; "It's too outrageous, but, you know, we have options." And that was really the smartest thing I think we did, that was really a kudos for Visual AIDS because we then said, all right; we changed it, we said all right, Day Without Art is a day of action and mourning in response to the AIDS crisis, and to help people with AIDS and their caregivers. So that was it. And you could do what you want, but so long as you did something. So that was, like, late April or May. Day Without Art. I mean, we'd do a poster, we got someone who was going to do it for free; and the whole notion is you would then be on this poster and for the very small organizations, you would be on the same poster; we'd have no hierarchy, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, or MoMA, or whatever, you'd be on there. So it was summer, and I was the public relations person of this special thing. It was slow going because it was summer and everyone, you know...not much was coming in. Then we started getting to August, and the poster was supposed to be – had to go to print, you know, September, whatever. Eventually it went to print I think like, October, the way these things always do; so I started getting on the phone, and I think back, and you paid for all this activism, and started calling. And of course, as you can imagine, a lot of the organizations, particularly the contemporary art ones immediately got onboard; "Of course, course, course". But then the others, and the ones that really were going to make the big bother with respect to the press and for this poster, were a little bit hesitant. And of course...

What organizations are you thinking of there?

Well, like the Metropolitan, the Art Institute of Chicago; you know. And that was what was going to make it...

Make a splash.

¹ Now known as Day With(out) Art.

Yeah, a splash. And also had the biggest numbers in the population; because at the Grey Gallery we did a whole big thing on that day, but if we had a hundred people then we were lucky, whereas a day at the Met is, you know, thousands; tens of thousands. So anyway, we started calling. And it was very interesting; some people said, "Oh, we just didn't get around it", or, "What are we supposed to do?" but [in terms of reluctance to do anything] I have to say there wasn't so much; only one person, I'll say Jacqueline, the biggest fucking prick in the world, who was out at the San Francisco Museum, "What is this to me, I don't want anything to do with it" and I said "Fine" and I said "You'll be sorry". That's all I said. But most people said, "What can we do? We want to be involved, but, you know, with the meeting; and one person on staff is ill, and the son of the [inaudible] and what do we do?" So, things are coming round, then more artists are starting to do work dealing with AIDS; because of course at that point people weren't doing work with AIDS 'cause they felt it'd never be shown in galleries, 'cause it hadn't been at that point; it wasn't sellable, for Christ's sake. The other auspicious thing was about the fall of '87, 'cause that's when the stock market crashed, and what that meant for the next five years or so was that since nothing was selling, [artists said:] "well, shit, we'll make something that really matters. And it won't sell, so why not..." And then it turned out the market turned back up and then stuff, like, many things, like David Wojnarowicz, which were terribly intense, started selling, you know, so it was an interesting sort of kickback. So we started saying, "Well, do this, do that, do this..." And then...

Sorry, just on that thought: do you think that the Day Without Art and the fact that your galleries were now becoming interested in it...did it act as a bit of a motivation for artists to start working?

Oh yeah, I think so, yeah.

Yeah, that's good.

But probably more so the market turned down. Well, partly, I think, AIDS was coming on like a gangbusters, so people were being influenced; but then also, I did think people from an emotional point of view were just saying, "How are we going to deal with this, this is, you know, intense... then, what the fuck, we might as well do something; nothing's going to sell, so maybe this is the time we really can say what we want to say". I mean even that, that was really the catalyst, to be honest. But anyway, I kept making calls, I was then able to say, "Well, the so-and-so museum's doing it; the so-and-so..." "Oh, oh!" Then in those last, I remember, it was so amazing; in that last month the calls started coming in; I mean, and it was like... and even this asshole Jacqueline called up when he heard who was participating. "Oh, what can I do; what can I do?" [brief interruption – a friend coming to the table] And then what was brilliant about it is, before the poster was printed, and many more [events] happened after that, 'cause, you know, we had something like 600 organizations, from nothing, like, literally maybe just five weeks before, then zhoom! And what was brilliant about the business of "do something" was we got people to literally do things that would contextualize with the history of their institution, or their part of the world; so it made it more than just, like, some New York activist, whatever. Like, I remember in New Orleans they did this wreath thing, because in New Orleans there's a tradition that when someone dies in a family, you will put a wreath, very much like a Christmas wreath, on your door, to show the world that you are in mourning. Now, from what I was told, originally it was, well, I guess at the time of tuberculosis and other

plagues that were airborne, and it was a way of saying, "Keep away, now we have a death that you know, you could get..." But then it turned into this notion of letting people know that there was a mourning. And so they had, like, five or six hundred houses in the French quarter did these wreaths. So it was really wonderful. In Philadelphia there was a parade with umbrellas, which, I don't know, somehow had some specific tradition in Philadelphia; so there was that. Some galleries decided to close; others said, well what point does closing mean? You know, people would just say "Oh, well I'm pissed off they're closed"; so what they would do is they would literally activate their guys; so the Met, for example, decided that they would remove a well-known painting, and instead of that painting the sign would say, well, this painting... I remember the one they picked the first year was Picasso's portrait of Gertrude Stein. And I remember one article said "Oh, sure, they picked a picture of an old dyke to take down", you know! [both laugh] But what they wrote was really beautiful. They said, "The sadness you may feel of missing this friend, which either can be an old beloved painting of yours, favorite of yours, or perhaps a painting you travelled many miles to see – like, maybe somebody is writing a dissertation and they want to see this painting, and it's gone – just as if you wanted to see a loved one, and they died before you could get to them". That was the Met...but the fact the Met was doing it! And then on the central information desk, right in the middle of the great rotunda at the entrance, there were bowls filled with condoms and same-sex... I mean, safer sex brochures. Which is pretty audacious for the Met!

And then there were other places where they took the show [i.e. participated in Day Without Art] and – this happened in a number of places – so it's like, the exhibiting artist was up in the gallery, and they'd say "Your show's up, what would you like to do?". It would be, say, the last two days of their exhibition – you know, the life-blood of artists is showing in the galleries – and the artist would maybe come in and turn all the paintings back, or just lean them against the wall for that day and write a statement. Or, do that and then have a specific reading or interpretive dance or something. I mean, all sorts of really incredible stuff. I mean now, you can't even remember, but you look back in terms of presenting... at these pages and pages of events.

I remember a friend called who really wanted to participate – he was the Chief Curator at the Jewish Museum – he said, "Tom, we really want...you know the hierarchy of the museum, the director wants to participate, and Board of Trustees felt... the one thing we can't do is, the Day Without Art is Friday, and that's the Sabbath"; he said, "We cannot do all this on the Sabbath, you know, that would... that is one thing we cannot do." But he said, "Can we do something the night before, because in the Jewish calendar, sort of, the day begins at sunset." So we said fine. So that was the opening [of Day Without Art]. And I remember it was fabulous. During that week we all were being [phone] called, you know, the main four, five of us, were being interviewed by press, all over the place. So we showed up in a cab and got to the Jewish Museum, and on the stage there was one of General Idea's paintings, which had the A-I-D-S, playing off of Robert Indiana's *LOVE*. And the way they had set up the evening – I haven't talked about this in a while – was they did it in the style of Judaic, Old Testament Judaic telling of history. Sort of like one of those chapters in the Bible, where so-and-so begat so-and-so begat so-and-so. And this woman Rabbi who led the evening began; I forget how far back she went, oh God, it was like first century BC or something it started; then she leapt pretty quickly about five hundred years at... but, sort of, the Jewish people, and then disease. We shot through like 2,000 years and then there'd be this sort of chanting, about "And so-and-so did..." And then somebody

would come out and speak. I remember Bill Hoffman spoke, who was the guy who wrote *As Is*, that play, which again was one of the earliest – slightly schmaltzy, but still – plays about AIDS. Then a woman got up whose son – she was a very, very prominent member of New York society, Jewish New York society – and whose son was a very prominent young doctor who had died of AIDS; and when it became clear he was ill, how she was shunned by so much of her community, and she talked about that. Then this very, very old Rabbi got up, he was 95 or something, and he talked about the fact that, how, because, although there weren't many, but there were some people, à la Anne Frank, where Christians protected the Jews during the Second World War, so the legend, and the community could live; the Jews could not among themselves – Jews with AIDS or even the rest of them, could not turn their backs away. And then there were others who spoke; I can't remember all of them. And then I remember, the woman chanting [the timeline], she was doing this and then she said, "In 1987, Visual AIDS started". Oh, we were all in tears and it was just, I mean, it was so intense. And then I remember we all stood up and then they sang some song that was about, like, the future, and we will all... some very traditional Jewish song, that was sung in Hebrew. And I remember my secretary came up to me, and she had come with her family. And she had helped in all this, a very young girl, and she and her family was Orthodox Jewish. She came up to me, and she was sort of teary-eyed, and I was teary-eyed, and we hugged one another and she said she was coming because she was Jewish, and this was the Jewish Museum, and she said to me, "Well Tom, I have something to tell you". And I said, "Please". And she told me – 'cause she'd worked for me for two and a half years – her brother, who was a hemophiliac, and had, maybe just ARC at that point, but maybe had AIDS, I can't remember, but she told me that for the first time. And then that was, like, her telling, saying to the wider world; it's always really intense.

So then we all got in taxis and went down to the Museum of Modern Art, where... that was where the next sort of official opening of the whole thing... [brief interruption – talking to the waitress] And it was great, because we were going along in the cab from 92nd St and 5th to 51st St and 5th, we were listening to, oh, what was the name of that old radio station, it was, like, the big liberal station, I can't remember now what the call letters are, and then the three of us in the cab were being interviewed. So it was like, wooh! It seemed like everyone in New York was involved. So, anyway, then there was this big thing at MoMA and I remember Leonard Bernstein performed; he was still alive at that point, then, I forgot who else spoke. I mean, lots of really important – some actors gave a soliloquy; who else spoke that night? Oh, I can't remember, but some really impressive people – oh and there were thousands of people.

Back just to the Jewish Museum, if you don't mind; was it a big audience?

Oh yeah, oh yeah; it was like three or four hundred people.

And you said your secretary was working with you for two and a half years, knew that you were working on this, but never said a word about her brother; but she goes to that event and is moved; it makes her feel safe to talk about it...

Well, there's privacy issues and what have you, but, you know; her brother was not gay, everyone was seeing AIDS as a gay disease. It was hemophilia, you know, that's perfectly clear, and everyone has their own reasons [not to disclose]; but who knows, her parents didn't want people to be... you know, who knows. But now that it was, like, ok, because it

had been sanctioned, so to speak, because of this Jewish thing [she felt comfortable]. So, we did that at MoMA and then we all went out to eat. And so the next day was Day Without Art. And I was the main press person that day.

I'm imagining you didn't get much sleep in the weeks leading up to this!

So the calls started that day. That was really exciting. That was probably one of the most exciting things I've ever done in my life. The calls started, and from every newspaper in America. And this has been true in the month leading up to it; but this day, I mean, and the *Times*... well, the *Times* had already come to talk to all of us, but, oh, magazines and radio stations, and I mean I'd say "Call so-and-so" because there were just so many. But one of my favorite moments was; it was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon and, you know, 'cause we were all wondering, 'cause the major night newscasts were all at 6 o'clock in the States, or at least in New York City; and I get a call from Walter Cronkite, you know, "Oh Tom!", my secretary, she had this little girl voice "Tom, it's Walter Cronkite!" I said "What, are you kidding!" You know, and I'm trying to, and I get a buzz, and I say "Mr Cronkite, could you hold" and then she said, "Oh Tom, you're not going to believe this, it's Dan Rather on the other line!" And I said "Tell him to hold" and really, I remember relishing it. [both laugh]

Dan Rather was on NBC, or...?

No, he was CBS, and Walter Cronkite was NBC. And Peter Jennings was... I didn't talk to Peter Jennings, someone else, but he was ABC. And I still remember this – and we have a tape somewhere – each one of those broadcasts that day lead with the story, every one, "Today is a Day Without Art." And they showed our Visual AIDS poster. And that was amazing. Amazing; 'cause the whole nation, I mean, the world, in those broadcasts. So that day, and then over the weekend – some people kept the display up for the whole weekend – or if they didn't open, they'd, you know...

Sorry to stop you there, but in a way it's also a good news story about AIDS. I mean, there is not a lot of good news stories about AIDS until the drugs start to be able to roll in and things like that in the mid '90s, so...

When I tell this story to people – I do sometimes when I'm speaking to young people about activism – I say, you know, this was a very intense moment. I mean, you went to meetings, and you went to see people in the hospital. And that's all you did for those five or six years; it was an intense period. And especially if you were in the gay community, but not just; I mean, if you were in New York, or Chicago, or Sydney I'm sure, and were at all active, it was just... But as I said, this was a whole group of people; we were not nobodies, we had institutional connections, and we were all in our 30s at least, so, you know, we were sophisticated. But still, without having a huge press agency doing it, we got the world to respond that day. And thousands and thousands of people saw it. It was amazing. And then, at that point, we had gotten someone to work for the office, a guy by the name of Patrick O'Connell, whose name you've probably heard. Patrick worked with us in the office and he ultimately ended up being; I guess two or three years later we gave him the title of Director of Visual AIDS or what have you. Another fellow who was an intern for him, named Alex Gray, is now a gallerist in New York. But anyway, the next year came and everyone was saying, "Wow, so what are we going to do now?"

Just backtracking on that one as well: you obviously got positive responses; 600, 700 institutions, universities, went along with it; there must have been some that said 'absolutely not'? Or...

Not that I remember in any kind of major...; I think Bob Jones Museum, which is connected to Bob Jones College, which is a southern Baptist university, said "We will have nothing to do with that damned Day Without..." I mean, they were the only...

I think they actually threatened to extend the hours of their gallery, didn't they?

Yeah, that's right, that's right! Yeah exactly, I'd forgotten all about that, wow. Yes, "We will; not only will we not close, we'll extend the day." Yeah; I'd forgot all about that, wow.

But that's the only one you can remember?

Yeah, graphically. I'm sure various people at various institutions wrote nasty letters etc; but nothing really like that one. I don't remember anything richer, nor any public stuff; it was things like, for example - and I think this was the second Day Without Art - at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which was a very traditional institution; I mean, so many people in the traditional black community didn't count that there was homosexuality among African-Americans let alone AIDS... So they papered - and I think it was the second Day Without Art - they papered the front of their building in Harlem, in 125th St, with the Day Without Art posters; and the event they had was a group called African PoMoHomos;² African post-modern men; gay men with AIDS, who did a performance. So second year came, and [we said] "What are we going to do new?" We were getting a little stropy with ourselves; "So what are we gonna do, we've got to make it bigger". So someone said - and it was always this way - you know, "Oh, what about this idea?" And we would say "Ok, you're that committee". And the next committee was this Night Without Light. And I can't remember the guy, he was an African-American guy, I can't remember his name now; he was new, so...

And how many were on the committee by this stage?

Oh, it was round about 40 people coming, give or take, each month; and then we started meeting more quickly, more often, as we got closer to December 1st.

And at this point there's no sort of management structure; you're all just putting up your hands, voting on things?

No, no. Well, because there were so many meetings at MoMA we made Philip Yenawine the first President, and he was President for two years, and then I was President of the Board for four years, I think; something like that; or more... five? Anyway, that was about it, yeah. At that point, basically, we got an office, because Philip had a sort of patroness who had a loft on 24th St in Chelsea, and she never was there, she lived in Los Angeles, and

² The group is called 'Pomo Afro Homos'.

Philip lived there, but part of the loft he gave as a kind of office. So that was our Visual AIDS office.

So this was in 1989 or 1990?

Yeah, well, '90 or '91. So our first office was down at the Clocktower for about a year, I think, I can't remember now, then that [24th St] was the office for a good number of years. Then we got little grants. But Patrick at that point, wasn't really a full-time job, what have you, and the other people like Alex, the intern, and there were other interns; and a lot of the money was still, like, I remember, I would fax most of the stuff through [inaudible]'s budget, or I'd have NYU pay for something, and MoMA could, and we still weren't getting a lot of money 'cause grants weren't easy to come by. People now know what Visual AIDS is, but then, oh, you know, "what really is it?", "is it an arts organization, is it social?" So anyway, as I said, there were about 40 people meeting, and then in the summer it would sort of ebb out, just because people were away.

So, Night Without Light... I remember for about four months we would say "What about the Night Without Light committee?" "Oh we don't know." [So we said] "All right, fine, next month give us your report." Fifth month came, he said, "We have secured Mrs..." I can't remember the first name was, "Mrs Whatever Dinkins, the wife of the Mayor at that time in New York; she is our honorary Chair". So with her they got to all the major developers in New York, and that made possible Night Without Light. For fifteen minutes, from 7:45 'til 8:00pm, all of the landmark buildings in New York turned off their lights; all the major tall apartment buildings, 'cause we had Zeckendorf and all these major companies; all of the Broadway Theaters darkened their marquees; all the bridges of Manhattan turned dark, and then...

So were people crashing their cars all over the place, without...?!

No, no, streetcars were. We had this postcard which we sold for a while which [displayed two images, one] was darkened, and then at 8:00, [the other image was] resplendent, so you know; out of darkness comes light, you know, blah, blah, blah. So that was it; we had a party; someone gave – one of the developers – gave a building that was just about to open, and he gave us the penthouse which was, you know, a fifty storey building, and we watched; that was quite dramatic.

Did anyone video it?

Oh yeah, there's stuff from there. It should all be in Visual AIDS's stuff. Have you talked to Patrick yet?

No, not yet. [Patrick O'Connell has subsequently been interviewed for the project.]

Oh, you really have to talk to Patrick. Anyway...

And how do you approach these people to turn off their lights? Like, I can understand going...

Well you basically say, "Mrs Dinkins..."

How do you know who owns the buildings?

Oh, well that's easy enough, that's easy enough. 'Cause you go in these big buildings and it always says, you know, "Managed by Zeckendorf Corporations". And a lot of the time they own; ten of the top buildings are owned by one developer. And then when you say, 'Mrs Dinkins has asked you to help by this, that and that', you know, "thump", I mean; that was it; when he said that, we all said "ooh!" So that was that thing.

The next year, again this was a sort of personal thing with me; it sort of held up one's life... so that would have made it 1990, I guess, something like that. I had jury duty, downtown; downtown New York. And it was in May. It was grand jury, and our system means you have to go every day for a month, for half a day. And in our system, basically what a grand jury does is, within I think it's 48 hours – no, 36 hours, it's very quick – if you've been nabbed by the police, if you are not arraigned, and brought before a grand jury, then you have to be released. And basically what a grand jury says is, not that you're guilty or innocent, but that based upon the charge, there is enough evidence to bring it to trial. I don't know if you have the same thing, or...

No, it's a bit different.

It was very... oh, it was great; I mean, you think of New York and the case of murder that was, you know, twelve hours before, oh heaps of little children... oh, it was grotesque, but it was very interesting. But anyway, I remember in the final week of that, I was on the subway every morning; all these people, it was just at the time of the end of the first Gulf War, when we first went to the Middle East, to Kuwait, and all these people here were making a big deal about the soldiers coming home and, you know, there's that tacky song – you probably had it in Australia – by some country and western singer – "Tie a yellow ribbon round the old oak tree", you know; so all these old codgers on the subway; you know, workers, plumbers, and sanitation workers, wearing these corsages of yellow ribbon. Everyone else just said "oh that's queer" or whatever, but it was for;... and there was this parade, 'cause they always have, when there's someone really special in, you know, downtown, Wall St, they'll have a tickertape parade, and all this shit is dumped on them; they do it for sports teams, and the war veterans. So we just had a meeting one of those days, and I said "Ah, I'm just finishing jury duty and this fucking yellow thing" ... and I said, "Wouldn't it be great if we could do something like that to get people..." So we had at that point a group called the Artists Caucus, because up until then, the first Day Without Art; actually that happened with the second one, but the first Day Without Art was just arts institutions, and the artists said "Well we want to do something". And it's very interesting; the only thing that was very important about Visual AIDS was that that then immediately spawned, oh shit, what was the music one called... oh... see, it's been a while now...

Oh, 'Red Hot and Blue'?

No, Red Hot and Blue was pop music. But classical music was called; I think it was called Classical Aid; and then the dance one was called... but there were about five organizations... and then they add to this... And from then on, December 1 became like,

you know, ballet was doing this, and the opera was... so it really became... and we all started that. And mostly it was gay men in these organizations who had power.

So the Artists Caucus said, "Oh, we'll do it". At the next meeting, I remember, it was in the summer; this woman, what's her name... oh God... I'll think of it; she came, and she was representative of the Visual AIDS Artists Caucus... oh God, I can see her... Hope Sandrow. She came in and she said, "Oh, we came up with something". All right... and so she had this ribbon. This, you know, the little twisted thing... And I remember I said, "Oh, that's really tacky!", you know? [both laugh] And everyone else said, "Well no, we sort of like it", but well, you know, what can you do? So they began... the moment went past. And then it started to gain momentum. And so this was before, well before Day Without Art, this was in April [1990], I think, when we first got it. And then we sort of said "Oh yeah, well, like, it's simple" and our notion was we didn't want to patent it, which we never did; and we didn't want to make it something expensive, 'cause the notion is, if you wanted to do it, you could cut up your T-shirt and make it out of that red block there. And so we just said, "Ok, we'll go with it." And then I remember we were saying, and I was sitting there saying, "Well, you know, if a tree falls in the forest [and nobody hears it], what the hell good is that?" And we were sitting there and I said "Oh, the Tonys...if we can launch it at the Tonys..." And one of the people – Patrick – said, "Well I used to sleep with Manny Derschowicz and we still have a good relationship, and Manny is the Head of the Broadway League of Producers; I'll call Manny up. And everyone would say, like, "Well I hope you were a good fuck because, you know..." And well I guess he was, because he emailed us the next day or something, "Manny's up for it." So then we're starting, and we got the ribbons and before that night, every person who was either a nominee or was a member of the League had one of these in a packet [we sent to them], and it said "Please wear this". But the one deal was they wouldn't allow anything to be said about it; and I can't remember why, maybe they thought it was too much. So I remember we all were there, we had a party, and on that evening Jeremy Irons walked out, wearing the Red Ribbon, and again, everyone was crying – and didn't say anything. But everyone then who got up had the ribbon on; and the audience all had this thing... And I remember... what was his name, that actor's name; Sam... no, Asner? Ed Asner. He said something like "I wear this because I care". And the next morning, oh, one of those gossip people who still writes for one of the New York papers said "Oh, there was that Red Ribbon that meant something about AIDS". And then it just, like, zoom!, took off. It's one of those things, like, someone's answered prayers. So we thought, "What are we supposed to do?" And I remember these meetings, we would have these ribbon-making bees, and we were all sitting talking... having these bolts of ribbon, and doing them because people would call up and say, "We need two thousand ribbons for this, you know, fundraiser", and "We need..." you know. And we didn't charge them much, except for the cost of the materials, and for mailing, 'cause we just wanted to get it out there. But the numbers were coming in, like, "We need ten thousand!" and "We need..." So I was involved, and Hope Sandrow, and a couple of the other people were involved with an organization that was called, oh, what was it called now? The Artists Homeless Collaborative. And there was a shelter, a New York City public shelter for homeless women, 35 years of age and older; that met in the New York Armory on 68th and Park Ave. And we went there and with artists, we, you know, made art with the women to decorate this very horrible shelter; it was things like a sculpture that could be a rack for them to put their towels after they'd bathed. And then we got, sort of, fancy stores to donate soap and towels and then we got a quilting organization to teach these women how to quilt, and then the quilts were sold, and then...

So we said to these women, “if you make these ribbons, for every two ribbons, you get a penny”. So these women, they were making thousands of ribbons and they were getting money. So that just started out; and then it just like blew up, and then there was... the US Postal Service, what do you call it, made a stamp with a ribbon on it, and then also...

Can you remember what year that was?

I want to say '91. '91 or '92, but Visual AIDS should have that information. [NB: it was 1991.] That was one of our big things, 'cause it just took off, and everyone... but now it's gone so, sort of tacky. There's a play called, a movie called *Jeffrey*, which is about a man sort of coming to, coming out; oh no, he gives up having sex because he's afraid of getting AIDS. And it's a very funny play by Paul Rudnick. But there's this one part where this woman stands up and she's one of these, you know, “ladies”, who's for every charity; and she's standing up at this marquee, and she has all these different kind of ribbons and she said, “This is the Red Ribbon for AIDS. This is the pink ribbon for breast cancer. This is the yellow ribbon; I don't remember what it's for, but it's for something good. And this is the brooch that Harry gave me because he loves me,” you know. It's a very funny scene. But now they've got every fucking color you can imagine of these stupid ribbons. But the point was, you know; and I remember we had one huge debate about the ribbons, 'cause people like ACT UP sort of, like, “Oh this is just shit”, you know, and I remember having this big fight with a few people saying, “You know, listen; all right, in New York City it's nothing for you or me to wear these ribbons, but I remember my nearest friend at this point had died, and his mother had taken the ribbons to her Catholic church in a working-class part of Chicago, and they were making these ribbons! And that was a very audacious... I remember at [inaudible]'s funeral, they gave them out to people... and I said, “You know, in other parts of the world, you have to remember, that's a very audacious thing”. And, but you, they – oh, I remember this very cantankerous meeting, with shouting and screaming and, about that.

I remember I spoke to Dui Seid last time I was in New York, and he told a very similar story about being in rural Pennsylvania; and his mother, or a friend of his mother or something or another wore...

I haven't talked to Dui in years, God.

And she wore the ribbon in this little town and it was a way for her to start a conversation about AIDS with someone else; they would come up and say, “What's that ribbon for, what does that mean?” And it was her way of broaching the subject.

Well I remember on the same level when I was invited, I guess a few years after I did Australia, I was on the circuit – so I was invited to do the same thing with New Zealand. And I remember there was this; but it was all about activism, not just AIDS; and I remember I spoke at this one sort of curator's thing, and there was lots of people there; and at the end of it this man came up to me who had been at this conference over two, three days, who was Maori. A really young, gay guy, really hip and all sorts of things, but he had with him this old woman, I have no idea... it turns out it was his grandmother; she was really, you know, this total mufti, this Maori mufti with feathers and, you know, wild. And she came up to me, and he said, “My grandmother wants to say something to you”, but she only spoke Maori language; so she started speaking, and he was translating; and

then she opened her cloak and she had a ribbon, because she said one of her other grandchildren had died of AIDS and she wanted to thank me; oh, and she started crying, and I started crying. But it was like those things, you think, you know; I was halfway round the world, talking to this Maori woman and this ribbon was... I think of that, without making too much of a schmaltzy story, but, you know, I love schmaltz; it had trans... forget some fucking AIDS activist in New York, you know, who that was his whole world and what it's all about and it's easy to do these sorts of things; but this woman, as you said, these people doing it as kind of a point of egress for discussions. I mean, it was a major thing!

Can you tell me a little bit more about the relationship between Visual AIDS and ACT UP? Were there people in Visual AIDS who were in ACT UP earlier; or both, or...?

Well, probably not really. I mean, there were some people in ACT UP, because it had started off in an interesting way with a lot of people, oddly enough, from the art world. And one of the groups that was sort of the key to that was a group called; oh shit, what was their name now?

Gran Fury.

Gran Fury, yeah. Which was Donald Moffett, and...

Marlene McCarty.

Yeah, yeah, Marlene McCarty... oh, who was that really cute guy who I had a crush on... it wasn't reciprocal, sadly; oh what was his name? I can't remember; him, there were about three or four others. Gregg Bordowitz, and they were really; you know, and then Douglas Crimp did that book on AIDS Demo Graphics; so it was actually a whole, then, style of calligraphy that became recognized as the calligraphy of protest. That was; it was sort of smart because it was about that; so that it was like when people would see it; I mean, just like you look across with this sort of spring awakening; I mean, that comes right out of a, what's her name; poster by...

Kruger.

Yeah, Barbara Kruger. So the public, even though they didn't know who Barbara Kruger was, they recognized; oh, it was something about... So they were involved. And some of those people weren't so vitriolic, and they realized that each part... but some of the worst were just, you know, and those people are just like the worst kind of... I mean, I very much admire what ACT UP did in terms of bringing down the cost of [anti-] retroviral drugs back then and AZT and all that; and they were very much... but you need to realize that there are different worlds that have to be spoken to about AIDS. Their perspective was that there's was only one way to do it; you know, "it's our way or the highway", which is just bullshit, I think, in any kind of situation. [Brief interruption – speaking with waitress.]

So then; I stepped off the Board of Visual AIDS after ten years, when I felt and said, "New people need to come into this". And then just as I got everything else, certain squabbles started happening between this one and that one and whatever; nothing that was super-

duper acrimonious, but just some people wanted to do this, some people wanted to do that. We had started up this BroadSides project; that was something else we did. Another project we did early on with Group Material was... now what year was that, the day without... for the December issue; that was one of Gary's projects. So maybe that was '89, even.

The AIDS Timeline...

We got Group Material to do the timeline for all the magazines, which was really great; that they all agreed to take the format and do it, that was a really fabulous thing.

And was that a Visual AIDS initiative; they approached Group Material to do that?

Or we approached them, I can't remember which, but one of those things. Then what else did we do? Oh, then we did the Archive Project which they've continued to do in a major way. I don't know about now, but at that point we were trying to enlist...; I remember some people came up to one of our partners, one of the bigger museums, and said, "Oh, you know, it seems as if the only people who can participate are curators and that, and we'd like to do something". So we said, "Oh, well this Archive Project, if you can get photographers..." And what the deal was, at that point, we would take two rolls of film of the work [the artist] had done, either an artist who was living or someone who'd died, and we would get an archivist registrar to do up a sheet with all the, sort of, taxonomic stuff of medium, numbers of works in the edition, etc, so it could be used, either for the sale of a work by a dealer, or we could set it up at auctions, or just for posterity. And then we started collecting the slides and that, but it got to be untenable, because – I remember this because we probably did more projects at the Grey Gallery, just because of me, than almost any place in town – and I said, "hang on, I just can't do that all the time," I mean, it wasn't appropriate. So then we dumped those at Artists Space; I don't know if they still have the Visual AIDS slide files.

No, they're back at Visual AIDS now.

At Visual AIDS, ok.

You know, there are 13,000 slides there.

Oh, that now!

There's 430-odd artists represented.

Oh I bet! I'm surprised there's not more. It'd be curious to see how many are from what historic period; I bet they were much more intense earlier on, and now...

I'm sure there were a couple of other initiatives, but I can't remember.

There was a sort of change in the direction of the organization, though, wasn't there? You go from doing these project-based things, which is about public engagement, through to what Visual AIDS does now, which is working almost as an

AIDS service organization for artists with AIDS; collecting their work, promoting their work through galleries...

Well that grew out of what we started with. I think it's appropriate [that the organization has shifted its focus] because, the thing is, the idea for the Archive Project was, we said would not distinguish between, you know, David Wojnarowicz and some person who painted on rocks; because the whole point was, it was about people who were artists, who make work. And that that work should be part of history. Now, the rock painter probably is never going to be more than that two rolls of film; but nevertheless, that should be preserved someplace. And now I think, especially with the fact there's so many people still alive from those days - I mean, that's 25 years ago - that tells you that different things are needed. And I'm really very pleased that I've not been really involved with Visual AIDS at all [for a number of years]; I moved out of the City, and I am doing different things. And the organization has adapted to suit the times. The only thing I guess I would like to see them do, or someone do, is [to recognize] the fact that now we are coming to a period where again we're starting to see infection rates going up, even with everything we know, which just makes me want to spit, you know; especially when you're gay, and there's a lot of people in the gay community bare-backing and shit like that, and you want to say "Oh, you asshole!" Well I mean, really! I remember this one person said to me "Oooh, you were..." - he actually said to me, this was in Pittsburgh about a year ago, I spoke to a group - this one person said to me, [laughs] really, it's sort of [embarrassing], I'll say it, he said, "I wish you were cuter because I'd really want to sleep with you, because you were from the 'golden age'".

What?! He said that to you?

And I sort of burst out with laughter at first, and I said, you know, "My first [instinct] is to slap you; not so much about the cute part, but just..." But just the part - give me a break, you know! - 'I danced with a girl who danced with the man who danced with the Prince of Wales', kind of thing. And I said, "Well, honey, I'm not as hot as you think", I mean, less hot, because I said, "I'm HIV negative". And he looked sort of downtrodden... and I said, "Ooh", you know, "You only want a diseased one?" And I said, "I've not heard something more stupid," and I then, I sort of... this kid... and I said, "Stand up", and I just sort of attacked him for about ten minutes; poor thing, and I went up to him afterwards. But actually, you know, how can you even say something like that?! I mean, it's so stupid! All right, yes, you probably could contract AIDS at the age of 25 and nowadays maybe live to be 60 or 80. But it's a chronic disease, and there are problems, so don't think, even if you don't die or have Kaposi's sarcoma, it's going to be a fun time of it! I said, talk to someone who has diabetes, you know, no fun there. So it would be nice to see if someone, to use a trashy and effective word, "nice"; could come up with something [i.e. new imagery]. Maybe it needs to again be; I don't know if it's a horrific image again, or something that's extremely sexy; you know, like some of those early Sydney posters? I remember that one that was so great that was, oh, what was it called? It was played after the thing in Australia where they would be, with people going to the beach, "slip slap and slide", remember that?

Yeah, "slip, slop, slide", yeah.

Yeah, and they were using [the slogan] "slip on a condom, slap on some lubricant..." that was really clever.

Yeah. The Western Australian AIDS Council did that. I think it was in 1992.

That was really clever, I really loved that. And then all those fabulous posters they did; and this wasn't really about the AIDS crisis, but it was about the gay community, and, what was the organization in Sydney? Oh shit, I can't remember what it was called. The New South Wales something... And it was portraits of pairs of, like, one was a nun and the other was a biker boy; and they did these paired posters, they were really fabulous. "Some of us like glitter and some of us like, you know, corduroy". But, yeah, something, a new kind of image, that could respond to where we stand with AIDS. I think that's necessary. The one thing that was said to me that sounds extremely interesting is this notion of maybe what people are doing in South Africa, to respond. You know, that is obviously a climate [i.e. situation] that's very, very different from our own, but... And some things [from the South African response] would not be applicable; but maybe that's even better. You know, so [inaudible] specific that maybe they've got to be even more effective.

Yeah, at the moment the New York Health Department's campaign slogan is "HIV stops with me", with a black and white photograph of a guy's face looking straight at the camera, saying, "I'm responsible for my own disease, it's my responsibility not to infect anybody else..." But this is very different from (a) shock, or (b) sex; I mean, it's neither of those things. And there is, again, the ACT UP type people saying that they hate it, because it sort of stigmatizes people with AIDS again, it says "you're the ones that are responsible for everyone else..."

Yeah, right, and that sort of mug shot image.

Yeah, yeah. Oh, I mean, the images are quite beautiful; they're all very beautiful looking boys, and you know...

But still...

Yeah, it's interesting. So, my last question on that theme, I suppose: Larry Kramer found it very difficult to leave the organizations that he founded; he had this sort of, this acrimonious... [Tom's phone rings - the interview is momentarily interrupted] So I was just saying that Larry Kramer found it very hard to give up control of the organizations that he established, but you don't at all seem to have found it difficult to say, "Well it's moved in a different direction, I've got things to do, and..."

Well, let's put it this way; it had been ten years when I was here. And at that point I thought – and I really believe this – that a lot of times you need new blood to sort of resuscitate [an organization]. It has only been now listening to her [Amy Sadao, Executive Director of Visual AIDS, who briefly spoke with Tom during a pause in the interview], really in the last two or three years that, in my opinion, that Visual AIDS has sort of, you know, gotten going again. 'Cause I think for a few years, you know, you'd hear some things, and they were sort of bumbling along... and, I mean, not knowing what to do. And that was partly because they hadn't done what they're doing now in a serious way; both raise money and really deciding to service a different kind of community than what we did; and, sort of, when you lost that, sort of, immediacy; you know, sort of...[Tom is

interrupted by the waitress.] ... if I ever come to Adelaide... I always think Adelaide is the weirdest place on the face of the earth.

It is pretty weird.

I mean, every time I've been there, someone has just been, like [the] head of the court, has been found in an S&M bar hanging upside down with his skin flayed off; it's a very grotesque place.

Or put in a barrel filled with acid, or...!

It's a very sort of Victorian place. I think it's very much like Pittsburgh. Ooh! But...

It is a lot more exciting than people give it credit for. It's known as the City of Churches, which doesn't inspire much confidence in terms of its nightlife and everything, but it does have its charms once you get to know it.

It's also one of those prissy cities, like Melbourne, that was not a convict city. So it's sort of like, "We were here when the gold or silver rush..." or whatever.

Oh yes, and they're very proud of that as well. We had Mandy Patinkin, the Broadway star and film star, do a show in Adelaide...

Oh, he's not Australian.

No, no, no, he's American, but he came and did a show at the State Theatre and my partner Katrina and I are sitting there watching, and he goes "And I heard that you guys are all descended from convicts". And someone just stood up in the middle of the theater and said, "Not us, we're from Adelaide!" I just thought, "Oh, how provincial is this bloke!" [both laugh] "Let him tell his story". But...

You know, I think it was partly because of the organization, there were, at that point, there were a couple of personality things that were going through, and Patrick was having some problems; he was getting really ill at the time, and there were some people on the Board; I mean, to be totally blunt, he and they did not see eye to eye, and that got really difficult. And there was some bad blood from that, still, among the generation of people. But I think for me, also, it was a factor, leaving the City, so that was probably... if I was still here, that would still have had some sort of emotional ties. But, you know, I've done different things with regard to some of the same issues in Pittsburgh...

You were on the AIDS taskforce there for a while, or still...?

No, no, no, I was never on their Board. I served in a number of sort of honorary capacities and chaired some of their galas a number of years ago; I... yeah, no, I was on the taskforce; oh, what am I saying, yeah, of course. No; see, the reason I stopped is there's another organization in Pittsburgh that's called Persad, which is an organization primarily about psychological counsel for people in the gay and lesbian community; much of what they did, early on, even before when I got there, was counsel people with AIDS, so I was involved with them as well, so that's what first stopped me. And I think that's sort of good,

and I think generational change is important... Also I think when you're older, and having gone through a period as intense as that was, not that you want to say "eh" now, but you hope that people who were younger and maybe been... [brief interruption – waiter] You know, it's time for someone else to do something. And, I mean, that's great, and she seems to be really snappy.

Amy's terrific. But it is hard to raise money nowadays when people think that AIDS is over and, you know, the next crisis has come along.

Right, exactly.

And that it, the organization, has been around for twenty years and people sort of think, well, "Aren't you a wealthy organization already?"

Right, couldn't you get it together, right, exactly.

And I don't think they get the sense that there's one and a half staff members there doing a lot of work.

Yeah, well exactly. And as she said, "We're doing such and such," but, you know, the grants she's talking about are about twenty thousand, fifteen thousand, and in New York, but for ...

And unfortunately it takes just as much time to write an application for fifteen thousand as it does for five hundred thousand. It's the...

Of course, of course, of course; and then the question that I would ask is, it's harder to do this in a place like New York, since there's so much... and you can get these wedges of people doing, you know.. but are perhaps things maybe better solved if, nowadays at least, when maybe the AIDS crisis isn't, at least in our world, quite so immediately engaging; like, in a better set of words; that maybe you get a sort of an organization that works with a progressive agenda; in other words, sort of arts for progressive issues, AIDS being one of them; I don't know. And maybe that's the way, because at times... you know, just as we found really it started with almost all of us; I don't say everyone, but I would say preponderantly in the gay community; in Visual AIDS was mostly gay people, just for obvious reasons, but...

Now, I want to know one thing, who have you talked to? Because I'm just thinking there's people who you might not know of and people I might be able to recommend; I don't know how much time you have, if you're leaving in the three days or something...

I've got two more weeks here. I've been mainly talking to artists who are making work now; some of them would be, like, Dui Seid was making work very early on; Barton Benes, Steed Taylor...

You should definitely talk to Donald Moffett. Definitely. 'Cause he's one of the best artists. He was with Gran Fury, and makes very potent, serious art. Because it's in the summer you're going to have a hard time getting hold of them, probably; his partner is Bob Gober, who's working... I'm thinking probably you would look at one person from that late '80s,

'90s period who made the most, like, profound work about the AIDS crisis, is Bob Gober. But he was... Oh, do you know the name?

No.

Oh, let me write it down.

I don't know why I haven't come across him.

Oh yeah, he really would be the major; I mean, and most people would say that Bob is, like, one of the great sculptors of the '90s.

Oh, sorry, Robert... yes, I thought you said "Bob Goldberg".

Oh yeah, no, Gober. And his partner is Donald Moffett, who makes again, wonderful work, in the same sort of, not visual mode as Bob, but where the idea of loss and that, it's very discursive. I mean, it's not à la Dui or someone else where the work is visceral, and sort of in your face, ergghh, you know. Who else... really now, not so many people just because it's apparently not popular. I mean, it's an awful thing to say about socially engaged art, but it's not! And we're also not in the period where almost any socially engaged art is invoked.

I think some of the best art that's being made is by African-American artists and Latino artists who are talking about AIDS in their community.

Such as?

There's a guy called Derek Jackson, who's a photographer; he did a series called *Thug Life* and *Black Faggot*, which is based... it's all about the 'down low'...

What's the name?

Derek Jackson. He's from New York, but he's living in Portland, Maine, at the moment.

Oh. Does he show with any...?

Yeah, he was... I don't know who he's represented by, but he's done a bunch of shows.

Oh really? Not a name I know.

Yeah, it's mainly photography; he does film as well. We were just talking about Dubai before - he has been invited to go to Dubai to do something. And a guy called Ivan Monforte; there's a curator called Edwin Ramoran, he used to be at the Bronx Museum, and Longwood museum...

Oh, Longwood Project.

Yeah. And he did a show called *On the Down Low* [DL: *The Down Low in Contemporary Art*], or, looking at this idea of straight identifying African-American men who have sex with men.

And this was where, at the Bronx, or at Longwood?

At Longwood, yeah. And that was probably two or three years ago. That's when I first come across both of their work. But they're doing some really good stuff. I mean, as soon as you... there's this huge absence of work about infection through needles, as well, that no-one... they're mainly gay artists making work about gay men dying of AIDS, so there's not that much about women with AIDS, and not much about needles and drug use, which is... I would love to see that addressed maybe more prominently, but that's...

Well, you know, I'm all... from Visual AIDS; you spoke with Robert Atkins?

Yes. And Barbara Hunt...

Oh yeah, she was the person who took over Visual AIDS first.

Yeah, she was there in 1999, or 2000?

Two other people I would suggest; well, I would definitely talk to Patrick O'Connell, and if you can't get his number - I don't have it with me, I have it at home - but you really should talk to Patrick, because he was really... And you'll get a certain sense of bitterness out of Patrick just because of, sort of, life things; his partner died; but he was really important... and tell him I said you should. And then the other person I think you'd find really useful for a couple of reasons; he was the only straight guy that was on the Board from the very beginning, a man by the name of Tom Finkelpearl. And Tom's a wonderful person, and he is the director of the Queens Museum. He is wonderful. And also, Tom's really good because he will give you a couple of other interesting perspectives because before he came to the Queens Museum - he's been there now, oh I guess about eight years or so - but he then was for two terms, he was involved with PS1, which - you know what that is?

Yeah.

So they did a lot of activist stuff; but then before that for nine years, for most of the time, yeah, I think the whole time he was on Visual AIDS, he was in charge of the projects that the City did for the arts; like art in the subway stations... so did a lot of sort of activist stuff, a lot with communities and color, issues of women, and so there was a lot of Visual AIDS seen... he's really a wonderful person, a really good guy.

I've read a book of his, it's more a collection of essays, I'm trying to remember what it's called.

I think it's called something like "Art in the Streets" or something...

That's it, yeah.

He's a really, really lovely person. And then... although, oh, he's now in Los Angeles... is our first president, Philip Yenawine, but he's sort of hard to find, 'cause he's sort of flying around; he does a lot with art education all around the world, he's now in L.A. But I think those are probably the people who could give you...

To talk to. Ok. I've got some questions about *From Media to Metaphor*, but how...

No, ok, I'm fine, sure.

Do you want to go somewhere else and get a coffee, or something?

Yeah, sure. Ok.

[The interview is suspended for a short period. Tom and Paul resume speaking in a nearby cafe on 8th Ave.]

Tom, I want to focus this part of the interview on the exhibition *From Media to Metaphor*, which travelled to nine different galleries in the United States and one in Canada from January 1992 to March 1994. I imagine you would have had to begin to devise that exhibition earlier than 1992; can you remember when you would have started working on getting that show together?

I don't really remember, I'm trying to think back; whether it was a show that Robert Atkins and I decided to do, just to do it, at Grey [Gallery], or whether we had conceived of doing it right away for Independent Curators Incorporated, who were the people who toured it. I really don't remember, to tell you the truth. But I don't think it was too long a time, because the whole idea was at that point, you know, ten years of AIDS art, I think we said, or...? No, it couldn't have been. But there was a period why we decided to do it then... it couldn't have been ten years, because, what were the dates when the show was?

'92 to '94.

No, it couldn't have been that. No, I think it was just this idea we were still very much interested and felt that no-one had done the sort of survey; looking, partly as you are now, twenty years later, or whatever it's been, at what that all meant. And to look, and that there were epochs within it. And, you know, decided how we are going to do it, how the catalogue that's going to come out, because at one point we thought of having different essayists, and then we decided no, that wasn't the way to do it, but to have these back and forth dialogues was the way we ultimately chose. But how we got to that, I don't really remember any more.

And what was the role of the Independent Curators Incorporated?

Well what they did, and as they continue to do today, they would allow any institution, but particularly smaller ones [brief interruption – waiter]... to do an exhibition where basically you prepare the list for them; they gave you, who it may be, one person, a group of people, a fee for the show and then they would take care of doing all of the registrarial work of contacting the artists, well, we usually contacted them, but calling them and saying, "Where can we pick up the work; does it have to be crated; does it need electronic

stuff..." And then they would charge each one of the venues a fee. So it was a much simpler way... and then they would also raise money; if the show needed more money than what they could allow, putting all the venue fees within it, they would raise money. So it was just a way of making a traveling exhibition service that didn't have a curatorial team, go round getting supposedly the best and brightest in the world to do this. And they have now, you know, travelled tons of shows; I mean, they've really grown. They've been in charge, they've been 25 years old now, if not more.

And so they paid you a fee, then, to work on the shows...

Right, as the visiting curator, Robert and I.

Had there been any exhibitions of that magnitude about AIDS-related art prior to that?

Nowhere; partly because, I think, there weren't that many shows. And, really, when I think about it, some of the biggest ones; as we said earlier, the *Don't Leave Me This Way* exhibition was probably one of the largest ones; then there was a show that Larry Rinder did, out in Los Angeles, that was really sort of a gay show, gay sensibility, but obviously for shows on at that time, AIDS had to be part of it. But there really had not been one, and the whole idea was to say that AIDS art now had a history; it just wasn't showing David Wojnarowicz or Nick Nixon, because it was interesting; I mean, right at that time I said to you we did the Roslyn Solomon photographs; the Nick Nixon show which was done at MoMA, just because it was done at MoMA got a lot of shit from Douglas Crimp and people like that; but our point was that this was now a subject, AIDS was now a subject matter in the history of art, just as you would say Renaissance work, or predella painting, or you know, the... Phil Noland, who was that famous guy in Australia who...?

Sidney Nolan.

Yeah, what was it, the guy who did?

Ned Kelly.

Ned Kelly series, yeah. But these were a category, you know. And then you could talk about it, and lots of people knew, and enough people were building on other people's work, and quoting other people's work, who did it earlier.

What was the name of the fellow in Los Angeles you mentioned who did the, sort of, gay...

Larry Rinder.

Larry Winder.

No, Larry Rinder, R-I-N-D-E-R. And I think a co-curator, or in some sort of capacity, was Nayland Blake. And the show was called, oh... I can't remember the name of it, but I can find that out for you if you need to.

And how did you find the artists, then, to participate? How did you become aware of their work?

Well, it's so funny because I haven't looked at this in eight years. Some of the people I had shown already...

As a part of *Morality's Tales*...

Well no, not just through, but different things; but see we had these windows that I talked about, and then we also had a little gallery that was maybe the size of this front room that was the other side of the big space, and often I would just focus on one person's work, but that was somewhere we found; oh, Ross Bleckner I had shown before, his were all AIDS related art; Nancy Burson the same thing; Steven Evans I had shown before; General Idea; Adrian Kellard I had shown before; Keith Haring, a lot of these people.

So did you have to contact them and say, "Do you have any work about AIDS?", or you already knew that they had a work about AIDS?

Well we knew, and then... yeah, I mean, it was that; but some of these people, you know, Frank Moore was in – oh, this was Donald Moffett, remember I was telling you – Frank Moore was in Visual AIDS; some of the photography people out of Los Angeles Robert knew, and then there were some people I liked and some people he didn't like, so they were cut out and that kind of thing. But a lot of these people we either had shown; I'd done a single person show of Masami Teraoka... So they were people who we knew of; and there weren't that many of them all together; as much as we could do this, it wasn't as if there were like 700 more. And also, we also wanted to show work that was, if not agitprop but at least had a fairly direct connection with AIDS, 'cause there certainly was a lot of work if you wanted to do something much larger, that dealt with loss at the time, or some people made the point that if, like, Ross Bleckner-like works were darkness, and, you know, penumbral landscapes and if they'd ask me, and, "Oh oh, you know, it's a very difficult time, time of hunger and AIDS etc.", so once you'd expanded it out large ways, but we wanted to make the point fairly didactically.

Yeah, fairly explicitly. When the exhibition toured to the different galleries, I think it was mandated that there would be a local component as well, as part of the exhibition.

Yeah, we always did that, yeah.

Can you remember what some of those local initiatives were?

I really don't; in fact, I'm trying to remember, 'cause I know I went to a couple of them to lecture, and Robert went to others. Let's see. Oh, maybe I didn't go to that many. Yeah, and I think I went to Miami to the Bass. I guess... yeah, I didn't go to so many as I thought I did. But that was one thing; and we would help in some ways to sort of, if there was some things we should ask; I mean, we had no idea who was doing what in, you know, Alabama. But more than likely, places that were interested enough to take the show would have had some referencing point in the community, and if they'd started asking; and then to others we would just say, "Hey, if you wanted to bring in work from somebody in New

York who you feel speaks really directly to your community, that's up to you; you know, that's your take".

Can you think of... Oh, first of all, how many people? Do you have an idea of how many people would have seen the show as it traveled around?

Well a lot of these, and not uninterestingly, were smaller places; and that's also a telling thing that; I mean, now, there's two aspects to it. One, usually bigger museums don't like to take touring shows, they like to do it themselves, but also I think it's not uninteresting that, let's see, University Gallery, Contemporary Arts Center; I have no idea what the Sharadin Art Gallery was, but I bet you – oh, Kutztown University, ok; Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal, that's a bigger place; the Bass; but all these are fairly small or university related, and I think that sort of suggests that even in '92 to '94, when the AIDS crisis was pretty endemic – pandemic – still places were, you know, hands-off about it. So we figured most of these would be up for a two, two and a half month run times; you know, ten [venues] or whatever it is; maybe 20,000 people each venue; so it wasn't a huge amount.

It's still a lot though, 20,000 each venue. I think that Robert [Atkins] was saying that the... [referring to the exhibition catalogue] Oh, keep that, you might need to keep looking at it...

Aide-mémoire, you know!

I think Robert was saying the gallery in Montreal had just opened up fairly recently, and so that was still new and fresh and people were coming to it just because they wanted to see the other shows and things that were on.

Well maybe a new building, but it was not a new institution, because, you know...

Yeah, it was a new building, yeah.

Yeah, that may be.

All right; can you really think if there were any particular controversies over any of the works shown in the exhibition?

This wasn't a controversy, but I remember one of the big issues was in Dui Seid's work...[consults catalogue] where is it?... where is Dui?... there we are; whether this was actual medical detritus or not. And there was this, I think the first venue that called up and they had someone who saw it, the art handlers picking it up, sort of like dropped it, and went "Ergh!" and running out of the room, and we had to get all sorts of affidavits to prove that it was just stage blood; you know, there was nothing there that was; there were no needles, 'cause someone said "Oh, what if you pinched these, you know, plastic casements..." No, there were no needles and it was all... But that's all I remember. Not in terms of; well, I guess that was more, not so much controversy, it was just more about safety issue, you know. But I don't really remember, I mean if there were, nothing preposterous; I mean, I don't remember anyone calling to ask us, I think we made a very firm stand, you know, that if we were going to start saying, "Well I'll show everything but

this one." We wouldn't allow that, to close the show... and I don't remember that happening.

You must have been a bit concerned. You were coming after Nicholas Nixon's show at MoMA in 1988, when there was the big ACT UP protest there, handing out the pamphlets, "No more pictures without context" etc.... the Roslyn Solomon show had received criticism; the Artists Space show had the NEA funding withdrawn in '89-'90. So you must have been a little bit worried in the back of your mind that there was going to be some sort of backlash.

Yeah, you know what was interesting; well, I mean, I guess I enjoyed playing with fire! It was so interesting 'cause I remember someone was in a, what's the... I think it was a Roslyn Solomon photograph, and someone, I think it was Donald Moffett, coming to the show, and saying how beautiful it was, he hadn't remembered how beautiful it was. And the one thing I remember, this is so funny, the opening night; 'cause it opened on January 10th or something, and I remember it was freezing cold in New York and that morning the heating in the gallery went off. And we almost were going to close for the opening, just not because of people or anything, but just for a fear that we had to take the works out of the gallery, 'cause it was so cold that there would be a problem; but it wasn't that cold; but I remember everyone had their coats on, and so there was a frisson of a real sort! But I just remember oh, it was freezing, freezing cold. And I remember someone saying "Fuck it, it's colder inside than it is outside," that's the only thing that I remember. No, but it was very funny, it was; we really had very little [controversy]. I mean, it was sort of once that immediate time period had gone, then people had moved on to other things. I remember when, some years before that, it was, like, 1986, '87, when the Robert Mapplethorpe show was on, of the eight venues I think it went to, only two had a problem, and it was finally Cincinnati that started the whole thing in Congress, but I don't think other venues...

Had a problem.

Nothing, it just...

Did you have any favorite works in the show, that you can remember, or ones that you felt were particularly important at that particular time?

[pause] It's funny, when you look back, I really hadn't remembered who was in the show, and... [pause] I don't know, I guess in just different ways they all do, I mean, 'cause they all speak to different... I mean, I've always loved Donald Moffett. I remember one piece I tried to buy, I don't know why I didn't; he did a piece that was – what was that for? Shit. Maybe it was the show on death; was it the show on death? And he did this piece which was 300 backlit transparencies, [gesturing] about this big, maybe eight inches in diameter, that you were looking down at a white rose. And in the center; what was the word? Oh shit. Did it say "mourn"? I think it said "mourn". And each one of the roses represented a hundred thousand people who were dead at that time. And it was for this show that was done on the subject of death that the New Museum did. And it was a very impressive piece. All these pieces... and subsequently over a number of years he sold them off as multiples; and I was going to buy a couple and I never did, I don't remember why. I didn't have the money, or what have you. But I always found that was such a; because that was, up until a certain point, [pointing at one of Moffett's works in the *From*

Media to Metaphor catalogue] that was the White House number, and then they changed it very quickly. Because it was like, in the background, was this lurid colors, 'cause it was like these things that they used to give out in the stores for... you know, in the streets, for porn numbers. And I always liked that piece an awful lot.



Gran Fury, *Call the White House*, backlit cibachrome transparency, 40" x 60", 1990.

And it recently - two or three years ago - was shown again, with the new Bush, you know, leadership.

Oh was it, I didn't know that, ok. [Interruption – phone call.] But anyway, you were asking what? I can't remember.

Oh, I was asking if you had any sort of particular favorites, we were talking about the Donald Moffett one, and...

Yeah. Oh, let's see. Well this [pointing to the catalogue], I remember when we did this, the...

Electric Blanket.

Electric Blanket, yes, see... that was great. I remember that first; this was fucking cold that night too, I remember! How many things do you think of in visceral ways! That was very impressive, 'cause again, it was a big public thing, and it was amazing.

Tom Woodruff was a very interesting artist. He's done a number of things that refer [to AIDS] in different ways; but they're more sort of like these, where they're kind of like this... [he's an] absolutely fabulous realistic painter, and he can paint almost any kind of thing; he's done all these things, like fruit that has died – like, rotting, in ways. He's a very amazing artist that, partly because of his style, has not been as prevalently positive.

Brian Weil was another interesting guy, sadly died of a drug overdose; he was a very interesting guy, and traveled... He was one of the people... was he in Gran Fury? He was either in Gran Fury or ACT UP; but one of the things he started up was very, very, very early on, he was working with AIDS babies: and would go to New York hospitals and

would spend, like, half a day just cuddling babies 'cause they made the point that, if children, young infants do not receive, sort of, epidermal abrasion, they can wither and die, almost. Because children need that, and of course these were babies either who were abandoned because they were HIV positive or they were born with AIDS; or the mothers have died in childbirth because they too were drug-addicted and had AIDS... And then he moved on and he connected up with some of the World AIDS [Day] things, and traveled and took photographs all over; like he did a whole series of photographs in sex clubs in Bangkok, and they're really interesting things, really, really... There was a big show of his work done at the ICP in, here in New York about; oh God, I don't know, time collapses; oh, at least ten years ago; but it was a really interesting body of work. [NB: Tom is talking about the exhibition *Brian Weil: The AIDS Photographs*, curated by Willis Hartshorn, 31 May - 21 July 1991.]

That's the International Center of Photography?

Yeah, that's right.

What kind of responses did you receive when you were approaching galleries to take the show on? Can you remember?

Well, at that point, I think, everything and everybody started opening up, started doing shows of various people. And so I don't remember anyone not wanting to be in the show. I remember some people who said, "Why wouldn't you want to be in the show?", you know, that kind of thing. But no, I don't remember any problem at that point.

And what about the gallery owners or the museums, the institutions themselves; did you get any really positive responses, "Yep, we really want to take your show", or, "No, there's no way we'd take your show"?

No, 'cause just looking at these, I don't remember knowing anyone, really, specifically, who was like my friend who ran this gallery; I mean, maybe some of Robert's, I don't remember. In fact the way this worked - the way the ICI works - it was simply ICI would every year send out a catalogue, saying, you know, we have these fifteen shows on tour and book what you want, and after they were booked then we would often get calls either to come and lecture, or asked if we could recommend people, or called by the local press before the show opened. But, no, then once they were already lassoed in and so... There was not the issue of, you know, problems, at all.

Did you get a sense of the audience responses to the show? Say, at the Grey Gallery, did you keep visitors' comments books, or did you keep a file of...

Yeah we had a visitors' comment book but I don't remember it being particularly interesting; there probably were some interesting things, but not that I remember inordinately fabulous. But then again, remember, we were a place where (a) I had been very activist, particularly involved with AIDS for oh, already five, six years since Visual AIDS had happened; so it was sort of like, "Oh yeah," you know; if I had done a show on bridesmaids I probably would have [been seen as] more controversial. I remember we had a guy who was our managing, sort of, operations guy, who was really good; he was more conservative than the rest of us liked, but he was a good guy, and he would always

say, "Oh Tom, what do you expect, of course everyone's going to love the show;" and he was partly right. And he was part of NYU, etc. Although we had one Vice President, and I always remember this, she would always at meetings ('cause I had, sort of, meeting status when I was there) and she would always make these slips of the tongue, and she'd say, "Well, what are we going to do about those homosexual windows at the Gay... oh, the Grey Art Gallery?" And each time I'd sort of 'grrr'. You know, and this was someone who wanted to be known as terribly intellectual and terribly avant garde; and heaven forbid if she would look like a Luddite, you know. But that was all I remember.

And then I remember one time my boss, who was a really great person, and she said to me, I was talking with her, and she said, "Oh Tom, sometimes the Trustees are saying, 'Oh, why are they doing something like that again...'" Not to the point of wanting to censor or not have me do it, 'cause no-one ever tried, but, "Oh, why can't they do such and such". And I remember we were in this discussion and a woman came up to me who was involved with one of the hospital projects with people with AIDS, and she laid into my boss, like, "How can you say that," and "Ra-ra-ra-ra", and, you know, "What's happening in this city," and my boss, who was a woman in her early seventies, and she was really great; started crying, "Oh, you made me cry, and this is terrible, and Tom: you can do it..." But I think there are often times in many places, except when you've got some real Luddites, as I said before, or someone who's terribly conservative, or maybe homophobic, whatever; it was just the notion of, "Mmm, this is the show that we come into," and so many people I think within universities or in communities, "Oh, we go to a gallery for peace and tranquility and beauty", you know, it's not of that at all; but neither was [inaudible] or neither was Picasso. And just because they're laments fifty years before; I mean, what's more potent about this is that it's the lament or the outrage of our own time period, and... I'm not sure if I have anything written about that.

What was the most, the biggest to-do I ever had in terms of a show we did...? No, oh, well, it's interesting; I remember... no, it was another show; I can't remember what it was of at the time, but the Postmaster General was honoring Visual AIDS and giving us a plaque for the Red Ribbon; even though they wouldn't give us any money for stealing the ribbon and saying that it was theirs to do whatever they wanted. But anyway, I remember he had spoken earlier at the Central Post Office here in New York, and I guess ACT UP attacked him. And I remember I went out to lunch, 'cause this ceremony which was happening at Grey and all the members were going to come; and I just was having lunch, somewhere around the university there, by myself, and my secretary, different secretary came running in, you know, "Tom, Tom, I've been looking round in all your favorite restaurants and oh, now you're here!" And I said, "What's the story?" And I said, you know, "Is the event..." and she said "oh no". Mrs. Levine, my boss, called up because I guess they had heard that there was this huge cabal up at the Central Post Office because of ACT UP; and they thought that they were going to come and attack the university! So I remember, they dragged out the university Police, and I remember the President of the university came, and my boss who was the Senior Vice-President and a couple of other Vice-Presidents, and I then went, "I'm coming!" 'Cause that was so funny, I remember, and I said, "Talk about a tempest in a teapot, for Christ's sake!"

'Cause this is happening when you were putting the show on, the....

No, no, no, no, no, it was just when the stamp was being...; but I mean it was still, at that point – I can't remember the exact date, it may have been before the show, I don't remember when the stamp was, actually. But just saying that, you know, that's how it almost turned into something, but it was really a tempest in a teapot, 'cause we had no TV cameras, which they had at the Central Post Office, so that's of course why ACT UP went there.

Could be visible.

They were no fools. You know...

If I wrote to the Grey Gallery, and I asked them if they've got a copy of the visitors' comments book, or if they can make photocopies, would they still have that on file, do you reckon?

Oh they should. The person you should write to would be Michelle Wong, W-O-N-G. And she's the registrar. And just say that I recommended... And if we did, and if they... we used to save them; yeah, they should.

'Cause it'd be great. I don't know, I'd imagine you would have some photographs of the exhibition *in situ* as well, which would be good to see.

A couple more questions; I was fascinated by two particular points that you raised in the catalogue essay - and I loved the way you did it as the interview, back and forth, as well - but you said in there, and this is a quote, that "This exhibition is unusual because we acknowledge a sometimes blurry divide between art and activism. We don't always see them as synonymous. Good politics do not necessarily make for good art".

Oh yeah, that's definitely true.

Yeah. Well for me, I suppose that sort of raised two questions; one: was that statement sort of aimed at pre-empting possible criticism from someone like ACT UP...

Oh no, because I think we used, for example, Gran Fury's "Kissing Doesn't Kill, Greed and..." uh, what was the words? "Kissing Doesn't Kill, Greed and Indifference Do." No, because the point of saying, when it is effectively done, it's fabulous. But if you were just doing something that wasn't as slick and as sophisticated as this, no-one's going to look at it. Because the whole point of it is, not so much to read out things that maybe were somebody angrier than someone had been in a year; but to say instead of, like, "Fuck you President Bush" or, "Fuck you President Nixon" or, no, now what was his name, I'll completely forget; the movie star.

Oh, Ronald Reagan?

Yeah, my God, that is a Freudian... the movie star, Reagan. But I mean, that's the point. No, it wasn't about that. It was just to say... too often, I think, people would do political things just to think it's good art because you can say "fuck this" or whatever: no! I mean art is

about making something that is visually arresting. And it's very interesting; I remember having this dialogue with someone; this is not necessarily AIDS related, but this was someone – a museum director – someone I respect very much; and there had been a big controversy over an artist at her museum, a guy by the name of Ron Athey who did this thing where he dealt with scarification.

He's a performance artist, isn't he, and [performs] body manipulation.

Yeah, and not a particularly good one in my opinion, and in many people's opinions. And he did this one piece where this woman – this was in Minneapolis at the Walker Arts Center – and she didn't even attend the piece, but she wrote this thing where supposedly what he did was – I saw the piece here in New York – he'd cut himself and then he would blot, and then put this blotted thing with bloodstain on it, like with pushpins on the wall. Well her line was, "He took these rags dripping with his diseased blood and put them on a clothesline and then they were flinging out at the audience, dripping, you know, huge quantities of diseased blood on the audience." I mean, talk about Grand Guignol; and there was a huge to-do about... But I remember my friend Kathy saying, you know, so often it's a shame we have to defend terrible art, just in order not to have censorship, 'cause he's really not an interesting artist. But then I remember, "Oh, should we cancel?"; "Oh no, it is art," etc. But no, because I think too often people are so intensely involved in some sort of crisis or movement or something that they think their emotional passion or their political nerve or verve will suffice. And no; art-making is about art-making, you know. And that so, and in a sense, when I look through this... and I wonder why we didn't include Donald Moffett, maybe... I mean, what's his name... Or did we include Goyer, wait a second. I wonder why we didn't include; maybe 'cause we really wanted to make it more that the art had to be very overtly about AIDS. But then you think back and some of these works, you know, art necessarily has powerful; I mean, it can be a very private sort of fun, is that a great work of art? Well, no, not really. But sometimes the more poignant ones are the ones that maybe allow, over a period of time, you still to use them and sort of be able to feel the same amount of, like *Guernica* or something like that; even though I have no feelings particularly about this kind of Civil War, but there's just such profundity in that work, that transcends it and spoke to that moment; but even today it speaks to totalitarianism and death and brutality and all of that.

So you'd be directly opposed to the Arlene Croce view: that some work is not critique-able, you can't take a critical stance on it because it is 'victim art' (in her words).

No, no. I remember when that came out, it was a big... I saw where she was coming from because I think the notion was... but I think she was sort of eschewing her role as a critic; because what she was saying is, either I am so deeply moved by the poignancy of the AIDS crisis because of friends who've died etc; or I am so taken by what, 'cause she was writing about – oh, what's this thing?

Bill T. Jones's dance piece, *Still/Here*.

You know, like, "I knew Arnie Zane and I share the pain and the loss of Arnie Zane." Well, all right, come on. I don't know if you've been hearing over the weekend, this – oh, what's his name – political analyst, Tim Russert died, and people talking about their feelings for

him, and then what he was good as a... You know, you have to step back and say, "Hey, I feel for Bill T. Jones and that, but some of his work was not good!" You know, what it's like, and art's like; and I think she was trying to eschew being unpopular, I think, in that review, really. I mean, it was very potently written, it's wasn't... but, I think she knew she was putting herself in the [inaudible word] seat more than she was being put there, I think.

Do we judge work that has a utility, a public utility, differently than other work? Do we judge work that maybe is trying to make a difference in the AIDS epidemic and possibly to save lives differently from another work? Maybe on aesthetic grounds, or... Is there a tendency to sometimes give AIDS related art a bit of a free ride because of its utility?

Well, that could be, that certainly could be. I'm trying to think how to answer that in a more serious way. [pauses] You know, ultimately, yes. And that's what activism, or even, I would say, for a fact, good art does not save lives. But I mean it can help those of us to live; as I think we're quoted as saying somewhere; but also the notion that if you're going to have real success with changing various aspects of the AIDS crisis or public knowledge about infection, public notions of hygiene and what have you; you have to change people's minds. And I think, you know, that notion of win hearts and minds; I mean, just seeing an AIDS baby or seeing a condom or seeing a syringe doesn't do that. It sometimes needs picturing. For example, Felix Gonzalez-Torres did this beautiful piece – I think he did it for the DIA Center for the Arts, I can't remember – but it was this huge piece that was a billboard piece. And one of them was these sort of AIDS timelines, but then he did another one which was about, well, his lover, but just emblematically, which was of a bed with a huge pillow and sort of with the impression of someone who had just got out of it, or had been taken away and died. You know, and that was a very telling thing because it was this whole notion of loss. Whether it's just the person you've slept with the night before and you wake up, and, like, "Where is he or she?" you know. Or this sadness of your partner, whoever he or she may be, has gone and oh, you're alone for the day; or somebody's left you, or somebody's left you because of death; and then it's just very moving. And it was very cinematic, and it could be read in the hullabaloo of New York City busy life; you pause with this, and it was just this... And that, I think, could really transforms people, just for a moment. That moment, just of loss. And loss in a wider sense; because I think if you've never lost someone to death, or lost someone younger to death, or lost someone who's deeply close to you, then it's only intellectual to say, "Oh I miss so many people." I always remember when I first moved to Pittsburgh – this is a bit of an excursus, but – I was involved in this ridiculous program called Leadership Pittsburgh, which my boss forced me to do. And it was sort of about getting to know who the potentates of the city were, government and health and you know, etc. And so I went once a month for almost a year and we'd have one day, it'd be like public streets and all these things, and meet these various people. But then at the end we had a retreat, so what did we learn, and we went up one day to this place in the highlands outside of Pittsburgh, and we were supposed to commune or whatever. And we were supposed to have this evening where each would bring an object that would be emblematic of ourselves. So of course, I being the drama queen that I am, I thought "What am I going to do?" You know, and most of these people were pretty corny, like "This is the cheese grater that my grandmother brought over from, you know, Northern Italy, and I own it now, and our family has grated our parmesan cheese on it..." You know, it's like, oh! And there were more of those than you can

imagine. So I go up; and there were a few that were interested in things; but I got up and I had – you know what a Rolodex is?

Yes.

And I had this bunch of Rolodex cards, and I stood up and I said, “Well I’ve brought Rolodex cards,” and everyone sort of burst out laughing, like, “Ha ha ha”. And then I said, “Well these Rolodex cards are very plaintive, because I’m a member of the gay community and these are 75 people who have died who I knew”. And, like many people – I don’t know about you – but many people have said that when people die, but because of the rapidity of deaths during the AIDS crisis, they couldn’t just totally scratch them out of their phone book. And I know I still have people now, twenty years after, but Rolodex cards, because, you know, you’d pull them out, so I have these. And so I went on about these, and I would go through and I’d say “Well there’s so-and-so”. And, “That was, you know, a lover.” Or “This was my business companion,” or “This was someone I saw every week; once a week for a drink, and this was, you know...” And there was this hush when I stepped down, and I remember it was so funny because I went and sat down [laughs] and there was this seat, and I sat down and this person who was sitting next to me moved one chair away, I still remember that.

You’re joking!

Oh, it was funny. And I sort of looked at him, I said, you know, “Pffft!” But then afterwards he was so interested; oh, some people came up to me, like, weeping, “Oh, my brother had died of AIDS and I couldn’t tell anyone about it”; it was really very dramatic. But... how did I get off on that.

I’m just thinking, like, “Let’s not invite him next year!” [laughs]

Right, exactly. No, but it was very interesting; I was the only one who... I guess many people didn’t think that I was gay or not, but I think it was that, and then the AIDS, and then these 75 cards, and, you know, it’s looking at my sort of mentality that came across. But really in the last three months it was very interesting; it was different responses, actually. Not so many homophobes or anything, but people were closer... and it was interesting, but... Oh sorry, I guess that was my point about saying unless you had that personal contact; just the death of someone. Another anecdotal story was a friend who had tons of friends in the gay community, she was a heterosexual woman, and we were walking in the Village one time; oh God, 1990 maybe. And we were walking across the street, and I was talking about something and she knew all the things I was involved with, and something or other got us onto talking about AIDS, and my friend said, “Oh, I never see people with AIDS,” and I said, “Eerk! Did you just see that guy who passed us?” “Oh yeah.” I said, “He was 29, probably.” But, you know, preternaturally haggard, and you know... and on his last legs; “Oh really?” You know, I was, like!

Well unless you have experience with it you wouldn’t necessarily recognize it. And that’s why, you know, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s piece is so strong, it’s...

Loss, yeah.

It makes it – yeah, you might not have lost someone from AIDS, but you understand loss. And this is what he’s trying to tap into.

I mean, yeah, some of the pieces here [referring to the exhibition catalogue] obviously you’re not about to – or this image virus... [Referring to Nancy Burson’s piece] I mean, it’s a neat image which sort of explains about proliferation in terms of the disease that they would carry this around, so it’s this sort of image proliferation; but it’s been just a little too intellectualized for the hoi polloi to get it, quite probably.

The second thing I found interesting from the catalogue essay, and you’ve just mentioned it already, is that it ends with Robert Atkins asking you a question: “Can art save lives?” And you say “No, not directly, but it can help the rest of us live”. I have two questions stemming from that; I want to know what you meant by that then, and have your feelings changed since? Do you still believe this now?

Oh yes, because I think number one: any time one has a loss – it doesn’t have to be death – you need something to help you get through it. I was talking, maybe over a weekend ago, a tour for someone of the Warhol Museum, and at one point I was showing them the paintings he did of Mrs. Kennedy. Are you familiar with these? Warhol did paintings of Mrs. Kennedy taken from the time of President Kennedy’s assassination. And he did 3,000 of them. And no-one has ever realized why he did them on that scale, and why he did so many. Because even though he made many prints and paintings, often he’d do, you know, a series of twenty or thirty and then... And my take on it was, and you could probably speak to this, I would think; I mean, your heritage – were you raised as a Catholic?

Yeah.

Well you know, in my Polish-American background I remember when somebody would die, at a visitation there would be these sort of holy cards. And often it would be an image of the Virgin, Lady of Sorrows; on the back it would say “Tom Sokolowski, born 1950, died...” And I think with these [Kennedy prints] he took this image [i.e. idea]; I mean, for a couple of reasons: number one, she was the most photographed person at that time, because no-one wanted to show the blown-up body of the President; but also she played into all these metaphors of, like, Our Madonna, sorrowing for us. But I think he was saying, you know, “Here’s your holy card, you take it home, I’m making these, 3,000 of them, emblematically, that we all have one”. And even though he’s this cool, hip, gay guy, whatever, living in New York and the fast lane and whatever; he went back to his ethnic traditions when it came to something as intimate and visceral as mourning the dead. And then we just found, about two weeks ago, a little envelope in one of his time capsules, in which he has two little sketches of these images that were to become of Mrs. Kennedy, and then in between, a little flower, if you can visualize his flower paintings. And immediately we hung in the gallery. Of those two he made about 3,000 [prints], and I think he was saying: what else do you do when someone dies, you send flowers. And then also immediately we all remember when Princess Diana died and there were millions of bouquets. So I think here you have one of the coolest, hippest, post-modern guys in the world saying, “Hey, I go back to my tradition” – what do you do? You do versions of the sorrowing Madonna, and you have flowers and people give them as tributes. So I think, that way, it helps you get through. Or a maudlin song that someone sings that makes you... I mean, I’ve just been through a memorial service for a dear friend who was a great,

famous musician, and they had this concert; and, amazing, his students and fellow musicians – he taught at Julliard – and then the last thing was this one friend, mutual friend, that was an Irish tenor who sang this totally schmaltzy but poignant song about “I will walk with you”. And by the fourth verse we were all in tears, because it was just this thing; you know, it touches that thing of loss. And I really believe that. Because people say that if you don’t have that opportunity with someone very close, to have that notion of seeing the corpse, seeing the body... I remember when I was a little kid, years and years ago, saying, you know, “Touch the hand” or somebody would say, like, “Kiss the body”. My grandparents were that wacky. But as grotesque as that could be, there was closure. You saw the person, stiff and laid out and made up with Kabuki make-up, but there was closure. And I really believe that. I really, really believe that.

And in the case of gay men, maybe, where the man has gone home to die, he’s had the funeral, the lover or the friends aren’t allowed to come to the funeral because the parents don’t want them there, so they don’t get that sense of closure.

Oh, well exactly, and I couldn’t tell you how many of those I knew. Bill Olander was someone who was a very, very, very dear friend, and went and lived [away] for about four months, and then we had a memorial service here in New York. I think that was also why memorial services became so important; because it was the way – even if the body wasn’t there and the parents weren’t there, where there was acrimony – a way in which one could have closure and sometimes, in very traditional ways, you know, religious things and that, or sometimes in the wackiest ways with can-can [dancing]. I mean, I’ve been to some of the most amazingly loony memorial services, but it was creating a tradition.

But it’s interesting, those visitors’ comments books I was telling you about from the Canberra show, and there was a number of those dedications saying, you know, “Mark, you felt so close, how I miss you” or “Darren, I cried for the first time: tears at last”. And it’s possible that it’s the experience of going through the gallery, the experience of viewing those works of art, that brings that closure which maybe they didn’t get in other respects.

I think particularly those works that were the most personal, where there were sort of diaristic, did that. [They were the most effective in that way] unless there was some work that was maybe so sublimely beautiful... And you know, it’s very funny; no-one knew, really, when Ross Bleckner – who was real hot shit for a while – no-one knew what his images were meant to be. Well, originally the first ones were stars, and then there are sort of these inky nights with these stars and of course everyone saw them as, maybe, an image of dystopian society, and the brash and all that. But then he later said they were meant to be the lights going out of people who had died; and these were a pattern made out of what could be white and red blood cells, and all that sort of thing. Some of these have poetry in them. You know, something like that [points] is absolutely beautiful.

The Duane Michals stuff is... it kills me every time I see it.

Although, have you ever met him? Oh he is such a bitchy old queen. It’s sort of hard; I mean, he’s just impossible! But you know, something like this; well, that’s sort of funny, that one, actually. But you know, where this is something quite different. The work is great, but it doesn’t necessarily get you in the mood.

Can you think of – even if you go outside of this show and think of other AIDS works more generally, and this could be theater, it could be film, it could be dance – can you think of some particular AIDS works which have been important for you, maybe in changing your mindset about the epidemic, or in helping you with your grieving process?

Well not for me, in terms of the epidemic, simply because of what I did. But, what pieces... I was a great fan, and a lot of people weren't, for that film *Longtime Companion*. I thought it was wonderful, I really thought it was a wonderful film. That was one [in which] I saw not so much myself, because I was never in that rich grand circle of people bouncing back and forth between penthouses and Fire Island; but that was a rather moving film. Partly because, I think, whereas in [the film] *An Early Frost* and things like that, they ended back with the family and that didn't happen with many people, where the family took people back; or other films where the family shuns them; but there it [i.e. *Longtime Companion*] was sort of saying, as so many people do, and not only just in the gay community but in big urban areas, you know, "you make your family with your friends". And those traditions, and the fact where the friends come, and they take turns staying with the person and all that; I found something very comforting in that. I always remember that play *As Is*, which was the first one; and did you ever see it?

No, I didn't see it. I've seen the movie; they made a tele-movie of it, I think.³

Oh, ok. But I just remember the last bit, where the nun comes out and the guy who asked her to paint his fingernails when he was dying; and the last line in the play, she comes out and she says, "gypsy rider", and she takes his fingers and she has her fingers painted and then the curtain comes down. And, you know, here's this nun who did this as her own kind of mourning thing. It's so out of character. And I think that was the sort of thing, where you have [this behaviour that is] out of character, with people who were truly transformed enough by an association with someone to do something that either they never thought they would do. And it's like, as you said, that business of wearing a ribbon when you've never been able to go along, you don't want to be criticized or ridiculed or derided for doing so, but you have to do it. And I remember, I think probably one of the more profound sort of moments; I remember being on a bus, riding from the airport – coming back to New York or visiting my parents, I can't remember – but there's a book by Reynolds Price and I can't remember what the name of it is, which is about this person who dies of AIDS and their lover comes back as a sort of ghost, but it's really, oh, it's really beautiful. I want to say 'The Prize' but I don't think that's right.⁴

Reynolds Price?

He writes; he's from North Carolina. And it's beautiful; I mean, Robert recommended it.

And that's fictional, or non-fiction?

³ The made-for-TV movie was written by the playwright William M. Hoffman, and screened in 1986.

⁴ Tom is referring to the Price's book *The Promise of Rest* (1995).

It's fictional. Just absolutely beautiful, though. See, I'm trying to think of any other sort of experiences. Not in dance, not in music necessarily that I can think of, and theatrical; there've been so many plays. [pauses]

At the start of our meeting [before we began recording] you were talking about the NAMES Quilt, and how that functions as a response to AIDS and how that makes people feel. Maybe you could just recap for the purposes of the tape what you think about the Quilt.

Well I think the Quilt, although some patches, I guess - if that's the word, Quilt pieces...?

Panels?

Panels, yeah - are so personal. And I think it's those personal things that are really touching. Because, yes, sometimes, it'd be great lines; you know, it's great that you quote Milton or something at the time of a funeral or something, but I think it's those personal things, because they are the things that we don't normally share. And those, then, that sort of open something up, and you think, "Oh my God, that just really..." you know, something... "I just know what they mean". And I think that was so much - and it was the enormity of seeing it, and as I say, I never saw the whole thing unfurled. And I think unfortunately, in the last few times that it was seen - and I only saw this through some videos - it got to be a little much. I mean, there were people wearing white, sort of unrolling it, and it was a little much. Yes, it is a profound thing, but give me a break after a while.

Yeah. In some ways the beauty of it is just seeing how, almost, un-stylized it is, and how homespun and stitched it is, and how authentic it is.

Exactly. And authentic. It's very interesting; my father died about sixteen years ago, and my mother, who's still alive, has dementia, she's 94 and not doing well, but every time I visit her, which is not infrequently, we go to the cemetery to see my father and I was there over Memorial Day. And you go and you see, especially at that time, all these people putting these flowers [on graves], and we would always - now my mother's not really that much able - but I'd critique some of them; you know, people putting flowers and then a plastic bag so the rain wouldn't [ruin them], you know [laughs]. I mean, some tacky thing like plastic covered furniture. But just that notion of people coming out; and, I guess, like me; I don't live in Chicago any more, but people come out and go and put these flowers. Sometimes they're old people, because for them the going to the cemetery was a whole thing. I'm sure once my mother dies, I'm sure maybe immediately afterwards; but I don't see myself in any way going back to Chicago to visit her and my father's grave; maybe I will, who knows. But I think the Quilt has that notion of saying these really intimate things. But also wanting those to be part of history. Wanting other people to learn from this. And that's to me what has always been very powerful about [it], is this fact that people are willing to open up their souls and say, "My son died and I'm grieving; and your son may die too, or your son may have died". And also, maybe you don't have a son but you have a daughter, and your daughter didn't die from AIDS, but she died tragically as a young person ... So this is for you, too. I've never done it, but I know other people have done them in tandems, like six or seven friends would get together and do one, so there's a sort of collective that's part of another collective that then is the nation...

Which, I imagine, can be quite a cathartic process as well, just sitting with four or five other people, and you're talking about the death, getting the feelings out.

Exactly. Right, yeah, it's like a little memorial service, yeah, exactly. And also, I think, with the whole idea of the artistic process is that even though many of them are by no means artistic; but, "Oh, should we put the line here, or should we put it here," and fighting about that, and then coming to a consensus, "Oh, no, he would have liked that"...

Yes, a lot of speaking for the person who's died, "Oh, he would have liked that there," and yeah, he wouldn't have, probably!

That's the last of my questions. Is there something that we've covered already that you want to revisit? Have you thought of something you want to add, or is there something you would like to state about something else?

Well you know, it's interesting, thinking about this, and then also when Amy was with us; just some of the names, some of these people I haven't seen or heard from in years; and yet I think it's funny – I've thought this often in the last twenty years or so – how some of those people really became either very, very close friends, or if not very, very close friends, people that, even if I haven't seen them for five years, or six years, somehow I remember that moment, and the connection. I think it was both the moment at New York, and one's age, and the AIDS crisis and everything else; but also with Visual AIDS and that, being a very important time. And with these people, most of whom were not, sort of, glamour queens; I guess all of us were in certain fun ways, but I think almost everyone involved in Visual AIDS, I have to say, and why it worked, was there wasn't anyone thinking "I'm from Whitney and therefore we must..." And I think maybe we sort of self-selected that way. But everyone was certainly welcome; maybe because some of us were in small positions and we had the time to do it. But I don't think it was that; I think it was just trying to do something that was bigger than all of us. And, you know, people didn't talk about who they were; that wasn't important. [It was a bit like] people, you know, who come back from war, Iraq or something or Vietnam, and even if they don't come back mutilated or wounded or shell-shocked there's just something that people will say, you know, you can't understand it, you don't know what it was like [to have been fighting the war]. And I don't know if I would go that far, but I think there was an intensity about it that was... I just remember this one year in particular, where I had these two very, very dear friends, and I would go every day to see one at lunchtime who was at one hospital, St Francis over here; and then the other would be in Beekman Downtown Hospital; every day for a year.

That's amazing.

And I would leave the one in the evenings and go to one of these meetings, and it was just... And I remember, it was so funny, when both of them died, I think it was like three or four years later, and I was doing a show with another artist and we met at his studio, nothing AIDS related or whatever, and I'm in his studio, and he's like, "Oh, let's go and have dinner" or whatever, he said, "I know this place, so let's go". And I remember we were driving down Broadway and we got to a certain street, and I started getting anxious and these palpitations. And I thought, "Oh, what's all this about, am I having a heart

attack?" And it struck me when we made this turn and I realized – and this is five years later, after the death of my friend – that I had not been down that path going to the Downtown Beekman Hospital in five years, just that way; and without knowing it my body was just remembering. And then it calmed down, but it was so bizarre. That just when you're in that road, and your body's saying, "Oh, remember, remember, remember". But it was a really intense moment.

I just marvel at the energy you would have, you must have had, to be doing that, to be involved in doing your own work with shows, be doing stuff with Visual AIDS, you know. And you weren't alone, either, in doing that; it's an incredible amount of energy that people had.

Well, I think maybe it helped us to get through it; I mean... I don't lambast or criticize people who didn't; but you think back on it, and you know, at the time some people just, egregiously making money; or on the other hand, just screwing their brains out and sticking dope up their nose and whatever; and I suppose that both of those in their own way, and the intensity of those, is maybe a way of not seeing or whatever. But I think it was a very sort of pressure period. And even now when people talk about the economy and that, it's not quite the same sort of thing. I mean, New York doesn't have the same kind of intensity. And, well, now it's just so expensive, I think a lot of that, this kind of stuff [Day Without Art, artists making work about AIDS rather than profitable pieces]; I don't even know if it'd be possible. You know, not just because of the cost of characters or humanity, perhaps, but all the galleries are just about making money, and unless they would sort of click in and say, you know, it's Robert Gober so whatever he does makes money, so of course if it's not about AIDS then looking at people's rectums, as paintings, then fine. But I think at that point there was that kind of freedom. New York has always been expensive, but still, [at least then] you'd get a place to live, but now that's all so emblematic in New York. And everything was also so professional. And I almost mean that in a kind of negative way. You know, it's all shined up and gold frames and bigger than life, and whatever. And I think there was a rawness to a lot of this stuff, in different ways that you don't see [now]; but very little art that touches me. It's very interesting; at the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, which is the mother company of museum funding in Pittsburgh; we had this show that dates back to 1887 and it's called the Carnegie International, and it's just a sort of survey that people do every four years of what's out there. And it was very interesting – I mean, I didn't like it very much this year, it's on at the moment – but the one piece that struck me in the whole show that I could see being somewhat akin to this, it wasn't about AIDS but it was people talking from the former Yugoslavia, and they're people who were either Croatian or from Montenegro. But all of them, because they were all older and they had all lost children in the war back, what, ten, fifteen years ago. But the title of the piece was *I Won't Speak Serbian*. And Serbian, which was the ruling language of Yugoslavia under Tito what have you, what everyone had to learn and you learned it in schools; but these people wouldn't speak Serbian. And it was just this notion of them talking; and each of them was speaking in various dialects. But... you know, "Of course I speak Serbian but I won't speak it". And there were these very flat images of these old people done; very beautifully taken, very grainy; [and I liked] that notion of the language itself speaking of totalitarianism and brutality.

And you would know, with Polish people and Russian, speaking Russian as well, they won't speak Russian.

Right. I remember my mother once, when she travelled to Poland some years ago had red, well, dyed red hair. She was in a shop - and she was born in America but raised bilingually - and she heard someone say, *niemka* which means 'German woman' in Polish, on account of the red hair, so my mother made a point of speaking in Polish to this woman, saying, "Oh I'm from America," you know. But there's still that sort of hatred of Russia or Germany because of what they did to Poland.

It's interesting what you're saying about the art world being, nowadays, very glamorous and professional and all that. I wonder if people would have the confidence, and even the naivety, any more to start up something like Visual AIDS and to believe that it was achievable at a grass roots level, that...

Well I would say yes; because I think, for as much as just, like, I believe it; but you know, people did it during Vietnam. I mean, it was very interesting, when we were doing this at different points, people would come in... I remember this one guy, oh, I can't think of his name now; but an artist who'd be very, very old now or dead, but he was a real lefty of the fifties, and came and said, like, "I think we should," you know. And this was all about labor and artists' unions and all this sort of thing. But that was a very big movement in the fifties and we look back to artists' socialist [inaudible few words] and the WPA [Works Project Administration] during the Depression... So I think...

I can believe it before; I don't know if I can believe it now, you know, just how sophisticated the...

Well you know, the spirit still, I think, is there. And I think if something calls you...

I suppose there were some things about Hurricane Katrina, I mean, yeah, Hurricane Katrina, and...

Well, it's interesting; and I'll step back now; and it is really interesting that, you know, potent - well no, no, forget potent - I can't think of a single person who has made a really powerful image, or images or art, about the War in Iraq, not a single one. Not a single one. Now, I'm sure there's some out there, but I certainly read everything and get around to New York often enough and whatever; I can't think of anything really, except I'm told - and I've not seen it - but Spike Lee did a documentary; well, documentary, neo-fiction as he usually does; thing about the Katrina that people say is good. No-one really has done anything; well, no, no, there was one piece that did something like it; I can't remember the artist's name. But 9/11, that didn't engender much. Now, some people have said that was such a shock to us; you know, America never having been touched in such a way within our borders. But then the thing about that: maybe they're right. Or maybe it's the fact of things are so good right now. And I was just thinking about that this morning, because I had to go down to the World Trade Center, and I think God, it's not even ten years and if you didn't know what that hole was there for, you wouldn't know. And even during that time, the economy was good. And then the Iraq War; I don't know anyone who's fought in the war, or I don't know anyone who knows anyone who's fought in the war; at least I don't think I do. So, you know, is it back to those time periods, pre-Vietnam, when, well, then that's really beyond my time. But that was probably the last time - well, maybe the Korean War, where everyone went to war; there weren't exemptions for rich people or

people in school and that sort of thing. And so maybe the notion of where now, wars are fought in every country by the underclass, I don't know. And maybe that is the transition point. Although I have to say I do believe that the human spirit is such that it's going to find another reason when something awful, to sort of take up the cause again; you know, someone has to... I'm not a dystopian by temperament, but I don't know. And also I think what's very interesting, and stop me if I'm babbling on, but it's also interesting; I'll just make the comment that I've not seen anything as good in New York in terms of visual art in the last twelve years since I left New York. No relation, you know, but it's true [laughs]. No, it's really, really, true. When I've been back, there have been some wonderful museum shows, largely dealing with things in the past or last century or what have you; but when I think of just this past Saturday when I went around through Chelsea and I didn't see anything – you know, there were some very nice shows, but nothing of...

Yeah. Did you see the Whitney Biennial this year...

Oh, it was awful.

I thought it was awful as well; I'm glad you said that. Everyone kept telling me, "Oh, it's really political; it's a really political show". I don't know; the politics either escaped me or it just wasn't very well done; it just wasn't very sophisticated.

Well that's the same thing to be said about this year's Carnegie International. Roberta Smith in the *New York Times* wrote this rather negative review, and I think what she laced together was sort of unfortunate to hit this local curator in Pittsburgh; but it's sort of, is it this kind of show, which is dead because, number one, there is no regionalism anymore; and the same artists are in every show whether it's in, you know, Adelaide. It is a bad period for art, [number] two. Three, the curators have no balls and, four, the critics and whatever aren't willing to sort of take out after these shows because they don't want to offend artists' reputations with their galleries, or collectives who put a lot of money into it. So we're all being very positive, and therefore it's a very pallid time. I mean, had the Sydney Biennale opened yet, or...?

In Sydney, before I'd gone? I don't know, I hadn't... yeah, I hadn't heard anything that it was open; I mean, we left in the start of February, we travelled a fair bit before we got here, so...

And now, is there still an Adelaide Festival, is that still on?

Yeah, it's every two years and it was this year. We missed it, 'cause we were travelling in February. It's a fabulous festival.

I've never been.

And every year they have a Fringe Festival which is the equivalent of any other city's main festival.

Oh ok, sort of like Edinburgh.

Yeah, and I mean, just top class acts.

I know a couple of times they've had visual things, too. Do they have a visual component to the Adelaide Festival?

Yep.

So I remember one year, I think it was the following year when I was in Adelaide the last time, and I think, what was his name, the German artist... Ansel Kiefer I think was the commissioner or something. The last time I remember, also, a friend of mine, who's, I can't think of him now, who went to live in Vienna, he's an opera director...

Barry Kosky?

Yeah, Barry Kosky.

Yeah, he's crazy!

Oh he's wonderful, he's just wonderful. I think he's fabulous.

He tends to put dildos on all of his actors; at some point in the show there will be someone with a dildo walking – or flouncing – across the stage.

Well actually I think you're right, because the last thing I saw of his was in Melbourne, which was in an old tram garage. And it was very, very long; three or four blocks long, a tram garage, so the tram could come in and then get greased; and the way that the seats were set up it was just one line of chairs, and it was the Dybbuk, the Jewish traditional theater thing, and it was done on those old fashioned kind of railroad things that rock up and down; and the play was these people who kept going up and down for this long, long thing; it really was very good. Yeah, he's amazing.

Sounds great. But yeah, he's in Germany at the moment. I think he's either touring something in the States or he's back in Australia doing something or other, 'cause I've just read something; and I'm reading...

I thought Vienna was his home base, this one theater company, unless he's moved. This is some years ago now.

It could be Vienna. But no, I've been reading American papers and Australian papers since I've been over here, so I can't remember which one I read it in. He's an interesting fellow. But it's a pretty fabulous Festival. We're very proud of it.

But anyway, so to answer: I think what people are saying about these shows is so much of [inaudible few words]. And [inaudible] said the same thing; it's all about these artists who are involved in, you know, a huge amount of process. But I guess my response to that would be, you did say the same thing about Visual AIDS, sort of coming round to our topic; you could say the same thing about Visual AIDS; but I think you would be, if we did all this talking, all these meetings, and never put out the Day Without Art or the Red Ribbon or the BroadSides, etc; to think that just the talking was enough. And I think maybe that is sort of a key to something you were asking; which is that maybe nowadays

the assumption is, like, a few little people can't do it, that you have to immediately involve someone with big money, and you have to get the biggest publicist to get involved in this; and I think what made Visual AIDS so effective was the fact that it wasn't over-processed. And it wasn't; and we never had sponsorship from anything corporate. At one point there was talk of taking money from Philip Morris, and we actually voted and we decided not to take the money because of cigarettes, it had nothing to do with AIDS. So there was never anything like that; like, oh, you'll get all the cigarette companies making money off people dying from AIDS. And nowadays people think that either it can't work or no-one's going to take it seriously unless the catalogue [is expensively produced]... I mean, this catalogue is a perfectly fine one, but it's little. But then once it's in thick, you know, vellum covers and distributed all over the world, then it's not real. And so I think that notion of scale, in a sick kind of way, is... [brief interruption – waiter]

Yeah, I agree with that.

And so it's sort of like ambition or misplaced ambition or you know, I don't know.

All right. Thanks Tom. I'll turn this off.

Ok.

[End of interview]

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Thomas Sokolowski interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, New York City, 16 June 2008, The Art of AIDS Prevention, <http://www.aidsart.org/#!vstc1=sokolowski>; <date accessed>