

Dui Seid interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

New York City, USA, 10 May 2004

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

Paul Sendziuk: This is an interview with Dui Seid. We're at his apartment in Chelsea, New York City, on the 10th of May 2004, and its 10:30am in the morning. Dui, can you begin by telling me why you decided to become an artist?

Dui Seid: I always was an artist. I went to Cooper Union (NYC) and graduated from there in 1968. I was making art which was, I think, spiritual in focus. It was only in the mid 1980s...84, that a friend became ill. At the time the disease was called GRID: Gay Related Immune Deficiency. There were a lot of myths and ignorance about how it was transmitted, what it was. There was no cure for it. But in any case, this friend subsequently died rather quickly. People did die rather quickly at the time and his progression towards emaciation, towards skeletal emaciation was quite shocking to me. I would come home from the hospital and start to work. Of course I could not be making art work that was like before. It was reflective of my emotional rollercoaster that I was going through. So I started making works that were elegiac at the time...they were visual prayers.

Subsequently more friends became ill and I realised that I was educated in a way of how to take care of people with AIDS. And in the late 80s I gave up a year to become a homecare worker, because I realised that there were people...I had gone to Paris and taken care of a friend for three months until he died. And when I came back I recognised that there were people who had no help, that their families had deserted them, or that they were having problems with their families, or they didn't want to leave New York City and face the stigma and prejudice and harassment of going home to another city and state.

So, I said, I had certain experiences, therefore I would give up a year of income and work. I worked for \$4 an hour, through the City, as a homecare worker. Generally the people that were homecare workers were High School educated, they were Black and Hispanic, that was the only job that they could get. It was absolutely minimal wage. For someone who had a college degree and was educated, it was quite unusual.

So I had a view of the AIDS crisis from a homecare worker's point of view and from taking care of people 'hands on'. My concern was their daily health needs rather than the political fight. The art that I made was reflective of that. It was not so much propagandistic, which, I would say, characterised the art of that period – the early 1980s running into the 90s.

Can you describe some the work that you did?

[Displaying photographs of his work] The early work was like that: spiritual...

That looks a bit like a spinal cord.

Right. They were all biomorphic works. Then, when AIDS was happening and my friends were dying and I'd come back from the hospital, this was one of the first pieces that I made. It was made out of paper, all the rocks, twigs, skeleton, everything is made out of paper.



Dui Seid, *Après le Déluge*, paper, acrylic, wood, glass, 8cm x 34cm x 52cm, 1985.

How do you pronounce its title?

Après le Déluge [translation: *After the Rain*]. That was made in 1985. And this one [showing another image]: I was invited to be in a summer exhibition about the beach, so I made one *Playa del Fuego*, which would be 'Fire Island', which was the gay utopian resort.

That is pretty heavy hitting stuff: the image of Fire Island. [The piece consists of a box seemingly filled with sand (but actually consisting of paper and paint) and miniature objects including a dead tree, a skeleton and section of blood red sand.]

So these were some of the early works.

Hourglass was in 1986. It shows a slab of flesh in a rather conical shape that has an aperture – a hole, a wound in the top that you pour sand in and it comes out the bottom. So it is like an hourglass: the vulnerability and temporal-ness of flesh and life.

That the flesh is dissolving into sand.

Right. And it stands precariously at a pinnacle of sand. When you build on sand, you're building on something that isn't stable.

This was *Node* – because everyone's lymph nodes were inflamed. So you have a node that is stretching and opening up and in between it is abundant flesh.

I should just say for the tape that this sculpture is as high as the ceiling of this studio and it looks a bit like a Cue-tip cotton bud, it has a bone-looking structure in the middle and two nasty green and brown bits at the end.



Dui Seid, *Hourglass*, polymerised paper, wood, metal, sand, 216cm x 112cm x 112cm, 1986.

Dui Seid, *Node*, encaustic, foam, copper, 260cm x 45cm x 38cm, 1987.

At the time they were talking about mineral nodes, which were created by volcanic eruptions under the sea. They were talking about farming those nodes. So it is actually a node that is opening up at actual flesh.

This was one of my favourite pieces, *U-brace Against the Door* (1988). [Gesturing] If I stood there I would be that tall. It is enormous. It took up the whole wall [about 2m tall – 45 degree angle of two bones intersecting into flesh] Into sockets of carrion meat. By that time, my feelings towards society and people involved in AIDS or not involved in AIDS, was that it was very taboo to speak about AIDS, that everyone was spending most of their physical energy trying to keep their blinders on. I felt that they were spending their time bracing against the door, to keep the truth out. I had friends that were HIV+ that were afraid to admit they were HIV+. Their art could not be related or about AIDS, even though it was the major thing that was impacting in their lives. So they were trying to keep that in denial. This piece is about denial. About society not wanting to – like the Republicans - not wanting to mention the word AIDS, or take any action, governmental action, to confront this medical problem. And about people with AIDS that were in denial about their condition.



Dui Seid, *U-Brace Against the Door* [installation shot], encaustic, fiberglass, foam, metal, latex, vinyl, 335cm x 305cm x 152cm, 1988. Exhibition: *The Body and Body Politic*, Tokyo, 1992.

Where was this piece shown?

It was exhibited in this studio. I showed this and *Hourglass* to people, wanting to get it shown [more widely]. The curator from the Whitney came in and said that this was 'disco' art. I didn't know where he was coming from. I was in hospitals. I was not in discos like he was. He showed me how ignorant he was about AIDS. This was in 1989, so it was where his head was at, not where my head was at...

[Incredulously] That is an incredibly insensitive remark isn't it?

I later wrote him a letter explaining what the work was about. It just shows you that AIDS was not an issue, at least for him.

Then I showed it to a museum director, who was open to exhibiting things about AIDS, who said this work will upset: "This is going to upset a lot of people" ...because at that time there weren't really very many artists or exhibitions about AIDS - totally about AIDS. We had Art Against AIDS, which were art auctions to raise money for AmFAR: American Foundation for AIDS Research. It included donations by artists so that their works could be sold and money could be raised for AIDS. But none of it was about AIDS...there were Warhols etc. Very little of it refers to AIDS or is about AIDS.

What responses did you get from people viewing your work? Perhaps the 'Fire Island' piece, 'Node' and the 'U-Brace' one? What were your friends saying about these pieces?

Well, I lost a lot of friends because at the time most of my friends were making meditative, spiritual sort of Eastern-related art. When I started making art with flesh, well, that's not very Zen! [Laughter] They didn't say anything to me, but I recognised that they disapproved. Some of my close friends, who were sick, told me that I should not make art about AIDS, that I would ruin my career. They had a problem with it. But I kept on doing it anyway.

Is that because they wanted art as an escape mechanism from their experience of their illness, that they didn't want to be thinking about flesh...they wanted to be thinking about transcendence instead?

At the time AIDS was full of fear. You feared your family's reaction. Many people were not 'out' to their families. You feared for your career; that people would not want to buy your art, particularly if you were not a blue chip artist. If you were a blue-chip artist, they would be quickly buying your art because you would be dying soon. But if you're struggling to make your name, if you were in the race, you didn't want to be seen as having a handicap. No-one is going to buy your art. People's advice to me was that I shouldn't do that because, first of all, it was so visceral, the work, that people wouldn't want to buy it and put it in their house; and the subject of AIDS was such a taboo.

Most people when they would see me would say to me , oh, "How are you doing now?" because, you know, because I was making art about AIDS they thought that I had AIDS! [Imitating a voice] "You would look darn well". There was a stigma to AIDS that was incredible, that was totally inconceivable. You would be rejected, you were afraid of being rejected and banished. And the government was of no help. It was horrible.

My first friend that died, he was the assistant to the minister of culture of New York City. When he died we couldn't find a funeral home for him that would handle the body. We only found one, on East 14th St. It was that bad. At that time, nurses and doctors were

refusing to touch you, to treat you. Dentists would not treat you. Nurses were leaving the hospital saying that they wouldn't work with AIDS patients.

AIDS affected patient's rights in hospitals. It affected the relationship between doctors and patient. Before AIDS no one questioned their doctor: he told you 'blah, blah, blah', you didn't question it at all. He didn't necessarily explain anything. But with AIDS the doctor didn't have the silver bullet, he didn't have an antibiotic that would wipe it out. So he was just as much in the dark as you were. White gay males, educated, went in and started researching medically... they understood everything that was going on. They got organised. They formed groups that were looking into new treatments, experimental treatments...the network of information about what was good, what was bad, what were the side effects of any of the opportunistic diseases, so that when a PWA – a person with AIDS - went to see his doctor [they would be informed]...First of all, because of ACT UP, so many of them became activists and one of the things was to take control of their own medical treatment. In order to do that you had to collaborate with your doctor and that changed how doctors related to their patients. Now, today, I know that I expect, whether it is a cold or whatever, it's a collaboration. I won't accept a doctor handing me a bottle of pills. I want to know what it is about, everything. Cancer organisations and patients have learned from the AIDS epidemic and activism. They have adopted so many of the ways that we treated the medical establishment.

In this situation that you're describing in the 1980s – this fear, this denial – the difficulty in getting treatments and getting people to listen, you were obviously making art about this and trying to raise some awareness. What could artists have done? Could art have made a difference in the 1980s?

Art can raise issues. Art can, for the artist him- or herself, bring to terms their relationship to AIDS in this difficult time. Some artists believe that art can heal. They were making art works that you meditated on to bring holistic healing. There were a lot of different points of view about how to go about it. Some were prayers, some were eulogies, some were a call to action, like ACT UP, political action.

There is one artist that I liked very much, the photographer Nicholas Nixon. He worked with people with AIDS and would once a week, or every few days, take a picture of them in their home.

He was HIV-positive himself, wasn't he?

No. He was given an exhibition very early on at the Museum of Modern Art. It was probably 1988. [Looking at Nixon's book] His photos show people when they were healthy, or relatively – you never could tell that they were HIV positive – and show the progression of the illness. The text of the book is by Bebe Nixon, his wife. It was a collaboration between the two of them. This one, Donald Perham is amazing, the father and son. The psychological relationship between them, I thought, was so potent.

But ACT UP hated it.

Yes. They picketed the show. This is the flyer that they handed out. It says 'NO MORE PICTURES WITHOUT CONTEXT'. And then it says:

'We believe that the representation of people with AIDS (PWAs) affects not only how viewers will perceive PWAs outside the museum, but ultimately crucial issues of AIDS funding, legislation and education. The artist's choice to produce representational work always affects more than a single artist's career, going beyond issues of curation, beyond the walls on which artists' work is displayed. Ultimately the issues of representation affect those portrayed. In portraying PWAs as people to be pitied or feared, as people alone or lonely, we believe this show perpetuates general misperceptions about AIDS without addressing the reality of those of us living everyday with this crisis as PWAs and as people who love PWAs.

Fact: many PWAs live longer after diagnosis due to experimental drug treatments, better information about nutrition and holistic health care, and due to the effects of PWAs engaged in a continuing battle to define and save their lives.

Fact: the majority of AIDS cases in New York City are now among people of colour, especially women. Typically women do not live long after diagnosis because of lack of access to affordable health care, a primary care physician or even basic information about what to do if they have AIDS. The PWA is a human being whose health has deteriorated not simply due to a virus but due to government inaction and inaccessibility of affordable health care and institutionalised neglect in the form of heterosexism, racism and sexism.

We demand the visibility of PWAs who are vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back.

STOP LOOKING AT US; START LISTENING TO US.'

So, this creed – the demand about how PWAs were to be represented - was taken and accepted by, I consider, the New York art establishment. I mean, you could not show things that...There were certain photographers that were promoted that showed people with AIDS but you couldn't tell the subject was HIV+. Smiling, or at a rally, defiant. This was the image of how you must represent them – the only way. I felt that some of Nixon's images were so realistic, for what I was seeing. I was seeing the love between the mother and father toward the son with AIDS in the home. Nicholas Nixon's work rang true to me because this is what I was seeing. I wasn't seeing people that were healthy-looking. For me, what was happening in the art world was: they wanted photogenic people. The moment you crossed over the line and became unphotogenic, bye-bye, you were forgotten.

You can understand why they produced a manifesto like that. They were trying to get through the idea that if you are HIV-positive you shouldn't be discriminated at work, or thrown out of a house, because they were trying to make you appear as ordinary and as normal and as not dangerous as possible. So you can understand

ACT UP's agenda. But they were denying the real experience – your experience that you were seeing.

I'm Chinese-American, so I know what happened in Maoist China. I know what the art looked like in Maoist China: the happy worker and the happy soldier with their arms in a fist, and smiling, marching on into the future. [Sarcastically] This is what ACT UP is asking for? Hello! It's Stalinist to ban any other representation. I thought we lived in a democracy where there were all points of view. I totally understand, and I'm not critical, of what they were promoting. But I felt it really quite Stalinist to dictate totally what could be shown.

Even though you're not a photographer, you felt that you were being isolated?

In 1988, the DIA Foundation [contemporary art space] organised an exhibition and a town meeting - it was a three-part series about democracy. One of the town meetings was called 'AIDS and Democracy'. It was organised by Group Material, an artist collaborative group. [Looking at a pamphlet] They say here the objective was 'AIDS in Democracy: A case study will confront the most pressing crisis as a society. This installation will create a junction in which sorrow, rage and fear can be used to reinforce our decision to act, to empower ourselves in the struggle for society in which all individuals will have their most basic needs fulfilled by a responsible egalitarian and truly democratic government.'

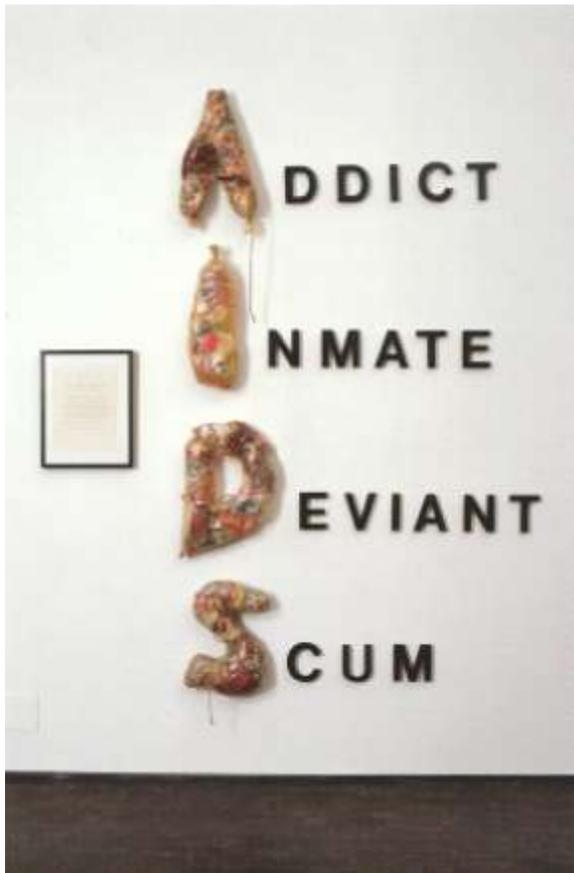
I attended that. Well, first of all I heard about that. Somebody advised me and notified DIA about the work that I was doing and they asked me to send something in. At the time I was making my 'AIDS words' series. I created a series in which [the letters] A.I.D.S. were made with medical waste that I had gotten as a worker. My idea was that there was not enough discussion going on between all the different points of view of what AIDS is, and so I wanted to make an art work, a conceptual piece, where when you walked in they would be up on the wall, each AIDS words piece: vertically [the letters] A.I.D.S. and then from each letter would be other words [written horizontally]. They would create a mindset. Each mindset would be represented. I didn't care if it was right-wing or not, or left-wing, or activist or PWA. They would debate each other. When a person entered the room they would recognise which one reflected their point of view and then they would have to see everyone else's. Next to each of these words was a more intimate statement that I had chosen that would reflect on the conventional response, generally to rebut it.

Where did those statements come from? Did you write them or were they taken from the media?

Some of them were taken from the media. Some of them were taken from right-wing demonstrations, from their flyers. Some were composited letters from prisoners with AIDS.

Lets look at one of the words: 'Almighty Intercede Deliverance Samaritan' – would the statement in the frame be countering or supporting those words?

In this one, in the frame is an obituary of a musician and composer who died of AIDS, whose concerto was being played by a symphony orchestra in Ohio. Reverend Phelps, who is a right-wing religious Baptist minister, self ordained, who goes from demonstration to demonstration all over the country with his family and they have 'God Hates Fags', and all these signs. He had created a flyer which was just absolutely horrific. Saying 'this sodomite is going to Hell', with a photograph of the composer. He sent that to the musician's mother. It arrived the day his body was being cremated. It just devastated her. They were outside picketing the memorial concert at the university. So it says 'Almighty Intercede Deliverance Samaritan', and then you see the distortion of what some Christian leaders are thinking. So this itself is a debate. Each one of these pieces was that.



Dui Seid, *Scum* (and detail) from *AIDS Words*, medical supplies, acrylic, paper, plastic, frame, 1989.

The medical waste and refuse that is encased in the letters – are they condoms or are they plastic bags?

They had plastic bags, syringes...blood turns black when it dries, so I used some acrylic paint to keep it red. They're housed in fibre-glass. They would say 'Addict Inmate Deviant Scum' next to a composite letter of HIV+ prisoners in an AIDS ward that were in total isolation. It was capital punishment. Murderers get isolation – get looked after better. This is what it was screaming about.

Where did you get the prisoner's letters from?

I was covering cultural aspects for P-WAC magazine, which was *People with AIDS Coalition Newslite*. And people all thought that I had AIDS.

Going back to the DIA show: I sent them one of the letters in a box to show them all my slides and things, documentation, what I was trying to do. I got a call immediately, the next day, telling me to come pick up my work. I wasn't going to be included in the exhibition. When I saw the exhibition it was totally abstract, it was basically black and white. The only visceral image was a photograph, an image reproduction, of Jewish Holocaust camp victims, meaning that at the time we had certain right-wing Republicans saying that people with AIDS should be quarantined. So they included a photograph of that referring to that issue. But there would be a black, you know, '+' sign, a black '—' sign, a table with ACT UP material and statistics. But there was no reference to the body, the fight of the body.

Kim Levin [art critic for the *Village Voice*] reviewed the exhibition and she wrote 'It's Called Denial'. [Looking at the review and photographs of the exhibition] This is some of the art work, you see. I mean, it is very 'cool'. There was very little emotion except for the ACT UP flyers and things that were in the room. What she said was that the body was missing in some way. In response to her review [there] were letters, and I am referred to in one of these letters. It was actually Kim Levin that had notified DIA about my work. It says here [referring to the newspaper] that she had proposed some artist's work and then it says 'our decision to exclude work that illustrates the disease in a horrific and arguably confrontational manner was a considered one. This exhibition was in part planned with people with AIDS and people living with the disease. Personalising AIDS is not an intellectual choice. When you live with the horror you don't need or want to see pictures of it. What Levin interprets as handsome and palatable we intend to be evocative and reflective and encouraging critical distance. The crisis demands we utilise every strategy on every front including AIDS'.

That is really odd because your 'AIDS word' series isn't quite as visceral as the flesh sculptures, and it is making those political arguments about the Catholic Church and about Christian society which is what ACT UP is doing in the flyers.

This piece upset a lot of people: Addict Inmate Deviate Scum. They didn't like that one.

Even though you were using these words ironically?

But everything had to be very straight forward, and very directly politicized, with political correctness. No ambiguity.

So where did the AIDS word series get shown?

It was shown in Reading, Pennsylvania, in one of the first AIDS exhibitions. I gave a talk there, where I spoke about being a homecare worker, and the need for them and what we

do. And the exponential increase of the crisis. Then I showed an edited video, made by inmates in Sing Sing, an upstate New York prison. It was a video, made by inmates there, about one particular inmate and what he was going through, being a prisoner with AIDS. He had a very bad case of KS that was encompassing all of his feet. His feet were black and bloated, like elephantitis. I showed that and some art people from New York came up and told me they had a problem with it. Well, I was showing the disease. Then the head of the AIDS organisation in Reading, Pennsylvania, which is a blue-collar town, industrially depressed, he came up to me and thanked me for showing it how it was, and that his lover was in hospital with KS. The whole point was that people from New York had already gotten what was politically correct, they had adopted the ACT UP censorship, whereas outside of New York people didn't have that baggage.

I'll read a letter from the *New York Times*, March 1989, it's called 'Artists with AIDS'. It was obviously in response to an article written by Michael Kimmelman, who was the art critic. 'Bitter Harvest - AIDS and the Arts' [19 March 1989]. It says, "I am an artist in favour of fighting AIDS not with the uncertain weapons of orthodox, unvarying party line propaganda, but by the truth as I see it, not as dictated to me by any group. I owe my friends - some of them dying from AIDS, some of them also artists not afraid to lead independent lives different from those designed for them by the gay media - this reaffirmation of our spirit. The AIDS epidemic will liberate gay America of its intransigent isolation within the larger society; and those dying of the disease are martyrs to this cause. We honour them by saying so, if their deaths are not be in vain, as we uncover this suppressed meaning. Such progress will only occur if AIDS activists will ever shut up for one moment and listen to someone not chorusing their constant ideological screaming."

Well, that is my point of view too.

That was a letter to the editor by Steven Meiss. Can you name any other artists who were supporting your point of view as well?

Rosalind Solomon was a photographer that was doing Portraits in the Time of AIDS. She had a show in the Grey Art Gallery in New York City at NYU. That was in 1988. These are the photos. [Looking at the photo] For me they are rather innocuous. [Pointing] That one is kind of more graphic. I knew him. But they objected to this exhibition as well because some of the images.

On the same grounds as the Nicholas Nixon photographs.

Yes, for showing KS.

You've talked a little bit about ACT UP...

They've done great work. But there were certain people in the leadership who became Stalinists. It became a one party system. It became the politburo. I won't name names. I can't even remember. It was so long ago. In any case, my point of view is not a point of view that you are probably not going to hear.

Before the tape began, you were talking about how art has changed – the degree of political correctness has now changed...

The AIDS epidemic is an on-going dynamic situation. A lot of the issues that ACT UP was fighting for - in terms of compassionate use and early release of drugs - was won. The discrimination laws and regulations were passed so that you could not discriminate against people with AIDS or anyone with a disability. If your partner died of AIDS you were not evicted from your apartment. Employment – you cannot be discriminated against or get fired because of AIDS ... In terms of the medical situation, people are living longer because of the cocktail and the advancement of that. So I believe a lot of the pressure has been taken off the desperation and in fact the relevance of ACT UP today as an organisation is diminished because the issues that they were bringing to the fore have in many ways been won.

But one of the things that they used to say at the time in the 80s was ‘we are living with AIDS not dying from AIDS’. That was the chant. I don’t have any photographs by the photographers that they were promoting – all the ones [taking pictures of PWAs] that were very healthy looking. I remember once being at New York Hospital, their AIDS clinic. I was bringing, accompanying, an AIDS patient that I was working with for his medical treatment. And in the waiting room I recognised this girl, I recognised her from her photographs being healthy-looking. But she didn’t look so good! And I said ‘Oh, oh, she just became invisible’! I was very upset at that time that there was a moment at which people with AIDS become invisible. Unphotogenic.

Now do you think that moment has passed, particularly since 1996, with the cocktail...

No, no. First of all, the art world has passed on. There aren’t exhibitions about AIDS anymore. I don’t know if an exhibition were to be curated today, whether or not the dogma, the manifesto, would apply. But what I do see is a lot more work that is diverse and personal.

Visual AIDS [organisation] – I was a board member – at the time that I was there, most of the board members of Visual AIDS were people in arts administration or writers or journalists or critics. There were few artists represented. There were basically gay white males. There was the thought of enlarging it to incorporate more artists and PWAs, artists who were PWAs. That created a direction. Basically now it is more of a PWA artist organisation and it is not so much to...the need for raising AIDS awareness, which was the first goal – creating the Red Ribbon, Night Without Light, Day Without Art – all of these things raise awareness. But the direction, goal, for Visual AIDS is to promote art by PWAs, to bring to public view. So it is a different agenda.

When were you on the board?

I can’t remember. It was in the early 90s.

Tell me, then, about the Red Ribbon Project, and how it came about.

The first time I became aware of the Red Ribbon Project there had been a meeting of artists, probably about six, over a weekend to discuss a symbol or some art work that would raise awareness. I remember that I was a little miffed that I wasn't asked to be there. I wasn't aware that they were meeting.

Can you remember who would have been at that meeting. Patrick O'Connell was one, I think?

There was Allen Frame, there was Frank Moore. Those are two that I can remember. [In a letter to *Art in America*, July 2003, Allen Frame named eleven other people who were present at the meeting. They are: Mark Happel, Leslie Sharpe, Ira McCrudden, Penny Arcade, Joanne Thornton, Jerry Tartaglia, Michael Stolbach, Dona McAdams, Eugenia Foxworth, Joe Rudy, and Maria Luppert. The meeting was held at P.S.122 Gallery in 1991.]

Robert Atkins, Tom Sokolowski?

No, it was a meeting of a group of artists. I remember that one of the ideas was to have a red ribbon in a test tube. At the time I was working with test tubes, so I pricked up my ears. But then they simplified it to just the red ribbon so that it could be made by anybody at home, or whatever, of the simplest means, to make a statement, a potent statement, of their awareness and of their support on the issue of AIDS.

Various people got involved in getting the ribbon out. I'm not fully aware of who exactly were the people who got it into the 'Obies' [awards]. My thinking is that it might have been Skip Mooney, who is now the director of development for Broadway Cares Equity Fights AIDS. I'm not certain.

Was it the OBIES or the Tonys?

It started with the Off-Broadway Awards first, then it was in the Tonys, then it was at the Academy Awards, and then at the Democratic National Presidential Convention. That's how it got out there and became controversial, because everyone was saying 'why is everyone wearing this red ribbon?' Then on the news they explained what it was, who was wearing it, who wasn't wearing it. It became an issue.

There have been criticisms of the Red Ribbon Project since, saying that it has become kitsch and that by wearing a ribbon it takes away your responsibility to do anything else to fight AIDS.

That was a point of view that ACT UP had. There was a meeting concerning that.

At Visual AIDS?

It happened that the New York City Cultural Affairs office on 57th St.

What year was this?

I'm very bad with years.

[Cheerfully] I'm a historian. I need dates! Names and dates!

I would have to look it up. It was in the 90s.

I remember, what is her name...she writes for the *Blade*...a lesbian. Anyway, she was sitting behind me – it was in the theatre at Cultural Affairs. She said: 'look at them, they're all in suits!' They were all coming home from work! It didn't look like an ACT UP meeting. She was one of the leaders of ACT UP.

So it was an ACT UP meeting?

No it was a Visual AIDS-called meeting to announce the release of artistic broadsides, but there was also going to be a discussion about the ribbon, about the relevance it had. For New York activists, wearing a red ribbon, walking around Manhattan, particularly downtown Manhattan which was their habitat, it is not an issue. But a friend of mine, an artist friend, who lived in Michigan, rural Michigan - his brother died of AIDS and his family had to confront that their two sons were gay, one died. Somehow it was in the newspaper and another family contacted them, or they contracted another family that also had a son die of AIDS. Together they started supporting each other, and they started making a quilt for the NAMES Project. And they wore red ribbons. Now these are farmers, who had never been politically active, and definitely not AIDS activists. They needed something to bring closure, to give them a feeling that they were memorialising their son, that he did not die in vain, that they would become...do something with his death.

Is that because they were still proud of him? They weren't going to hide him. They were actually going to wear him on their sleeves, literally?

Right. And they made a quilt to be added to the national AIDS quilt and then they would go to the capital of Michigan and they would go to demonstrate for AIDS! This family became activists, this rural family. Now that AIDS red ribbon meant something to them, and for them to wear it in their community and in their environment is a badge of courage, because that is red-neck country, dear!

Do you think it was a really important stepping stone...before they could become activists protesting in the capital city they first had to wear the red ribbon and that got them comfortable with making that kind of statement?

Yes, yes, yes. And then a personal friend of mine – he was in junior High School at the time – it's one of my best friend's nephew. This friend of ours, Michael, he died. So Jamie was brought up in junior High School at the time, was very fond of his uncle, adopted uncle,

Michael. And he was terribly grief stricken that his uncle died of AIDS. He knew all about AIDS by that point. He wore a red ribbon to school...in rural Connecticut! That boy wanted to make a statement, he wanted to let his friends, his classmates, know about his grief. So when these New York AIDS activists denigrate the red ribbon...no one is asking them to wear it...but it means something in other locales. It is a stepping stone to awareness. When I fly on Lufthansa to Europe, and I see the steward and stewardesses wearing a red ribbon, that is something.

Yes. Just looking at places like South Africa and Africa, that red ribbon symbol is omnipresent. They have obviously used that as a starting point, to start to talk about issues such as AIDS, discrimination against PWAs, how we can make people with AIDS more visible (because there is still a lot of people not coming forward as being HIV+ because they are worried about discrimination), and it looks like it has been that stepping stone to something greater along the track.

In the early days of the red ribbon, if you saw someone down the street wearing the red ribbon, it had significance because you knew that that person had been touched by AIDS. It was not like people in the closet. In other words they were coming out of the closet, you know? It was fallacious, ACT UP's accusations, saying with such blatant generalisations that people were feeling proud for doing something for AIDS by wearing the red ribbon but not actually doing anything. I say to them: how presumptuous! You don't know what these people are doing in their lives, whether that are activists or not, whether or not they have raised money for AIDS, whether or not they are homecare workers, whether or not they are doctors and nurses that care for people with AIDS, or somebody in their family has died. The accusation, what they were saying was: 'you wear but you don't do anything'. That's just another of their PC things, saying 'coalition building', 'you've got to go out and demonstrate and lie in the streets, and get arrested'.

If you look at how the celebrities started to wear the ribbon, you could say that it was just a gimmick, that was just a way of making people feel sympathetic towards them. But at the same time, it was those celebrities that we were seeing in Australia. If they weren't wearing them we wouldn't have known about the red ribbon project. The fact that someone like Sharon Stone, Elizabeth Taylor suffered personally from supporting the AIDS causes – accusations that they must have AIDS themselves, Liz Taylor...

Her daughter-in-law was HIV-positive and had AIDS.

So in many ways some of those pioneers of red ribbon wearing, they did something for the cause, and to label it kitsch or to say that ribbon wearers were just trying to fit-in with the crowd is a bit unfortunate, I think.

Well, the thing is, what they were attacking were these celebrities wearing the ribbon at the Convention or at the Oscars but that became news – it spread the word about AIDS and it made it alright for people to wear the red ribbon in their own little rural locale, to speak about AIDS. It was such a taboo to speak about AIDS.

Do you think the NAMES AIDS Memorial Quilt functioned in the same way?

ACT UP criticised that too. Saying that it was a waste of energy, that it had no political significance and action. But people aren't robots. They have feelings. For families to be able to memorialise their loved ones is significant. It can't be bad. And one of the things was that it made one aware of the cross section that this epidemic had touched. Each time the Quilt was displayed in Washington Mall, in DC, getting bigger and bigger, and you would see families coming across the country, converging on Washington to look at this display of quilts laid on the ground in a ceremonial fashion, in utter silence, tears and boxes of Kleenex. And you see Black families, red-neck families, White, gay and lesbians holding hands, hugging and crying. Me, in my own little sheltered little art world in New York, I was totally blown away by the extent of this epidemic and I realised I had no clue that it would be affecting a red-neck family which normally a sophisticated New Yorker would denigrate. I remember saying: 'I have something in common with these people'.

When you experienced the unfolding of the Quilt, do you think it altered your sense of what your responsibilities were within the community and within the world?

Well, I think that for any person that went there...you were overwhelmed. I do not know what reaction or what would come out of it. But it was very affecting. It is the largest folk art piece in the world.

What came out of it for you?

I was already doing my thing. But it made it personal; these are not just numbers...100,000... because each one of the quilts was a family with love. When you just hear a number it is not personal. This made it personal. But this is one of the problems that I found with the activists. It is so unfortunate that they couldn't get beyond their political agenda. They should have been much more democratic - I'm speaking about ACT UP. It would have been much more helpful.

Did you go to Washington for one of the unfoldings?

Each one. Yes, each one. Then they happened in Central Park. But it can never be shown again because it has got too big.

Can you remember when you first went to Washington to see it? I think the Project first began in June 1987.

I don't remember the year. I'm trying to remember if it came to New York first. It was impressive in Central Park, but then to see it in Washington, even larger.

They have it against the other big monuments there, the memorial monuments [in Washington].

It went on for miles.

If anything the Quilt raised awareness, permitted people to express their love and their grief, it motivated people to get involved. All those people who were there, the majority probably went on AIDS walks to raise money. To look at it as just one event and to denigrate it is, I think, misplaced.

I agree.

I've just got three more questions that I want to explore. The first is about the art that is being produced now. You've already remarked that we're not seeing exhibitions devoted to HIV and AIDS these days. But there are people still making art. What I've noticed is an absence of work dealing with two things; first, the fairly recent rapid rise in new HIV infections and the incidence of unprotected sex which the statistics and surveys are telling us is happening. Yet I don't see a discussion in the artists' work about why that rise in unprotected sex and HIV transmission is happening. The second absence that I have noticed all the way through the epidemic is an absence of work dealing with HIV transmission through drug use and sharing needles. A lot of the work is dealing with sexual transmission, which might be because it is gay artists rather than drug users who are producing the art. Can you comment on those two things? You may not agree with my observations. But if you do, why are we seeing an absence of works dealing with the recent spike in HIV transmission overall, and why the absence of work about needle sharing and drug use?

The recent rise in transmission has, from my understanding...is primarily rising within the youth and if it is rising within the gay community it is rising within gay youth who think possibly that people don't die of AIDS anymore, that it is a manageable condition, and therefore they're not worried about it. Because people are living with AIDS – as ACT UP had always wanted, it was their creed – it is actually happening; therefore they [gay youth] have not been in the hospitals, they have not seen people waste away to nothing within six months or a year. If anything, that is what it is about...a medical problem...until the body has developed resistance to any combination of the cocktail.

So, from personal experience, a lot of people are unaware of the visual manifestation of the disease. Occurring to me right now, in my head, is that possibly now is the time for exhibitions by Nicholas Nixon, work that dramatically informs people, shows people what the disease physically is about. Because I have friends that are HIV+; they still function, they have their jobs, they have their careers, things seem to go well. They don't seem to be talking about the ups and downs of their illnesses as openly as before. It is much more private, I find. But I do know that they do sometimes have a bout, a problem, but they go to their doctor and it is resolved, and they bounce back. So it's not in your face these days. To be HIV+ is not the death knell that once it was when there was nothing they could do for you. So that's the problem with the young people. They have no experience of it. They probably don't know anybody who is HIV+, they may not see any difference between them or anybody else.

If we look at artistic responses, though, there is occasionally, within AIDS organisations and within public health organisations, discussions about how, after 20 years of education, could people possibly still become infected. And they mentioned reasons like you just have – that young gay men in particular have no experience of death and dying and that there've never been to hospitals...

They're never taken care of anybody.

They've never taken care of anybody. And if they do happen to get infected they've always got the drugs. But there is also this underlying thing: how can they still become infected? Are they stupid or something? What is going on? You have people like Douglas Crimp, Larry Kramer, who have been very vocal in HIV circles, promoting art and promoting education and prevention, and they become HIV+. There seems to be a silence within the art world about how people like them are becoming infected. Can you account for that silence, within the art world at least?

I think that people don't know who has contracted AIDS. Among my friends, unless they have contracted AIDS and come out and tell me, I wouldn't know. Visually you would not know. Some of my friends – my God, Mr Universe, oh, true hunks, major hunks, muscle, lean, absolutely fabulous – the only thing they have a problem with is they have to get injections for the hollowness of their face. But physically, my God, I wish I had a body like that! You just don't know anymore. It is under the radar.

In terms of needles [IDUs], the fastest growing rate of infection is in the Black community. I must say that in these conservative times...I am person of the 60s when it was much more integrated. The art world was much more integrated. I don't find the art world particularly integrated [anymore]. It's a Black issue that is not affecting very many people in the art world. There are certain art institutions in New York, like Harlem Studios Museum, and they haven't made exhibitions about the Black AIDS problem. The Black community has only very recently acknowledged that AIDS is a problem to them.

Well, they have difficulty dealing with the 'down low' as well, black gay men not identifying as gay.

Right. There is one Black organisation, the Balm in Gilead, that is working with the Black churches in our country addressing the issues. The Black Churches and are main institutions in the community.

Is Bam in Gilead a church organisation itself?

No. It's an AIDS awareness organisation that focuses on reaching out to the Black Churches to get them on board in raising awareness about the AIDS issue, fighting discrimination, getting the ministers involved, getting the Church to accept that these people are not sinners and AIDS is not God's wrath. The woman who is the director is Vanessa...I don't know, but she has done a lot of work. Jesse Norman got involved in their major fundraiser

where all the Black ministers and Churches came to New York for a benefit concert given by Jesse Norman, Whoopi Goldberg. They got the Churches behind it.

You might remember that there was a fuss in the early 90s, possibly the end of the 1980s, about a dance piece by Bill T. Jones, and the critic of a major paper refused to review it because she said it was 'beyond criticism' and 'victim art'. I'm interested in your ideas about how can we judge or critique AIDS-related art. What criteria should we be judging it by? What is 'bad' AIDS-art?

Well, I know Bill T. I was at that performance.

It was a performance of *Still/Here*.

I saw Bill after the performance. Part of the performance is that he would come out and sit on the edge of the stage and the audience members could stay and there would be discussion about AIDS and the work that they just saw. But that particular piece stood up. If one had not said it was about AIDS, it stood up on its own. I forget the reviewer's name.

Croce.

Yes, Croce. Well, first of all, I think that is truly amazing. That is just as bad as Jesse Helms or any other right-wing politician condemning Artist Space for doing an AIDS exhibition and wanting to defund them without ever having seen the exhibition. Or their criticism of movies without ever seeing the movies; you know: 'I know pornography when I see it and I don't need to see it.' Basically that's what she was doing. I hold her in no higher esteem than Jesse Helms.

That debate about politics in art had been an on-going debate within the art world internationally. What I call the 'Formalists' were saying that politics in art – they disagreed with it. They called it propaganda. I find that their interests in formal art - being art for art's sake - is disconnected with current life. But artists are living in a time and in a society and they are reflecting what is in their lives. What's wrong with that!

The personal is political.

Yes! And so that debate has been in the *New York Times*, in the Biennial, even this Whitney Biennial presently. Kimmelman of the *New York Times* wrote a review and he was saying that it was a beautiful Biennial and that basically he was pleased that it had little political art. And I'm thinking (sarcastically) 'Hello, how long has Bush been in office? Nearly four year. This country is moving towards Fascism, American Fascism. We are in a war...as disturbing and as divisive as the Vietnam War. We have been attacked, September 11. And there's no art about it?!' I mean, something is wrong! What I'm for is for art reflecting the issues of society. I just don't agree.

Visual AIDS collects work by HIV+ artists and they have to identify as an artist. But some of them would have taken up art after becoming HIV+, they had no formal

training in art work at all, and yet they are placed next to Felix Gonzales Torres, and other people who have had major shows in major galleries. How are we to judge their work, if politically it is in the right place?

I believe in contextualism in art history, or contextualism in any history, because, you know, it depends on whose history and who is interpreting history. The British definitely have a different vantage point on the American Revolution than we do! For me, Visual AIDS is creating an archive that will be there for future generations and historians to look at, and it is for them to decide. In art history there has always been artists that were discovered as important and relevant after their lifetime. Albert Rider wasn't acclaimed in his life time.

Vincent van Gogh.

Right, right. So I'm all for it. I'm old enough to know that when I was in my 20s and I think of the artists that were on the cover of *Art Forum* and *Art in America*, nobody knows now. So who knows who is going to be relevant and represent a period?

Talking about artists' legacies and what happens to them after they die: we're yet to talk about your piece *Artist's Estate*. Could you tell me about it? In particular, what kind of responses have you received about that work? [See image overleaf]

Well, I'll first tell you how it came about. My neighbour told me about going into a gallery and looking at some art and there was a man standing at the desk speaking to the gallery owner, saying to her or him: 'I have this artist friend who left me all his paintings and I've kept them for years but I can't keep them anymore. There is so many of them. I'm willing to give them to you free, you can do what you want with them, and place them and sell them or do whatever.' So, my friend overhead that and said: 'I'd love to see them'. She went to the loft to see them and other people had come too – word had spread. And people were taking these beautiful canvases, going down the stairs of this loft, and ripping them off the stretches and throwing the canvas on the street and keeping the stretches because the stretches were very fine expensive stretches – custom made, worth hundreds of dollars.

I thought about that, and I thought about all of the artists that have not made their mark and gained recognition so that they would be valued. So I made *Artist's Estate* and I asked everybody I knew who was HIV+, or their partner, to donate something to this garbage heap. This was part of Tom [Sokolowski] and Robert [Atkin]'s exhibition at Grey Gallery. It had finally done the tour of Canada and the United States and had come home. They asked several artists to do an additional piece. They gave me a certain size that it had to fit. I made a fake dumpster where the telephone number was for the CDC – Centers for Disease Control. The serial number on the dumpster, which all dumpsters have, was the number of HIV cases in the United States at that time. And I had a Christmas tree with broken decorations, because I find that Christmas trees are like dead bodies on the street – discarded corpses, very sad that they were valued for such a short time and then discarded with thoughtlessness. I had stretches, paints, photographs, rejection letters from galleries

and museums, everything like that all cascading out of the dumpster. Holland Carter from the *New York Times* reviewed the show and said that it was the most potent piece.

What colour was the dumpster, blue or green?

Green. They're often green and chipped. At the opening, I had friends there and it was very early on, and it was placed near the emergency exit in the back of the Grey Art Gallery, and one of the guards and staff maintenance persons of the NYU came through the door and said: 'Oh my God, we didn't take out the garbage!' [Laughter] It was so real. I loved that reaction.

Subsequently that piece was in France, just outside of Paris. Then in Hagen, Germany, and then in Essen, Germany. Each time it got bigger and bigger, so that the pile was 20 feet high and took up this whole studio. It would have a section for children, a section for heterosexual men, a section for women, a section for artists, for gays with pornography and all. The children's [section] had toys. It was basically about life, about how lives are valued or placed in value.



Dui Seid, *Artist's Estate*, varying dimensions, 1993-4.

Given that the first one would have been around 1992-1993 if it was in 'From Media to Metaphor' at the end of its tour, that is really before Visual AIDS and The Estate Project from Artist's Alliance were really getting started. So it was right at the start of awareness of the need to conserve...

Actually, I didn't know, but Patrick Moore, as part of the Estate Project...I read years later, like 2000, he spoke about a dumpster and AIDS. I don't think he ever knew about the piece.

Were any Visitor's Comments books kept from those exhibitions? Did you receive any letters from people giving you feedback on the work?

I would point out various curious things that happened in terms of the works. In Germany, I'm in the Karl Ernst Osthaus Museum – they own a large body of my work – the *U-Brace Against the Door* is on permanent display. The museum director tells me that it is very upsetting for the viewing public. They want it removed. The visceral quality of it...I think it is totally classical. The 'AIDS word'...They had the 'inmate' piece [the one that ends with 'scum'] in the exhibition. One museum received it – I was in Japan at the time preparing an exhibition – I got a fax from Robert [Atkins] saying that the museum refused to touch it – were refusing to hang it. They had gotten in touch with the CDC workers' safety...I wrote back, I said: 'It's not blood, it's paint', but they still wouldn't hang it. They were worried that if a viewer got AIDS they would say they had got AIDS from the piece and sue them. This is supposed to be sophisticated! They're accepting that they want to put on an AIDS exhibition but they're worried about getting AIDS from art, which, when I made the 'AIDS word' piece I was thinking 'Ha, ha, ha...you can get AIDS from art': I was thinking that as a joke! But people actually think that.

Which gallery was that?

I would have to get the gallery list out [to remember its name], because it went all over the place. But I couldn't believe it. When it was hung in Germany, the Minister of Health came to the opening, you know, previewed the show. He said that all of it had to be taken down. I had to explain to him that it was simulated blood, blah, blah, blah, and so then it was all right. But each time it confronts people with their fear. This is one of the things that I built into the piece. In all my work I said that one of the things that propels the AIDS crisis is fear and ignorance, and so therefore I said: 'OK, I make work that embodies, elicits a fear, but that has a rational component that you have to reflect on to overcome your fear', because this is something that I had to go through to take care of people with AIDS. I had to get over my fear to wash their wounds, and things like that. There is one piece that is about a gaping raw anus that I had to wash. I was sweating bullets, but after I finished taking care of this friend I recognised that that wound is no different from his face, his hair or his ear – it is not a monster. I had gotten over my fear. So this is something psychologically that I had put in my work, consciously.

OK, final question. We've talked about the art that you make, and the responses that you were trying to evoke in your audience. What has been your experience – and I want you to try to take your mind back to the 1980s – when you saw your first AIDS

film or you went to see other people's AIDS-related art exhibitions? Can you remember how or if you were moved by the things that you were seeing, and which particular works had an influence on you and maybe changed the way that you thought about the epidemic and your responsibilities within it?

There were several TV movies that I watched, such as *An Early Frost*. I looked at them in a political-social context. In many ways I wasn't looking at how they affected me so much as how it might effect others at that time, because so little was available. Anything that was presented you went 'OK, this is going to be a breakthrough...How is it going to touch the uninitiated?' Nicholas Nixon affected me a lot. I saw truth in it.

Can you describe how it affected you? What did it make you think about?

It made me think about my own experiences. He captured what I was seeing in people's homes. And the dynamics between the family members. He was documenting it. And doing it in a very powerful and sensitive manner, an honest manner. Some of the photographs are really beautiful.

Who else? Hmm. I always liked Paul Thek. T-H-E-K. He died of AIDS. He did a lot of work earlier on. You will have to look it up. A major artist showing in the 60s.

[Leafing through an art catalogue] This had something to do with Tom Finkelpearl. I don't know what happened to him.

I like these. I related to them because they were boxes. These were AIDS pieces, with little tiny little light-bulbs, these environments. This one was like the Stations of the Cross.

Wow.

I have never seen any of these done since.

The artist's name is Rod Rhodes.

Yes. I should do a Google search and see where he is or if he is alive. [*Postscript*: Rod Rhodes died from AIDS in 1989.]

So this is really early work – early 80s – not necessarily about AIDS?

No, these were about AIDS.

The Stations of the Cross one was 1988.

Yes. You could just watch them, look at them for hours.

Given that you were caring for people at home, you had friends that were dying...you were obviously going through a fair bit of grief and despair yourself.

Right.

Were there art pieces or films, movies or theatre that helped restore your faith in humanity, or that encouraged you to keep going?

When I was making this piece, *Turning A Blind Eye*, which was an angry piece - I was angry at society, that they were turning a blind eye, it was done in 1986 - I was painting that and I was in tears. It was like operating. I was there crying as I was painting. I had no idea what I was crying about, it was just very moving.

Was art a comfort for you?

Yes. A great comfort.

I used to write poems in High School. These were visual poems that I was making first. They weren't political at all. That was the problem. Then I became a political person. I began to realise that everything was political. Then I started doing the 'AIDS words', which were more overtly taking a political stance, that we live in a democracy rather than a totalitarian state, which was the situation that I was seeing...I needed my art.

What about other people's art? Did you need other people's art as well?

When you are going through it, you don't know how you are projecting. There were certain people who were interested in dating me at the time, but I was an obsessed person. I was totally involved in AIDS. My world was in AIDS. [Laughing] It was a little difficult for other people, I think.

Larry Kramer found the same thing, if *The Normal Heart* is anything to go by!

Of course, those relationships would never work out.

Were you able to have relationships?

Not at that time. Certainly you could get in a relationship but it would have to be someone focused in the same manner, in the same direction as you. I think it was a pervasive sadness. That is not something to build a relationship on: sadness.

No. OK, they are the main questions I wanted to ask. Is there anything that you would like to elaborate on now, anything that you want to bring up?

I think it was a really good interview.

I think it was a really interesting interview. I have learned a lot. It should lead to some interesting writing. Thank you very much.

What I am interested in, Paul, is other people's memories of that period. I feel like I was off on my own.

I should direct you to the ACT UP website. They are undertaking an oral history project at the moment. They will have 40 or 50 long interviews with people involved in ACT UP. There are about 5 or 6 artists and creative people who they have interviewed. It is about what ACT UP is doing. They are interesting to go through to find out what artists and the arts scene were doing in terms of responding. They are all on the internet. You can see them talking. They also have transcripts of the interviews online.

I'll turn this off.

[End of interview]

If citing this interview, please use the following:

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