

## **Amy Sadao and Nelson Santos interviewed by Paul Sendziuk**

New York City, USA, 4 May 2004

*This is a slightly edited transcript of a recorded interview. The text has been edited to correct some grammatical errors (which are inevitable features of spoken conversation), but only where this was necessary to aid comprehension. Sections of the interview that deviated too far from the subjects of AIDS, art and Visual AIDS, have been omitted. These sections are denoted by [snip]. In reviewing the final transcript, Amy and Nelson generously provided some additional comments that were not originally recorded.*

**Paul Sendziuk: Amy, you have taken up the position of Director at Visual AIDS fairly recently. Can you tell me about your background and training in the Arts?**

**Amy:** I have a BFA from Cooper Union, so I went to an art school but I knew I wasn't going to pursue a studio practice. I was interested in the curatorial end of things. I then worked with a variety of arts administrators here in the city including Simon Watson, who very early on was connected with Visual AIDS. I worked for the Whitney Museum, interned there when Thelma Golden was the Branch Manager at the Phillip Morris gallery. I did a lot of commercial work and also took a break to go to do a Masters degree in Ethnic Studies, where I was concentrating on race and women of colour in contemporary art. So the ways that I was interested in engaging contemporary art always had a political or social bent to it. I also worked briefly at Art in General and with some smaller arts-related organisations.

From the time that I was graduating from Cooper Union, I knew about Visual AIDS. I had co-curated an exhibition with Barbara Hunt who had just moved from London to direct the organisation. It was through my connections with the art world that I met [my] first HIV+ people, the first AIDS activists. I think, even when I was at Cooper Union, ACT UP was meeting down in the basement and my roommate would go down there. My teachers were part of Group Material. So in a lot of ways, art and AIDS have always been connected for me. While I didn't come out of AIDS activism or social work – I came from an arts administrator background – the two came together.

**How about you Nelson: how did you come to work at Visual AIDS?**

**Nelson:** I moved here about four years ago, in June 2000. I got my MFA from the Art Institute of Chicago. While in Grad School, and for two or three years after Grad School, I worked for some art organisations that tied into the work that I do here. I worked in galleries, I taught at University level, I worked for non-profits and had an interest in the relations between art and other things, such as AIDS awareness, or means of awareness through art.

**How many years have you been here?**

**Nelson:** I've been at Visual AIDS since August of 2000.

**You realise that in the 1950s and 1960s people had just two or three jobs for their entire lifetime! You guys have been everywhere and done everything! [Mutual laughter]**

**By all reports, a couple of years ago Visual AIDS was on the verge of folding. Public meetings were held and the future of the organisation was discussed. Can you remember who were some of the chief participants in those meetings, and what were they saying?**

**Amy:** I only attended the second Town Hall meeting because we had a change in staff. What precipitated some of those meetings was a financial downturn for Visual AIDS. We were experiencing a Recession in the US, we were looking at a life-cycle of the organisation of about 14 years in existence...As it took a financial downturn, it was decided among the board and staff that it was a good time to reassess our priorities, because if we were having difficulties with our finances maybe there was an area or an issue that we weren't addressing. Maybe there was something within our base support or the communities that we served that was not being fulfilled. That is what the Town Hall meetings came out of.

Having read the transcripts of the Town Hall meetings, and having sat in the follow-up meetings here in our office, no one – none of the artists in the Archive Project or other artists that have association with Visual AIDS, or the people that had a history of organising Visual AIDS – nobody felt like the mission was depleted. Nobody really felt like we should put the Archive Project in the library and close our doors because there were other organisations that covered what Visual AIDS does. What we discovered is that there is no other organisation that covers what Visual AIDS does. Even in God's Love We Deliver, and Visual AID, our colleagues out in San Francisco...they deal with people with all kinds of illnesses, not just HIV and AIDS.

**Was there ever a push to deposit the Archive Collection in the New York Public Library?**

**Amy:** There has only [ever] been talk of that. I'm sure when you talk to the founders of Visual AIDS they will tell you that idea has been around for years. About 6 or 7 years ago, at the time when a lot of the AIDS activists were placing their materials with public collections, there was talk of approaching the Library. But as of yet, we haven't gone down that path.

**Nelson:** I started with the organisation when lots of those financial problems were starting. The only thing that I would add (to what Amy said) is that it was also a post-9/11 situation, and lots of funding [i.e. donations, foundation money] went to things that were 9/11 related. Everyone was hurting – all of the arts organisations and all of the AIDS organisations, let alone one that was trying to do both. I would also agree with Amy: there never was a divide into camps or people who felt that we should disband Visual AIDS and quit. There was never a group that said 'well, your time has come'. Those meetings definitely confirmed that we needed to keep doing what we were doing.

One of the discussions that we had was to reevaluate our two mission statements; that is, promoting HIV and AIDS awareness through the visual arts and the other one, which is supporting artists living with HIV and AIDS. We tried to decide whether one or the other is more important. But we decided that they were both still important.

**Which is what you originally knew at the start! [Mutual laughter]**

**Amy:** Yes. We had to work out how to do that with a small staff and a small hard-working board - how to keep those missions central. I think about that everyday. I think: 'is this program actually going to help an artist? How can we continue to help them make work and participate in the visual arts? What are our responsibilities while working within the art world, or the periphery of the art world? How do we get information out to educate people?' That balance is difficult. One good thing, I think, about Visual AIDS - in terms of it surviving for 16 years and where it might be in another 16 years time - is that it has always been a very flexible organisation, one that can change quickly. So that when a project comes to our table that involves artists that are not apart of our Archive Project, or activists come and say 'lets do this', we can consider those proposals, or direct things. There has always been a wide variety of projects. Since 1994, when it [the Archive Project] came here [to Visual AIDS], the Archive has always been our backbone - a lot of time and resources are spent maintaining it as a slide resource and also offering services to artists who are represented in the archive.

**Nelson:** It is kinda amazing that Visual AIDS has been around for 16 years and it has always been pretty much two people running the organisation, along with a board. And as those people change and very different people come on board, somehow the organisation has still retained its identity and its mission. Even though our projects change, the organisation has not shifted away from its original mission.

**What kind of relationship does the organisation have with its original founders (Tom Sokolowski, Robert Atkins, Bill Oleander, and Gary Garrels)?**

**Nelson:** I think all of the original founders are still proud of being apart of this organisation and of founding it. At the same time, those who are still with us have moved on to other organisations and have a truck-load of their own work. So we don't have a constant dialogue with them, which I think is healthy. I haven't met anyone who has been a part of Visual AIDS who has any sort of bone to pick with us.

**Amy:** People have spent their time at the organisation and changed it under their directorship. Any criticism from the founders or the artists in the artist caucus would weigh heavy. But I agree with Nelson, the people who founded the organisation were able to let go of it, and let it go out, and recognised the way in which it was going to be changed depending upon who was involved.

**Who sits on the board?**

**Amy:** Right now we have a five person board and we have four Directors Emeritus, who are not 'active' on the board. We have a doctor, Dr Howard Grossman, and the rest are artists and arts administrators: Geoff Hendricks, Sur Rodney (Sur), Barton Benes and Paul Gunther, who is currently the President of the Institute of Classical Architecture and Classical America. They have all been connected with Visual AIDS for quite a long time.

**So they provide a bit of continuity – while Executive Directors come and go, you can maintain a longer-term view?**

**Amy:** They all have a longer history with the organisation than we do. I know that Paul has served on the board for quite a long time and was a close friend of Frank Moore, who helped found the Archive Project. Sur Rodney and Geoff both worked on the Archive Project, even before it came under the auspices of Visual AIDS in 1993, '94.

**Nelson:** Geoff and Sur came together for the Arts Community/AIDS Community show. That is what they brought together with Frank Moore and David Hirsh.

**What is your relationship, then, with the Estate Project. They have a very good dance archive. Is there a division of labour, where you are trying to look after the Visual Arts side of things?**

**Amy:** That is what our mission is; our mission is specific to visual arts...[snip]

**Nelson:** If anyone who is a writer or a performer calls us, we can direct them to the Estate Project...[snip]

**Amy:** They still have the definitive publication concerning how to set up an artist's estate...[snip]

**Is Patrick Moore still heading up that organisation?**

**Amy:** I think he is a Director Emeritus...[snip]

**I know that one of the missions of Visual AIDS is to lobby gallery owners and museums to show work by HIV+ artists. How successful have you been in doing that? Has there been a change over the past five or so years?**

**Amy:** Well, in terms of lobbying or advocating for the inclusion of HIV+ artists, we do a monthly web gallery, where we ask different curators to select the artworks – they can come from the arts world or they can come from AIDS organisations. That is just one way of involving arts administrators and researchers and getting them to understand what the Archive Project is, and getting them to utilise the resources and become familiar with some the artists in the Archive Project, so that the artists might have opportunities to be included in upcoming exhibitions or publications – things that artists need to further their careers.

## **Is there evidence that this has led to getting the artists' work in galleries?**

**Nelson:** Last year two full exhibitions came out of this kind of work...

**Amy:** ...they came out of curators coming to use the Archive Project. MOCDA – the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporic Art in Brooklyn - did a full show of just artists from the Archive Project and they are working on making that an annual exhibition; recognising the way that their community of Africans and African-Americans in Brooklyn are particularly at risk from the HIV epidemic. So they are interested in working with artists in the Archive Project.

Also Edwin Ramoran up at the Longwood Gallery in the Bronx - again a community that is particularly at risk - organised a show in which 7 of the 12 artists were from the Archive Project. They were looking at the 'down low' and the way that the 'down low' was being represented in contemporary art [the exhibition was titled 'DL: The Downlow in Contemporary Art']. They were talking back to the mainstream media's prurient interest in [mocking tone] 'Well, there are men who are having sex with men who aren't identifying as gay' ...the idea of this threat. Edwin was really deconstructing this idea in that exhibition and in his curatorial practice.

## **What do you mean by 'down low'? I'm not familiar with this term.**

**Nelson:** It was originally a slang term that means 'undercover' or 'private'.

**Amy:** In the context of thinking about HIV or thinking about sexuality, the 'down low' - at least in New York during the last year, and I'm sure people would tell you otherwise - there is an issue of gay men not identifying as gay or not identifying as queer particularly in communities of colour. In some ways, it is perhaps an identity of younger people, of a generation under 28 [years of age]...

## **Are we seeing art about that point now, of not identifying as gay or bisexual in communities of colour? Is there an artist response attached to that?**

**Nelson:** Well, that whole show [DL] was a discussion of that idea. As for other shows based on that idea, I personally haven't seen or noticed one. There is a magazine published by AIDS Project Los Angeles called *corpus* that seems to have a lot of that sort of focus. So I'm sure that there are other places, and I'm definitely sure that there are artists individually who are dealing with these sort of issues. But as far as any trend of shows in this area, I haven't seen any related to that.

**Amy:** We are always seeing in the art world that a generation questions all these things. That 'you can't call me gay', or 'I won't be identified as a black gay artist - I'm going to take that apart with my work'. Or issues of transgender artists, who are gender fucking. You're seeing this in the art world where [traditionally] younger artists are going to look at the artists who were working 15 years ahead of them and say that 'You can't call me that'. In the 1990s there was a 'post-feminist' movement among young women who were, like,

saying 'I'm not going to say that I'm a feminist...I don't even know if I wanna say that I'm a woman!'

But specific to HIV and AIDS, there is a concern that men who are having sex with men who aren't identifying as gay are engaging in more risky behaviour than those who identify as gay. That is why there is a discussion of men about the 'down low', in terms of new HIV infections.

**Well, that is certainly the case in Australia, where there is a big push to get men to identify in some way with the gay community in order to access information and peer support that is essential for preventing HIV transmission.**

**Nelson:** Part of this whole discussion about the DL [down low] is that Latino and African-American culture has its own strong history and cultural-background, and what is being represented as a gay culture or lesbian culture in the media is still often white male or white female. And so part of the discussion is that if you are African-American or Latino, what culture are you going to identify with? Are you necessarily saying that you're not gay or lesbian, or are you just not prepared to identify with that culture [because it is deemed to be White]? So, part of this discussion about HIV transmission and the DL is about reminding us that you can't use the same sort of messaging that was directed towards a gay culture in order to reach people from another cultural background...

**You need to target your campaigns more specifically.**

**Nelson:** Right. I think this is a huge discussion that I'm trying to wrap up in a few sentences, but part of it, too, is the concern...two concerns actually. One is the unsafe practice. Two is about communication. If you're on the DL and you're not telling your girlfriend or your wife that you're seeing other men, then at least you should be practising safe sex.

**Where can I find more information about the exhibition that was at the Longwood?**

**Amy:** We'll give you Edwin Ramoran's contact details. I'm sure he can send you a press kit, and there was a really excellent essay done. And he probably has a whole slide sheet that he can send you. Just write to the curator or the director of that gallery. Because of the mission of what Longwood does, which is represent artists of colour and women artists in particular, the way that they challenged conceptions of the 'down low' also looked at the ways that men of colour are targeted as 'dangerous', accused of putting other people at risk, and of being 'infectious', which mirrors a lot of the ways that gay men have been targeted when we talk about the epidemic.

**I want to talk about two specific exhibitions that Visual AIDS have organised: the 'Bodies of Resistance' exhibition and the CMV exhibition titled 'Share Your Vision'. Can you tell me about how they were conceptualised and how they were put together? And, if they have been evaluated in any sense, how many people came to see those exhibitions, what sort of feedback did you get about them?**

**Amy:** You should speak to Barbara Hunt about 'Bodies of Resistance', who was the curator and director of Visual AIDS at the time. My understanding was that it was the first exhibition by Visual AIDS that had included HIV+ and HIV- artists, which, for us, was a really important move: to make the exhibition thematic as opposed to being based on identity or serostatus. I mean, I don't think there is anything wrong with doing salon exhibitions that showcase the work of artists in the Archive Project, especially if you curate those exhibitions based on themes, where the artists' works speaks to each other beyond their biographies, beyond the fact that they are all HIV+. But that was something that was really important in Barbara's exhibition. It also went international and was installed in South Africa in Durban during the International AIDS Conference. It had people from both the Durban Arts and AIDS communities attend the exhibition, as well as people coming out of the International AIDS Conference.

### **What about the CMV exhibition?**

**Amy:** The 'Share Your Vision' exhibition has been received extraordinarily well. It came out of an Open Call, so it didn't have the same sort of curatorial practice behind making the selections of the work. The theme was CMV retinitis. The artists were asked to apply knowing that the goals behind the exhibition was to raise awareness of this opportunistic infection, but also loosely to work with metaphors of artistic vision and physical sight. It was a juried exhibition and they made a selection of 21 artists. It was installed for a short run, basically 2 weeks, at Artists Space here in New York City, but we also did a wide distribution of the catalogue. Then later, at the end of the year, for World AIDS Day, postcards and a small calendar were published so that those works and the ideas behind the exhibition were able to be spread a little bit further.

### **Can you give me an idea of how many of those catalogues and calendars were produced?**

**Amy:** [Asking Nelson] Did we send out 4000 calendars? And then Roche distributed double that amount. Roche funded the exhibition.

**Nelson:** I'm not sure. Maybe less than that.

**Amy:** Maybe 3000 of the calendars. We probably only mailed about 500 catalogues.

### **What sort of feedback have you received about the exhibition?**

**Amy:** Excellent

**Nelson:** Both of them have received really positive feedback. One thing that I wanted to say about 'Bodies of Resistance', in terms of its continuing significance, is that Harmony Hammond at the University of Arizona in Tucson has been using part of it in her lectures. Recently Boston University Medical Center Bookstore contacted us to order the catalogue for one of their classes as a textbook. So the information is still circulating.

**Amy:** It was the first exhibition in, like, six years to deal with the international effects of the AIDS pandemic. I don't think there has been another exhibition of contemporary work with that focus since.

**Were Visitors' Comments Books kept for that exhibition? Is there any documentary evidence of the feedback?**

**Nelson:** We don't have copies of them. The galleries might. I know that for 'Share Your Vision' there were sign-up sheets rather than a Comments Book.

**Amy:** I think one of the ways that we've gauged the reaction to 'Share Your Vision' was the interest shown by other artists to join the Archive Project. While that was wide-ranging in the year that the exhibition was being planned, because we had done an Open Call, I think that people and artists who attended the exhibition saw it as a very effective and very beautiful exhibition, and the quality of the work made it interesting and attractive for artists to join the Archive Project.

**So for your purpose – to make contact with artists and get them involved – it was very successful.**

**Amy:** Yes.

**The Lightbox exhibition and the entire Archive Project provides free documentation of the artists' work so that their artistic legacy is preserved. What kind of impact does that have on the psyche of an artist, or the arts community, or the AIDS community – to know that they're not going to be forgotten?**

**Nelson:** That is a good question to ask the Archive members, whose work is represented. I think it varies between generations, or the people who joined the Archive at different times. Documentation of the artwork serves at least two purposes. One is that it serves as history of HIV and the epidemic. Also, creating the slides is a service to the artists themselves. They have the slides and can take them out, and move forward in their professional artist careers, approach galleries and so on. So artists are thankful on different levels...[snip]...Certainly I have spoken to artists who are setting up their estates whose concern is to know that their work is going to survive; and knowing that their work will at least be here in document form is a relief for them.

**Amy:** I think it is a concern for all artists: what will happen to their work when they stop making art or when they pass. The decision to join the Archive Project is one that is really extraordinary...Sometimes I talk with different artists about this. In terms of being on staff here and thinking about what the Archive Project means, I think it is extraordinary to join the Project and to be up front with your serostatus, regardless of the thematics of the work, and to recognise the goals of the project, not necessarily just the ways that it serves the artist, but the idea of this trying to be comprehensive, trying to be an open, unjurious



archive, to document the way in which the AIDS pandemic has affected the visual arts...[snip]

**Nelson:** It is different now that Amy and I are here, as opposed to when it started, when David Hirsh first went out and started photographing the work. [Then] there was more of a sense of urgency in documenting the work, before the work possibly disappeared, when there was a double loss: the loss of the artist and the loss of the work. We don't necessarily deal with that as often per se, with artists joining the archive now, except in the case where an estate is joining. I think many of the artists who join the archive now do so for many other reasons – for the other services and the other uses of their slides.

**There was a sense, in the 1980s, that you needed to try to promote some kind of 'community empowerment'; with that term meaning that you, as an individual, had some sort of control over your destiny and the epidemic, and that the epidemic was not going to wipe out your community. It was really important to install the sense that there is a future and that your community was worth preserving, and that is why it was important to have safe sex and use drugs wisely. Does this project contribute to that? By collecting the work of HIV+ artists, is that saying 'what you're doing is worthwhile, your community is worthwhile, and that both you, your work and your community have a future'? And hence it raises the self-esteem of the individual artists involved?**

**Nelson:** Certainly, for some. There are different levels of artists in the archive. That is partly how the archive works. We ask that the artist be a professional artist, but the level of the artist varies, so for some artists, especially some of the more emerging artists, this is a real opportunity to get their first grounded feeling of being a part of an arts community and, perhaps, being a part of an AIDS community as well.

**Amy, do you have a response to that?**

**Amy:** I think that there is still a lot of stigma around being HIV+ and so a support network – whether it be the Archive Project or another place where other people who are HIV+ can connect – is really important.

**Nelson:** Again, I think that it is important to ask the artists that too...[snip]

**OK, how are you guys going? Would you like to take a little break?**

**Amy:** Yeah, I'd like to take a little break.

**Nelson:** I've got to check the phones.

[The interview is suspended for a short time and then resumed.]

**I've noticed an absence of discussion within artists' work about the fairly recent rise in new HIV infections and the accusations that those who seroconvert now must be 'stupid' or 'irresponsible'. It may just be me, but I'm not seeing artwork that is engaged in this area. Can you think of artists who are looking at this issue?**

**Nelson:** Thom Markee is the first one that comes to mind. He is a younger artist who converted more recently. He has a piece, for example, that is a figure of a 1950s-looking man in a white T-shirt or tank top, with his arms [raised] up in joy. And there is a [voice] bubble that says 'Today I'm going to be positive'. His other works – such as 'Party Pony' – are still sexualised images but from the perspective of a young man who has more recently seroconverted.

I think there are young artists who are dealing with those sort of issues but their works – and I'm thinking of Rene Capone as well – are on a much more personal level. They are about one's personal identity and dealing with becoming positive, rather than working on a political level.



Thom Markee, *Positive Today*, acrylic on canvas, 4" x 4", 2002.



Thom Markee, *Party Pony*, acrylic, 48" x 48", 2002.

**Amy:** If I can make this a gigantic statement about what I am seeing in the contemporary art world in general – most of the contemporary art that we are seeing now deals more with metaphor, or is personal or coded, as opposed to the [earlier] more overt messaging that fit really nicely into a Barbara Kruger-type text piece that would be speaking much more directly about HIV and AIDS. The work is more nuanced around [the issues of] seroconversion or discrimination or the negative reactions that someone who seroconverts now might be facing.

**Does that maybe reflect debate within the community that no one really wants to talk about these things and confront the idea that a whole bunch of the people are seroconverting in these enlightened times. No one seems to want to come out and say at the top of their lungs: 'why is this going on? Where are we failing?'**

**Nelson:** I'm sure that there are some artists that are dealing with work on that [political] level. But part of it is whether or not that is the job of the artist. You can be political on one level and not necessarily be political in your art work. I feel like the general trend in works that I see is towards the personal level, but that doesn't mean they're...the artist is not necessarily feeling like a graphic designer or a politician who might create those sort of messages. Also, we have to remember that there is that sort of messaging being done by AIDS service organisations – that is their mission, to do AIDS awareness campaigns. In the early stages [of the epidemic], artists certainly felt that those messages weren't getting out there, so there was more of an urgency to create art in that vein.

**I just get the sense that 10 or 12 years ago artists would have seen it as their responsibility to speak up and perhaps refute the more accusatory statements about why there has been a rapid rise in new seroconversions.**

**Amy:** I wouldn't say that there are not political art collaboratives happening right now. Looking backwards at the history of art activism, specifically around AIDS activism, the artists did come out – this organisation wouldn't be here if there wasn't that cross-over between working artists, arts administrators and AIDS activists. But if that activism is now 'historic', and we are feeling, "Where are the current AIDS arts collaborations?" we should also consider the life-span of AIDS activism as a whole and how the epidemic has changed in the US, and conceivably in Australia, and how the response from grass-roots organising in general has changed. With people's lives being extended by drug therapies available in 'developed' nations, the sense of urgency has died down.

I may not be the expert to speak about this, but in terms of the spike in recent infections, the question might be asked, "who is seroconverting today – are they gay white men or IV drug users, or prisoners? I mean, who is the outcry about new seroconversions directed at? These are questions that are raised when anyone speaks about HIV and AIDS. Why aren't people in the streets like in 1990? And is this out of our realm as an arts community? [Some galleries and museums might say that]: 'our mission is to work with art'. Well, what about utilising art? In some circles, [people] do not want to utilise art, art is art. Yet here, at Visual AIDS, we are saying that art can be judged as aesthetics but it is also speaking as cultural production and is sometimes in the service of politics, namely social justice. In particular we're trying to effect change in the fight against AIDS.

**Can you think of any more artists who are really thinking about their recent experience of seroconversion and are trying to work out why it happened? Do they feel stupid? Do they feel that they didn't receive the support that they needed?**

**Amy:** That is a really specific question that you would have to ask the individual artist. I can only draw upon some conversations that I have had with a person who has recently seroconverted, who was very active in ACT UP and TAG, and that person's interactions with his community were really negative once people found out that he, as an older man, had recently seroconverted. Some of the other artists that are dealing with their identities and their bodies, and recognising after the fact - I'm thinking of Derek Jackson's portrait

series...we spent a long time talking about what it is like to be an HIV+ artist and be apart of the Archive Project, and what it was like for that to be always hanging over and prefacing his work. He did a series of self-portraits, not thinking at the time that they had any thing to do with his serostatus, but afterwards he looked at them and had to engage with why they looked the way that they did...Your question was really specific...

**Nelson:** That is really a question that the artists need to answer, because seroconverting is so much more complicated than just feeling stupid that one converted at this point of time. There are people in long term relationships where one person is HIV+ and the other is HIV- and we all know that there is not 'safe' sex, there is just 'safer' sex, so there are always risks. That risk becomes really personal, like, what risks are you willing to take?

**I suppose that is what I am looking for: which artists are addressing that ambiguity about being 'safe' as opposed to just the experience of living with AIDS. There is a lot of art about negotiating the new drug therapies, and the effects of the new drugs – a lot of art that is created out of capsules and pills. But I'm looking for a body of work which is dealing with, say, what I, as a recently converted HIV+ artist, am feeling now that I have seroconverted, about the choices that I made, the options that I had or didn't have.**

**Nelson:** Recently I've been seeing more shows that are gay and lesbian themed – shows about gender and queer identity. They are not necessarily about being HIV+ per se but that is sometimes involved. There is a tendency in the younger artists' works to bring back a more overt sexuality in a fun way so that it is not so much about being scared of sex. The works are not necessarily about condoms, it is more about sexuality. Maybe that is the area that you need to be looking – the concerns of someone who is HIV- who is thinking about the possibilities of being HIV+ or what it means to be HIV-. Again, the names that come to mind when I think of that seem to be dealing with this in a very personal way, on a metaphorical level [as opposite to overt political messaging].

**Amy:** I can't think of a group of artists that I would say specifically address their difficulty in accepting their seroconversion based on community disapproval. If you are looking at artwork, or trying to find where artists are in dialogue with that idea, it might be interesting to look at queer works that are overtly identified as queer and overtly dealing with sexuality and desire. And then see if there is any intervention in those works about 'why now in 2004 [is there a spike in infections]', or, why now in 2004 has there been a throw back to the 1970s – a revival of an interest in hedonism and also of the idea that queer identity is based in sexuality and sex...[snip]

**What about artworks dealing with drug injection and transmission through shared needles?**

**Amy:** [Laughing] Yeah, that is not such a hot theme!

**Why not? And should artists be involved in discussing such a thing?**

**Nelson:** In some ways we're looking at a younger generation of artists who are more sexually free, and there is a certain amount of 'sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll' that is being displayed in their work right now. And that goes beyond queer works. I haven't seen any works that are displaying drug use in a negative way per se...

**Amy:** I've got to say that the 'sex and drugs and rock 'n roll' kinda work here and in the UK don't seem to question those things in any way. Maybe there is a little irony...

### **There is a degree of buying into those things...**

**Amy:** Yeah, there is a degree of collusion with fashion trends, and trends in music.

**Nelson:** It is a response of a generation that grew up with the message 'Just Say No!'. Just like we were saying earlier, the artist is always responding against authority or whatever trends there were in the generation before. But I don't see the messaging [about HIV transmission risk] in that kind of work.

**Amy:** What you pose in terms of IV drug use and harm reduction is sort of challenging because I feel like the collaborations that have happened between gay and lesbian centres and organisations such as Visual AIDS, and collaborations between artists and those centres, haven't been happening in other areas. I can't recall the Harm Reduction movements, or the movements for people inside of prisons, working with artists outside of art therapy or the limited education that you can get in prison or, for that matter, in any sort of disadvantaged community.

### **Is this because AIDS art is predominantly gay art?**

**Amy:** It is a class issue in the art world, between what shows and who shows in the contemporary art world, and the level of art that is done by someone who has served time in prison vs. an artist who has already been shown in galleries.

**Nelson:** In thinking about the artists that I know who have dealt with addictions and such, the work that I can think of off hand deals with the issue of drug use on a more spiritual level...as opposed to the more preventive messaging. It is not that those people that I'm thinking of don't deal with that – they deal with that on their own personal level – either in speaking engagements where they talk about where they came from and where they are now. But the work itself takes on more of a spiritual or healing perspective.

### **Can you name some of those people that you're thinking of?**

**Nelson:** No, I don't really want to imply on the recording about the drug addictions of the artists.

**Sure, that's fine.**

**Let's talk about your experiences as consumers of art. Here I'm not just interested in your experiences of the visual arts, I want you to think about going to the theatre, watching films etc. that were AIDS related. Can you remember whether that art made you think differently about the epidemic, and your responsibilities within it? In what way has 'AIDS art' changed your perspective? It might be going to the Quilt for the first time, or seeing *Philadelphia*.**

**Amy:** [Laughing] God, I just blanked out! I started thinking about the first times that art had an impact on me...[snip]

**Nelson:** There were certainly movies early on, independent films whose titles are slipping my mind, that were very powerful. As far as art work goes, I think Felix Gonzales-Torres has power at more than just one level, because his work was political on more than just one level. I guess if I had to name someone from my generation, Felix Gonzales-Torres would probably be the one. He tugged at something; it was something that I could relate to. Also, Derek Jarman, in film and writing as well. There were all kinds of amazing art work.

**Amy:** I was at art school in the early 1990s and I remember being really impressed by the number of artists who were crossing over and doing really political work, whether that was collaboratives like Group Material and Dyke Action Machine, the kinds of poster projects that were illegal and unsanctioned, all of the ACT UP work that was out there. The commitment that they had to activism, and the belief that they had in changing things by getting information out there was really inspiring. It made me think: that is what we are supposed to do.

**That turned you on to contemporary art, but what turned you to thinking about AIDS and what you were going to do with your own body?**

**Amy:** That powerfully helped me make personal decisions for me, like 'no unsafe sex tonight'?

**Yeah.**

**Amy:** Well, it makes you think about the epidemic and, yeah, how you have to use condoms, you have to be safe. It is a difficult point to identify, when did I switch on to that, how do artists reach their audiences?

**Nelson:** As a gay male growing up, by the time I reached my sexuality it was already automatically a concern. There wasn't necessarily an art work or film that did that. But that is not to say that they do not have their own powers and effects, things that you absorb and take in...[snip]

**Amy:** We're kinda of that generation, that because we are both kinda upper-middle-class and public school educated, being sexually active *was* always using a condom – that kind of information was out there. We were informed about sexually transmitted diseases, that there was an AIDS epidemic happening...[snip]

**Nelson:** I don't want this to sound like a Visual AIDS plug but...

**Amy:** [Laughing, and in a ironic voice]: 'When I saw the Red Ribbon, then I knew...'

**Nelson:** [Sincerely] Well, actually, the Red Ribbon did have an effect that way. I was in the Bay Area at the time – people were either giving or selling the ribbons on the street. Well, in Berkeley people were definitely selling the ribbons on the street! But on the campuses people would give them out, and it was giving recognition to a gay or AIDS community, and that had a powerful effect in the beginning.

**Amy:** Building that initial awareness was really important. And the art exhibitions, art works, the posters are building blocks – they are keeping the issue in the spotlight, so we don't forget. It is difficult to then say: 'Oh, I don't wanna think about that', or 'Hey, it's not a problem anymore', or 'People are looking fine, you take drug [cocktails], everything is cool'. But the step towards making it personal – towards deciding to make those choices, in the most compromised situations: when you're high or when you're really horny for someone – that might require more than that. That decision might come out of a conversation with someone after seeing an exhibition or seeing a movie, but I don't know if the experience of viewing art alone will do that, because viewing art is difficult.

Art can definitely be a place to start a conversation with peers. The communal experience of viewing or experiencing art leads to discussions about ideas that one might not otherwise have.

**I think you are both right. I wasn't asking you to name one specific event that changed your life, but I think art can have a cumulative effect and create a memory, and can make you think more deeply about your own behaviour. I want you to ponder this question, because I am interested as to how people come to an awareness about AIDS and how they come to make personal decisions.**

**Amy:** Regarding your proposition that visual art - its reception, the process of viewing and living around it - can cumulatively affect our understanding of lived experiences past, present future, well, I say absolutely. It is my greatest hope. It is why I am interested in art and why art is interesting to me. Again, I am not schooled in theories of Aesthetics, I don't think I even can remember my Plato. But I am struck by something Gregg Bordowitz said, kinda off the cuff, recently at a talk he gave in Artists Space in NYC. He was *reminding* us that artists are no more 'responsible' for making change in the world than bus drivers, professors or dentists. That's a bad paraphrase but a good thing to think on now and again.

I tend to think that if art isn't actually responding to the world (and again, this is not entirely the artist's concern in the making process, but might become more their concern, as well as the curator/writer/critic's once you move to the sharing or exhibiting stage) its somehow statically accepting the status quo. When I think of the world I am living in, even here in the heart of non-America, New York City, the status quo leaves me really, really depressed. So, you know, keep hope alive. Keep lobbying for arts funding. Keep it possible

for visual artists to do their jobs. Keep making art public and free. Keep talking with younger people and older people. Keep letting art be free to pose lots of questions and make us uncomfortable and make us sad and angry and scratch our heads. There isn't a lot in our hypermediated world that leave things unanswered, leaves the decision in some ways up to the viewer – and I think the best thing we can look for in all the arts is that freedom, and to have that responsibility shifted onto us as we move from viewers to agents. Wow, I hope I don't sound like Larry Kramer or something!

**Nelson:** Art certainly has a cumulative effect, and it trickles down through film, television, advertisement, the web, everything we see and hear, and this in turn affects art and artists. All of this information then enters our conscious and/or subconscious and affects the choices and decisions we make. Of course we may tune into the messages we most align ourselves with or react to those we are against, but again all of it makes for change in the individual and therefore, changes society in a cumulative way. With that said, I believe the job of the artist is not so much as lone art activist - this is not to say that art as activism hasn't been valid or even crucial at times - but I think what all artists do or hope to do is find a new way of seeing and understanding. To view things outside the box. To express those ideas and feelings, and hopefully get others to do the same. There have been many films, performances, artwork, etc, that have made me laugh, cry, smile, yawn and question - and in doing so it has affected who I am today and who I will be tomorrow.

**Ted Gott, who created the most significant AIDS art exhibition in Australia, can remember a specific artist whose work, he claims, saved his life; he was talking about David McDiarmid, who later died of AIDS and whose luminescent paintings of naked men were used in a safe sex and safe drug injection campaigns by the AIDS Council of New South Wales. They were incredibly sexy, and drug-use tolerant, but also carried the message of harm minimisation: sex and drugs are great, but use condoms, don't share needles...[snip] ...He is an older man who didn't grow up with the expectation of sex with condoms – his mindset had to be altered.**

**Okay, we can stop there. Thank you very much. I'll turn the tape off.**

[End of interview]

*If citing this interview please use the following:*

Amy Sadao and Nelson Santos interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, New York City, 4 May 2004, *The Art of AIDS Prevention*, <http://www.aidsart.org/#!vstc1=sadao>; accessed <insert date>