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Forgetting ACT UP

Alexandra Juhasz

Alex, I'm glad that you are documenting the good work of ACT UP. I couldn't join ACT UP because I was undocumented and could not afford to get arrested and potentially deported. Good luck with your article. I'd love to read it.¹

I remember and document ACT UP often as a once participant in the lively 1980s AIDS activist video scene in New York. At that time and in that place, I made work for Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the Brooklyn AIDS Task Force, my doctoral research, and as a member of ACT UP NY, and the broader national and global activist AIDS community.² I have continued cultural production around AIDS across my career as an artist, activist, and academic. Given this lineage, in this time I am often asked to remember ACT UP in work-related contexts such as this one. I have become a professional ACT UP rememberer. In contexts as varied as at Harvard University, for a doctoral dissertation on 1990s art, in the NY Public Library, for oral histories, at conferences, in my contemporary video production and writing, for gay male youth of color, and in classrooms,³ I recall 1980s AIDS activism with pride, history, my best candor, and stories of our amazing energy and grief.

Given this demand, as Cindy Patton noted the quick governmentalization and professionalization of "the AIDS service industry" in the 1980s,⁴ I now acknowledge, these many years later, the development of a new class, *AIDS lamenters*—a disproportionate number of whom are women. Frankly, this turn from movement participant to expert eulogizer feels at once essential and overblown. I've done this so many times before!⁵ What else could I ever have to say? And what does it mean to be compelled to remember by and for others?

When ACT UP is remembered—again and again and again—other places, people, and forms of AIDS activism are disremembered.

I guess I never became a member of ACT UP because I saw myself as other than the members. For the most part they were educated, white, gay men who talked in a high-fallutin' manner. Whenever I gathered up the nerves to engage ACT UP about

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becoming a member or getting involved in activities other than attending a rally or march, they seemed aloof, I did not feel welcomed. I had friends who belonged to ACT UP but not one ever invited me to join.

Despite my disappointment I still believe they are a group that has really had positive success in helping to put the HIV epidemic on the front pages. They got things done and shed light on the issues in what ways that left an impact.

The few times I was around the group it seemed to me they did not have the shackles I had on me. They had time to take off from jobs, they had money to spend on travel. They had no fear. I had fear if I took off time from my job to attend an event I would lose money or face being fired. If I got arrested no one would be there to bail me out, defend me or take care of my family. When I was not at work my time was for my family. They seemed to not have families frowning at their activities or demanding their time. The money they used for trips, donations, equipment or just hanging out at a restaurant, I had to struggle to divide up for bills, clothing, shelter and food. I wanted to join the activities, to help, but my obligations seemed to always have to come first. While they were ready to stomp across a bridge filled with energy and rage about injustice, I was ready to fall in my bed and sleep filled with frustration from everyday life.⁶

When ACT UP is remembered as the pinnacle of postmodern activism, other forms and forums of activism that were taking place during that time—practices that were linked, related, just modern, in dialogue or even opposition to ACT UP’s “confrontational activism”⁷—are forgotten. For example, when the ACT UP women’s caucus was asked to suggest an action for its Nine Days of Protest in 1988, we split internally around whether our action should be the showy, fun, and funny “Shea Stadium Women’s Action” or the direct education campaign of outreach to teenage girls at local high schools. We did both. One action was memorialized—given how impressive and imminently, definitively representable it was, in that it was made to be recorded as much as lived—the other largely forgotten.

In just this way, other principled, debated, and quieter acts—like those of the many friends and activists I knew who *didn’t* go to meetings—are thereby written out of history.

I wasn’t an ACT UP member essentially because I was put off by what I perceived then as its clique-ish-ness. Whether I would let that put me off now, I’m not sure.

I also found it to be too white and too privileged, and although that was as much my milieu as theirs, I had a sense that they would not be able to reach the most at-risk people in NY, which seemed to perpetuate rather than address the problem—i.e., those with privilege to fight would fight for their rights and those without would remain outside of the system as ever. They may have been queer and fabulous, but their race and class issues seemed firmly in place. Still, this sounds very high-handed and holier-than-thou, and the truth is, I’ve never been good with groups. I tend to have an almost allergic reaction to belonging, so it was probably just my own neuroses and introverted nature that kept me from joining.⁸

In its time—the 1980s that I remember here, the time I was a member (I went to my first action, and then meetings, about a month after ACT UP’s inception)—ACT UP was embedded in New York City, and a larger world, that itself was made up of competing affected and committed communities (albeit with a variety of access to

resources), intense political arguments about tactics, and varied activist practices best suited for diverse communities, outcomes, and individuals. People were doing AIDS activist (video) work in institutions from the art world to non-profits, at government agencies and community-based centers, and within their homes and communities.

To remember ACT UP, as I'd like to do here, is also to relish its surrounding and rich context of activist antagonisms, alternatives, associations, alienation, and awe.

I am in awe at the amount of work that ACT UP did. As a person living with HIV, I benefit from the efforts of those who held up the banners. I didn't go because of my perception that the white gay intelligentsia was at the helm of the movement. So, I didn't think that the issues of black gay men would be considered since little concrete movement, on race issues, happened in the "queer" community. After years of doing anti-racism work, I found that HIV and/or sexual orientation was not the point of departure toward coalition building with various minority groups, as it could have been. While I worked for GMHC, I chose to put my efforts that were targeted for black folk, in the sacred community of Lavender Light Gospel Choir and Unity Fellowship Church, where we tried to tailor the educational messages to be culturally sensitive. Sadly, I think that racism continues to be a dirty little secret in the queer community.⁹

When ACTUP is remembered, it is most typically thought to be the home of privileged white gay men. And that was the majority of who was there—at least as I remember it—although, of course, I am a woman and I was often in the room. Therefore, one activist choice at the time was to build community organizations that were better suited to reach the communities underrepresented by ACT UP. Another was to work inside of ACT UP. As part of the women's caucus for a few years, I collaborated closely with amazing feminist/lesbian activists who worked against ACT UP's biases and blind spots, as did many other affinity groups within ACT UP. In the mean time, as a committed feminist, I looked to and worked with a number of people and agencies outside the purview of ACT UP. I wanted to learn and act from their well-developed analyses of the connections between institutional racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, sex, and education.

So it seems as in the past, and its memory, so in the present.

After attending an activity or funeral, I had to come home to my community and hear: "Why you hanging out with those white people?" "Why don't you stay home with your kids?" "Are you Gay? Do you have that disease?" My community did not think the issues referred to them. Blacks, Puerto-Ricans, Women were never going to get AIDS, it was a white disease or a Gay disease. They thought it was either disgusting or funny that ACT UP put a condom over Jesse Helms' house, they did not see that it accomplished anything. They were shocked and appalled about many of the things ACT UP did. They did not realize that ACT UP got even them talking and thinking.

I wanted very much to join ACT UP, but in the end it was my own insecurities of being the other that kept me out. Looking back I wish I had not let my insecurities or ACT UP's seeming indifference keep me from joining. I would be proud to tell my grandkids that I had been a member of such a brave group.

I wonder if it is too late? Would my age, health, obligations keep me from joining now? Would the ACT UP community be more welcoming now? Would I still feel like the other?¹⁰

Street-based, postmodern, confrontational ACT UP activism got and gets most of the attention because it could and can and it wanted to. It had the funds, time, and self-confidence. Given that its participants were more photogenic, wealthier, more powerful, and simply sexier (in the eyes of dominant culture) than the rag-tag group of feminists, lesbians, drug addicts, people of color, homeless people, poor people, immigrants, mothers, and Haitians who were also engaged in activism at this time, ACT UP activism is quite memorable. Yet, as I'm trying to demonstrate, there was an incredible range of activities and activisms at this time, across the broader AIDS activist community, and within ACT UP itself. While these informed and complemented each other, only some were photographed or even photographable. And from the extant documents, memory and history-making attach themselves (which is why I was a video activist after all). But: how to keep reaching past or deeper into the histories that begin to encrust with meaning because they are more ready to remember?

For of course, remembering, too, happens in communities and within specific contexts. I can only remember ACT UP NY—and I am often asked to speak, one official AIDS rememberer, telling the stories we are most able to want to remember—but we all know ACT UP was international. Which is to say that as certain versions of ACT UP may be almost too remembered in the various small substrata of culture that I call home, and in which I am asked to write and speak, it falls away elsewhere unless those of us who were there continue to speak, even through our exhaustion, repetitions, local- and mis-rememberings. It's not like I think we *shouldn't* remember. At a recent screening of a draft of the documentary *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP* (Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman), a part of their larger ACT UP Oral History Project, much of what I express here was enacted by the audience: frustration that only ACT UP NY is remembered, pleasure and pride that one activist history is salvaged, worry that young gay men of color (and others) do not know this history, and joy in community.

So, as is true for this anniversary collection, *United in Anger*, and the many other attempts to remember ACT UP, my experimental piece, *Video Remains* (2005), is deeply concerned with the legacy of forgetting AIDS activism: what amnesia looks like, sounds like, and means in daily life for those of us who survived as well as for new generations of at-risk gay youth of color who were never reminded that others fought, lived, and died before them.¹¹ I wrote elsewhere:

In *Video Remains*, a community is also dust. It was an AIDS activist community that came and went, but is still caught on the tapes we made. The (video) evidence demonstrates that the AIDS activist (video) community is history. Many of those who were captured on tape, like my best friend Jim, have died. But some of the individuals who constituted this community remain, like the friends I interview, friends to whom I may not have spoken in years.¹²

Deborah Gould writes: “The movement of movements into history is not without its affective dimensions.”¹³ When we continue to remember ACT UP, whom do we forget and how does this feel? My best friend Jim, who died of AIDS in 1993, probably only went to one or two ACT UP meetings (although he accompanied me to many more protests). I imagine, or think I remember, that the insanely electric sexual charge of the room, coupled with a wicked brew of political correctness, entitlement, and power-mongering was too overwhelming for him. An off-off Broadway celebrity and sometimes go-go dancer, he liked to be center stage, and that role was already taken by a slew of more worthy and sexy politicians. Actually, Jim hated ACT UP. Or loved it. “The powerful sense of belonging that some people felt is matched by the ambivalence of others,” confirms Ann Cvetkovich.¹⁴ True enough, but I can’t really recall the subtleties of *Jim’s* emotions; nor should I. That was his/him, and he is no longer. It pains me more than I can say that I can’t simply email him to clarify; just a quick note via Facebook, like those included here, to expand the range, tone, and memories that come from us, the aging AIDS bewailers.

These many years later, my bonds with other NY AIDS activists are still strong enough that these old friends and colleagues will pen a few words about their memories for my particular professional recollection obligation: they feel moved to recollect; I am honored that we can remember together. As professional rememberers, we lament for the many missing voices, those who can no longer remind us of their actions and memories, those whose feelings are lost, those for whom we who are still here feel obligated and privileged not to forget.

Notes

- [1] Personal email, June 2011, from Azadeh Khalili, 1980s employee of AIDS Discrimination Unit of the New York City Commission on Human Rights [NYCCHR].
- [2] My doctoral research was a community-based AIDS educational video project for urban women of color. Together we made the video *We Care: A Video for Careproviders of People Affected By AIDS* (The Women’s AIDS Video Enterprise, 1990). My dissertation about this project, and AIDS activist video more generally, is *AIDS TV*.
- [3] See, as a few examples: *ACT UP NEW YORK: ACTIVISM, ART, AND THE AIDS CRISIS, 1987–1993*, Harvard University, October 15, 2010. Royal S. Marks AIDS Activist Video Collection at the New York Public Library. The ACT UP Oral History Project: <http://www.actupforallhistory.org>. AIDS/ART/WORK Conference, May 30, 2008. Alexandra Juhasz, “Feminist History Making and *Video Remains*,” an interview with Antoinette Burton, *Jump Cut* 48 (Winter 2006), <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc48.2006/AIDsjahasz/index.html>.
- [4] Cindy Patton, *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
- [5] For example: “AIDS Activist Movement” and “Feminist Movement Media” in *Encyclopedia of Social Movement Media*, ed. John Downing (London: Sage Press, 2010): 277–78, 196–99; “The Failures of the Flesh and the Revival of AIDS Activism,” in *Failure: Experiments in Aesthetics and Social Practices*, ed. Nicole Antebi, Colin Dickey & Robbie Herbst (*LA: The Journal of Aesthetics and Protest Press*, 2007): 135–42; “From the Scenes of Queens: Genre, AIDS and Queer Love,” in *The Cinema of Todd Haynes*, ed. James Morrison (London: Wallflower Press, 2006): 156–74; “So Many Alternatives: The Alternative AIDS Video Movement,” *From ACT UP to the WTO*, ed. Ben Shepard and Ronald Hayduk (London: Verso,

- 2002): 298–305; “Introduction,” and guest editor for *Corpus V: Women, Gay Men and AIDS* (March 2006); “*Video Remains*: Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism,” *GLQ* 12: 2 (Spring 2006); “Art Works: A Special issue of *GLQ*,” co-edited by Richard Meyer & David Román: 319–28; “Feminist History Making”; “AIDS Video: To Dream and Dance with the Censor,” *Jump Cut* 52 (Summer 2010).
- [6] Personal email from Juanita Mohammed-Imran, June 2011, AIDS activist video-maker, GMHC, BATE, Mother/Daughter Productions, Diversity Video Productions, NYC Human Resource Administration, 1980s–present.
- [7] Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP’s Fight Against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- [8] Personal email, June 2011, from Alisa Lebow, AIDS activist videomaker and NYCCHR employee, 1980s.
- [9] Personal email, June 2011, from Chas. Bennett Brack, AIDS activist videomaker, employee of NYCCHR AIDS Discrimination Division and GHMC, 1980s.
- [10] Personal email from Juanita Mohammed-Imran, June 2011, AIDS activist video-maker, GMHC, BATE, Mother/Daughter Productions, Diversity Video Productions, NYC Human Resource Administration, 1980s–present.
- [11] *Video Remains* can be purchased from Transit Media: <http://www.transitmedia.net>.
- [12] <http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc48.2006/AIDsJuhasz/aids2.html>
- [13] Gould, *Moving Politics*, 42.
- [14] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 174.