

"So many alternatives"

The alternative AIDS video movement

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In the years since AIDS was first identified with a name, thousands of programs about the crisis have been produced by videomakers who work outside of commercial television. Most critics, viewers, and producers refer to this large and diverse body of work as "the alternative AIDS media." The term distinguishes the unique conjunctions of finance, ideology, artisanship, profit, and style of independent video from the standardized, profit-oriented, seemingly authorless, and unbiased network television productions typically called "the mainstream media."

Of course, the binary terms "mainstream" and "alternative" obscure a great deal of cross-fertilization, mimicry, and hybridization: actually, both media use experimental as well as conventional forms; either format can espouse conservative ideology; "alternative" videos can have budgets larger than those of the "mainstream," and can make a lot more money.

Nonetheless, those of us who make and use AIDS media have held on to this sometimes obscuring terminology because while connoting processes of production, it has equally served to signify production ideology. The terms express our understanding that the "mainstream" media have consistently represented dominant (bigoted, distanced, judgmental) ideology about AIDS for the "general public," while the "alternative" media represent a critique, re-evaluation, or resistance to these "bad" images for a smaller, more committed audience. This simplistic understanding of the media has functioned to describe what has proven to be a relatively straightforward history of AIDS media. It has also contributed to a movement-wide awareness of the

power of representation, giving words to a recognition of the negative consequences of mis- and under-representation by dominant institutions as well as the immense significance of resistant, critical, or alternative representations.

This terminology, however, does not allow us to see how the "alternative" AIDS media are themselves composed of individual tapes which are conceived, funded, produced, and distributed in an infinite variety of ways. The case studies which follow are examples of "alternative" projects based within the New York AIDS video community. They range in budget from \$2,000 to \$1.3 million, and in form from art tape to traditional documentary; they are shot on camcorders, Betacam, and 16 mm film by producers who are self-identified as amateurs and professionals; and they range in distribution strategy from screenings at high schools to airings on PBS.

But their similarities are also telling. Several agencies and names involved in these projects appear in more than one case study, which indicates a commitment broader than one distinct project, and also points to the interrelation between alternative producers who are highly aware of each other's work. Yet, while interaction within the alternative community provides inspiration, all eight of these projects explicitly position themselves in some relationship, however diverse, to the form, reach, or agenda of the "mainstream media." Equally crucial, each one of them would never have been made without the highest level of passion and tenacity by their respective producer or collective. Such projects are based primarily upon the urgency of politics and, according to Sean Cubbitt, the notion of struggle: struggle to find funding and equipment, struggle to learn skills, to organize distribution, and to invent the best forms for new content; struggle for specific real-world goals because the work is primarily and consistently motivated by a shared commitment to altering the course of the crisis.

Testing the Limits

Originally a group of six artists and AIDS activists who knew each other from the Whitney Independent Studio Program and/or ACT UP, the Testing the Limits Collective (TTL) has produced five videos since their formation in 1987: *Testing the Limits Pilot* (1987); *Testing the Limits Safer Sex Video* (1987); *Egg Lipids* (1987); *Testing the Limits: NYC* (1987); and *Voices from the Front* (1992). Part of the collective's struggle has been to strike a balance between the desires to reach a mass audience, and to remain true

to their art-school training, and to their commitment to the movement which they document and in which they also participate. Currently in production on four hour-long documentaries about the gay and lesbian liberation movement, the collective's transition away from AIDS-specific video marks a significant change in its work, as does this project's million-dollar-plus budget.

In 1986, David Meieran and Gregg Bordowitz conceived of a video project which would represent the resurgence of lesbian/gay/AIDS militancy in New York City. Bill Olander's Homo Video show at the New Museum served as an inspiration, bringing together for the first time a developing movement of art and activist video centered upon the politics of AIDS, homophobia, and gay identity. In the meantime, ACT UP was forming. It was a heady, exuberant, dynamic time; anything and everything was happening in the just-forming AIDS activist community, and it all needed to be documented. "ACT UP drove us, galvanized us, gave us a focus. There was a direct alignment between the group's history and our own. We were caught up in it — documenting daily ... constantly."

In early 1987, Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, and Hilary Joy Kipnis joined Meieran and Bordowitz in the production of the first documentary video about the fledgling AIDS activist movement. Their intention was to produce the first mass-release AIDS documentary for Middle America, so they set their sights on PBS.

The organizing principle for the pilot they were producing to help raise funds for their thirty-minute PBS-style documentary was "document everything." The group taped countless demonstrations, ACT UP meetings, public roundtables, and interviews with AIDS activists. This documenting occurred however it could, which most typically meant "down and dirty footage" shot by whomever had a camera. This is what Meieran calls "alternative media": media production motivated by a commitment to a social issue where production occurs because it has to, by unpaid staff who are themselves insiders to what they document.

Testing the Limits immediately began "to distribute itself" to AIDS service organizations, as well as within the art and activist scene. Although the tape used a hybrid of conventional if roughly produced forms (talking-head interviews with AIDS activists interspersed with sexy footage of AIDS demonstrations which is, in best MTV manner, rapidly cut to music), its content, the early history of ACT UP/New York, was even less conventional. *Testing the Limits* never had its PBS airing: the style was too rough, the politics were too explicit. Thus, the group make its first steps towards

professionalization, which, among other things, resulted in ideologically bound splits within the collective.

The group's next project, *Voices from the Front*, took two and a half intense years to complete and began where *Testing the Limits* ended – the 1988 March on Washington for gay and lesbian rights. The great diversity of issues, organizations, and activist strategies covered in this 90-minute tape demonstrate how the AIDS activist movement and agenda had expanded and diversified since 1988. Transferred to film, *Voices from the Front* went on to play at art and independent theaters across the country and, with even greater success, on the international film market. In October 1992, it aired on HBO for a \$15,000 fee. Nevertheless, the tape ran up a \$40,000 deficit, and never aired on PBS, perhaps because of the group's continued reliance on "guerrilla coverage footage." But Hutt and Elgear think there is another reason: "We were too close to the material. Our friends, our lives, were in that tape. If we didn't have that type of intimacy, it wouldn't have been made. We wouldn't have gotten those interviews."

The year 1992 also brought about an escalation in anti-gay violence, and lesbian and gay militancy. TTL began documenting the birth of Queer Nation, and the response of gays and lesbians to anti-gay initiatives across the country. Now consisting of Elgear, Hutt, and Meieran, the group continued their attempt to professionalize, working on the transition from "alternative" to "independent" media production: work that, they explain, requires funding before production; work that is job- rather than issue-driven; work that is organized, structured, and neat in its form and production strategies; work that answers first to its funders; work that is paid; work that is viewed by millions. After receiving a \$1.3 million grant from ITVS in 1993, TTL is currently producing *Rights and Reactions*, a four-part series of hour-long documentaries about the history of the gay liberation movement. In this case, their political commitments will be marked by the process and professionalism that only money can buy.

DIVA TV (first incarnation)

In 1989, DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television) was formed as an affinity group of ACT UP, "organized to be there, document, provide protection and countersurveillance, and participate." Catherine Saalfeld, who co-founded DIVA

TV along with Ray Navarro, Jean Carlomusto, Gregg Bordowitz, Bob Beck, Coasta Papas, Ellen Spiro, George Plaggianos, and Rob Kurilla, points out that DIVA "targeted ACT UP members as its primary audience and made videos by, about, and, most importantly, for the movement." The group produced three tapes in its first phase: *Target City Hall*, which chronicles ACT UP's March 28, 1989 demo against Ed Koch's administration; *Pride*, about the twentieth anniversary of NY's gay and lesbian pride movement; and *Like a Prayer*, five seven-minute perspectives on the ACT UP/WHAM demo "Stop the Church" at St Patrick's Cathedral on December 10, 1989.

Testing the Limits and DIVA TV often shared footage, covered the same actions, and were committed to AIDS activism, as was also true of GMHC. But the AIDS video scene itself was diversifying and expanding along with the AIDS crisis. As their production histories reflect, by 1989 none of these groups necessarily shared ideological assumptions about AIDS video.

While Testing the Limits and DIVA TV had a close affinity in membership, content, and political commitment, the groups also differed significantly. With PBS as its goal, Testing the Limits always attempted to professionalize. DIVA, on the other hand, was remaining staunchly antiprofessional. As Saalfield explains, "Watching Testing the Limits evolve into an institutionalized organization reinforced DIVA's commitment to working as a collective. We remain fluid, make decisions with whom-ever comes to a meeting, and resist assigning a treasurer by dedicating any income to buying tape stock." According to Saalfield, DIVA's commitment to "the quick and dirty approach" of alternative production led to a "limited audience, inconsistent participation by collective members, and more process than product." But at the same time there remained "the essential goal of inclusivity, with open lines of communication among collective members for expressing opinions and offering analyses. Here protest is the process, communication is our form of resistance, and everyone has a say."

Tom Kalin

The film and video artist Tom Kalin has made at least eight videotapes and films about AIDS since 1985, although he believes that all of his work (including, for instance, his feature film *Swoon*) is impacted by the crisis. His AIDS work has been financed, produced, and distributed in a variety of ways — from personally funded,

individually produced montage-based experimental "art tapes" to collectively produced, glossy television. Kalin believes that he combines two models of the artist-as-producer: the "heroic artist," who gives form to the issues and feelings of his own personal/political landscape, and the "collaborative activist," whose work reflects a collective interpretation of experience and ideology.

Kalin's first AIDS tape, *Like Little Soldiers* (made while completing his MFA at the Institute for the Arts in Chicago), marks his initial response to AIDS – a personal and profound fear untempered by any interest in organizing or politicizing with others. The tape intercuts the brutal image of a pair of hands washing and picking off the white and then brown paint which color them, with the image of a burning shirt. In 1987, Kalin together with Stathis Lagoudikis produced *News from Home*, which renders the anxiety of disclosure of sero-status within a relationship and the society at large.

Kalin's search for and move towards a community represents a second stage in his AIDS work. His 1988 production, *they are lost to vision altogether*, reflects his move to New York and exposure to the activist politics of ACT UP. The tape strings together found and stolen footage from television, movies, reshot television, and Kalin's own images of sexuality, history, and activism, into a rapid and disorienting montage juxtaposing mass media hysteria with individual fixation, desire, and fear.

Until 1991 Kalin also produced work with the ACT UP artists' affinity group, Gran Fury. In 1990 the group produced *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, which consists of four thirty-second public service announcements for racial and sexual diversity in the face of AIDS; all emphasize the group's belief that, although culture is made in a lot of places, the mainstream media set the global and national agenda about AIDS. Therefore, to reach people and to reach for change, it is necessary to speak to people where they listen and in a language they understand. Kalin insists that "the ideal distribution" for even alternative AIDS video is television, "plop in the middle of the market place. You need to work to engage in the politics of Michael Jackson, Madonna, and Benneton. There is no outside the market place in relation to art production – the best you can do is to tease its margins."

Kalin makes tapes for ghosts – the people he's lost to AIDS, the faces he's seen on city streets or at AIDS demonstrations. "I don't have anything more to say about AIDS than the proverbial Latina mother of two infected babies who is also sick herself. But I do have cultural access, entitlement, privilege." Kalin used his privilege

like an artist, like an AIDS activist. He represents what he knows and how he lives in a mass-mediated society which is unaware that it is dripping with infection, and unaware of Kalin's grief and anger unless he represents it.

James Wentzy/DIVA TV 2/AIDS Community Television

AIDS Community Television, a half-hour public access show devoted to programming "for greater advocacy, coalition building and greater public awareness of AIDS activism," first went on the air on January 1, 1993. There are twelve airing times monthly in all five boroughs of New York, and many of the shows have been aired by ACT UP affiliates across the country. Since its second inception, the new DIVA TV (James Wentzy) has produced over twenty shows, including *AIDS Community Television: Introduction to AIDS Video Activism* (January 5, 1993), *Target Bush: Last Night in Office* (January 9, 1993), and *Tim Bailey Political Funeral Washington* (July 6, 1993). That's one show a week, without break, for over twelve months and counting: 101 shows as of December 5, 1994. Wentzy's raw, angry, and thorough coverage consists entirely of long and unedited shots – as if you are there – usually intercut with interviews of activist participants who contextualize or critique the event covered.

DIVA TV, the media affinity group of ACT UP, was defunct for a variety of personal, structural, and historical reasons when James Wentzy, who had joined ACT UP in 1990, reenergized it with the goal of commencing a weekly activist cable show. With his Hi8 camera, and no experience editing or producing video, Wentzy produced *Day of Desperation*, which documented the first ACT UP action he attended. A slow accumulation of grants (approximately \$17,000 since 1992) has allowed DIVA to purchase a 3/4-inch off-line editing system, currently housed in Wentzy's living room.

Wentzy claims he has documented 95 percent of ACT UP's demonstrations since his reconstitution of DIVA. "The weekly show is my life. If you want to know how I'm doing, tune into the Manhattan Public Access Tuesdays at 11:00 p.m. or Fridays at 9:00 am." Wentzy's new goal is a national media network devoted to reflecting the "struggles, needs and state of mind" of people affected by AIDS. He believes his television coverage of the AIDS crisis has an activist perspective. "It's the only weekly series in the world devoted to covering AIDS activism, and it's political. All activists see the crisis as a political problem." On the other hand, he sees that "the

nature of the broadcast media is that it is fleeting, with so little for perspective or evaluation."

It is telling that the first action Wentzy documented was the last action covered by Testing the Limits. Wentzy is in effect a third-wave AIDS video activist in a movement that has had only a six-year history, re-creating a wheel only four years after the first video collective devoted to covering AIDS activism was formed (Testing the Limits), and two years after a group was formed as an arm of ACT UP (the original DIVA TV).

Meanwhile, other individuals and organizations have been using both high- and low-end video to educate diverse communities of color, artists, PWAs, caregivers of PWAs, the "home viewer" of broadcast television) about safer sex, the interpersonal, physical and emotional consequences of HIV infection and the politics of the representation of AIDS.

Having concentrated here upon the production histories of a diverse group of alternative projects (and having made many such alternative tapes myself), one conclusion about this work rises above the expected remarks upon the similarities of commitment, struggle, and ideology which set apart the alternative AIDS media. In the second decade of the AIDS crisis, and nearing ten years and tens of hundreds of alternative AIDS video projects, what I see is a crisis of multiple perspectives, diverse dimensions, countless communities, and limitless personalities and a response, in video, which attempts to take this web into account. There are "so many alternatives" because a complex and mutating social crisis needs as many responses as there are forms in which to respond.

As is evidenced in the projects above, mediamakers come to AIDS with camcorders and 16 mm cameras, with their sights on national television and individual video monitors, and with political inclinations which range from the left to the center to the apolitical. And it is precisely this feature of the alternative AIDS media, as opposed to the bounded and closed nature of so much mainstream television, which I celebrate and applaud: a form as rich, open, and malleable as are the individuals and communities who have been scarred and scared into action against AIDS and the cultural and political indifference it has continued to breed.