

#2: (*laughing*): The way you came on to me. Only a lesbian would have behaved like that.

#1: OK, I'm a lesbian. I'll take your word for it . . . for now.

C'S STORY: I fell in love with a woman in Australia. I had always known it was a possibility. I was there for six weeks. She was wonderful. Then when I came home I let her come visit me, and it was a dreadful mistake. I couldn't stand the social thing. As a heterosexual I don't have to say I'm heterosexual or be known as something special, but as a lesbian I would be put into that category and I couldn't stand it.

N'S STORY: After my divorce seven years ago, which was very ugly and nightmarish, I vowed I would never get involved in something like that again. So I've been pretty much alone since then. In feminism it's a big problem here [Germany]. Lesbians have their own conferences and culture. Feminist conferences include lesbians, but the differences are never talked about. And much of the organizing wouldn't happen without the lesbians because they are the most active and energetic and advanced in their thinking.

Notes

1. This essay is based on a talk delivered at the Lookout Lesbian and Gay Television Festival on October 13, 1991, at Downtown Community Television in New York City.
2. Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, Russell Ferguson et al. eds. (Cambridge: MIT Press/The New Museum, 1990) p. 282.

On the Make: Activist Video Collectives

CATHERINE SAALFIELD

for Raymond Navarro

This paper could have been written by a group of people. In all but the most basic sense, it was. As I draw upon experiences of people in "real-life activist video collectives," this insider's view is not the result of an un-collective process. I want to discuss the underpinnings of our work, the fuel for it, the subjects and the products, and the relationship between those things. After I explain this endeavor, one collaborator turns her head, looks at me from the side of her face, and says, "I really don't think twenty pages will be enough." Sure. But we have to start somewhere. So, true to collective process, the first thing on the agenda is to set the agenda.

Setting the (Alternative) Agenda

During the last few years, gay and lesbian and AIDS-activist video collectives in New York City have caused a chain reaction of grassroots production. Often there's no office or telephone. Often the members meet a lot of times, with not enough time, anytime, and, when the crunch is on, all night long. Some persevere, continuously producing clips like a radical newsreel. Others make one tape, get a little exposure, and then procrastinate or get distracted by other productions, with members regrouping in another collective with a different acronym. All get at least a little bogged down in bureaucracy, but maybe only for a moment before getting back in gear.

Across these variations, no one gets anywhere without an agenda. Besides, an agenda—whether to foreground activists with AIDS protesting their own limited access to health care, or to represent lesbians and gays of color in an empowering and insightful way—is usually what brings the group together in the first place. Often more than one agenda, of the personal and historical type, crowd the room, and never do just a few remain hidden. Whether the problem is a peculiar editing style, previous sexual involvement with someone in the group, authoritarian ego, dogmatism, or political desperation,

collectivities often bury their motivations in irrelevant and frustrating cat fights or frantic forays into distracting topics. Just as we bring our temperamental dispositions and frequently humorous mood swings to a shoot, we can't hang our desires like a jacket at the door when we get together to edit. The impetus for this work is passion, and lust haunts many a move.

It's time to chose a facilitator, even though not everyone's here yet and the meeting was supposed to start half an hour ago. Someone's on the phone in the other room. Someone's on the other line in another bedroom. Someone's piling more beers into the overstuffed fridge. Someone's hanging out with a unaffiliated housemate, and to everyone's distraction, someone's cranking the stereo volume and gyrating with the fantasy partner of Queen Latifah.

Rule number one: the facilitator and the host cannot be the same person. As we narrow down potential nominees for the job, a harried member whisks in with papers falling to the floor and his shoes untied; "Sorry I'm late, but my *other* meeting ran over." On his backpack there's a pin which reads, "Process is for cheese." I pour more diet coke into my coffee mug.

The facilitator uses the back of an old party invitation to scrawl out an agenda, as the topics are listed. The final order (and does anyone have a problem with this?): introductions, announcements (gotta be short), counter-surveillance at upcoming demonstrations (when are they?), the current tape (screening of rough cuts and then half an hour of discussion), distribution initiatives (fifteen minutes), cable group update (another fifteen), speaking engagements and presentations (ten minutes, to be continued by subcommittee), future projects (will we ever get this far?).

Exchanging Names and Numbers

All right, we've allotted five minutes for introductions. Newbies first. Who you are and what you do.

The most recent effort in New York City of more than two inverts getting together to make a video about queer issues is House of Color. This group was the brainstorm of Robert Garcia, who, fantasizing about an explosive mix of lesbians and gays of color from various backgrounds, invited everyone to a meeting. In this case, "invitation only" presumes a shared ideology, a shared goal. The premeditated nature of House (as it is called by its intimate relations) sets it apart from other collectives discussed here. Ultimately, their work is about the web and weave of dynamics within the group and how the experience of working on their tapes affects and empowers other gays

and lesbians of color. Their main focus is not necessarily the interaction of their work with a viewing audience.

Robert Mignott, Jeff Nunokawa, Pamela Sneed, Jocelyn Taylor, and Julie Tolentino all joined what would become House of Color because they were Robert's friend—or roommate: "I really say no way of getting out of it." They also live with a double-edged invisibility of being people of color in various queer communities and being queer in various communities of color. They found the final member, Wellington Love, at a swinging downtown benefit for a different group with overlapping membership.

Although it's the most closed collective of the bunch, House exemplifies the political urgency and upbeat confidence common to all. Their original project was to produce three-minute blips with commentary on any range of issues, which would be interspersed during mostly milky-white programming on gay cable channels. Their first deadline narrowed this intent, and they produced the five-minute *I Object*, which glimpses at, and simultaneously revisions, exoticized and eroticized people of color as icons of beauty. In *I Object*, intermittent remarks by the producers break up what otherwise might feel like commercial TV, or like the inside of some mainstream fashion



I Object, House of Color

magazine: (white) face after (white) face, skimpy (white) women running around in next to nothing. Next page, (black) women, skimpy as well, and running around in next to nothing too, but with a different, sometimes almost subtle, exotic quality. Maybe it was the leopard skin underwear.

I Object has been described as “spunky,” a term apropos of rapidly successful upstarts. Given that very few of the members of this collective had any background in video, the tape represents a powerful combination of suggestive shots, rhythmic editing, political savvy, excellent tunes, and great looks. Shot on borrowed equipment, in collective members’ homes, edited at work after-hours, and finished a couple of minutes before its premiere in a video marathon at a popular nightclub, *I Object* is an origin story of sorts, one that aptly describes the nativity of many collectives.

Clearly a predecessor of House, the Paper Tiger Television Collective (PTTV), was the brainstorm of a few media agitators who were interested in exercising the democratic mandates of public access cable TV in the early eighties. Since then, the Paper Tiger production philosophy has influenced the evolution of many New York City video collectives and should rightfully be credited as a model for much quick-and-dirty media that evolved later in the decade. As an urgent response by, for, and about the ever-present medium of television, PTTV demonstrates a methodology by which to reinterpret cultural misrepresentations using the very same tools of their production. Cofounder DeeDee Halleck has noted, “There was a very conscious effort to make *Paper Tiger* a model for cheap television, to think about what those elements are in television that make television what it is.”¹ House of Color continues the tradition of calling to question the racist, sexist, and homophobic backbone of network television that posits all “special interest groups” as such.

Paper Tiger’s weekly shows—aired citywide on public access television, with roll-ins—have a handmade look and an immediate message. By challenging network forms of television, it represents alternative TV, and can be watched not only at home but also in community centers and galleries, in schools and organizational meetings. Fundamentally, the group maintains that people “should be able to work in media, so they can be critical of the mass media and not victims of mass culture.”² Whereas network TV perpetuates the hierarchical structure by which it is produced, the collective nature of the particular alternative media at issue here redefines a long, profit-guided history of nonparticipatory forms of TV production.

True to form, the PTTV collective is completely open to volunteers, so most progressive video producers in the city today, at one time or another, either have worked on a Paper Tiger tape, spiritually guided one, or been a commentator who deconstructed a propaganda mechanism of the information industry for one of their programs. Paper Tiger encourages anyone who

already knows (or is willing to learn) about a certain topic, to investigate relevant documents, organize a script, paint a backdrop, put the headphones on, and get behind a camera. In PTTV, producers are encouraged to research, analyze, and represent social and political issues despite (and at the same time, because of) their own race, gender, class, age, and sexual identity.

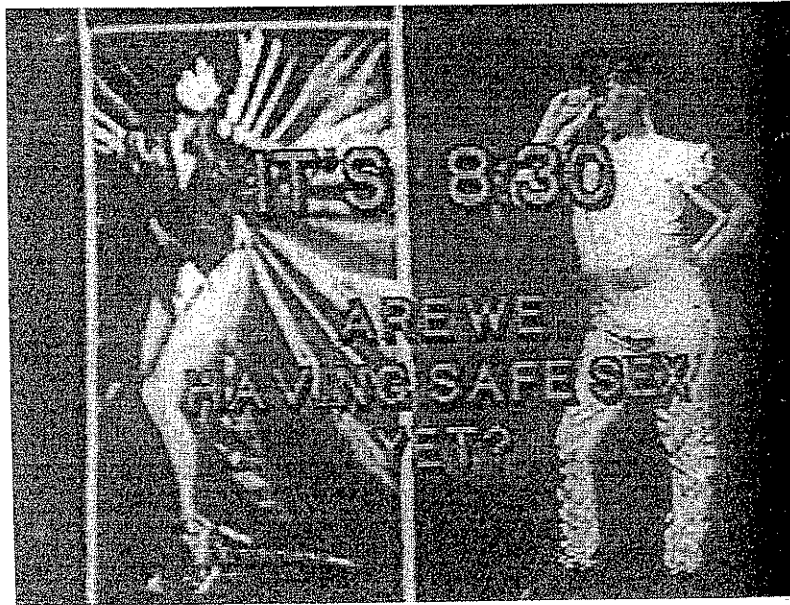
Between its New York City headquarters and Paper Tiger/Southwest, a San Diego affiliate, the fluid group of lesbians, straights, and gay men that comprise PPTV—more or less in that order—has produced four of the earliest activist documentaries pertaining to the AIDS crisis. In *PWAC Talks Back* (1988) the late Max Navarre of the People with AIDS Coalition (PWAC), discusses the organization’s unique publications *Surviving and Thriving with AIDS* and *PWAC Newslines*, a monthly newsletter. In *Simon Watney Speaks about Clause 28* (1988) the author of *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS and the Media* provides a scathing critique of homophobia in the UK by closely reading the mainstream media coverage of England’s repressive legislation against queers. Like Jesse Helms’s parallel amendment to a bill on AIDS education funding, Section 28 limits government support for “materials which promote homosexuality.”

Then the San Diego crew came out with *Transformer AIDS* in 1989, which features University of California, San Diego graduate Bob Kinney illustrating the vacuity of Ronald Reagan’s lip service to the AIDS crisis. Two years later the same queer crew again occupied the university’s in-house studio and graced us with *The Silence that Silences*, which calls into question “pictures without context.” Kinney examines desolate, desperate, lonely photographs of people with AIDS taken by Rosalind Solomon and Nicholas Nixon, and sees not the implied “AIDS victim,” but rather a manipulated image of people living with AIDS who seem to lack agency and voice, unlike many people with HIV who are vehemently fighting with their lives, for support, love, family, friends, lovers, and themselves. Like other activist collectives, PTTV/Southwest also used footage of protests in its half-hour reformulations of mistaken, mainstream dictum, changing a documentary into unapologetic agitprop.

Such informal linkages as those between the Paper Tiger collective and House of Color similarly inform the history of another early, collectively produced tape on the AIDS crisis, *Testing the Limits: NYC*. In spring 1987, the Testing the Limits Collective (TTL) turned out their half-hour documentary about what some people living with AIDS were saying and doing about the dominant heedlessness of government and medical officials. Notably, the gay and lesbian liberation movement was the genesis both for this collective video work and for the earliest activist responses to the AIDS crisis. After taping demonstrations against the 1986 *Bowers v. Hardwick* Supreme Court decision, which upheld state sodomy laws, a few folks got together in the

familiar networking-the-circle fashion to record the growing AIDS activism in New York City. The early TTL members were lesbian, gay, and straight: David Meieran, Gregg Bordowitz, Hilery Joy Kipnis, Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, and, later, Jean Carlomusto. In 1986 and 1987, they spent six more months covering various demonstrations of ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power). Subsequently, they completed the tightly edited and well contextualized *Testing the Limits: NYC* about the swirling hellhole of AIDS deaths, panic, misinformation, and governmental bigotry that the city had become.

TTL attracted many other eager video jocks from the paisley of ACT UP's energetic band, many of whom created DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television), which targets ACT UP members as its primary audience and makes videos by, about, and, most importantly, *for* the movement. Nine folks founded DIVA: Ray Navarro, Jean Carlomusto, Gregg Bordowitz, Bob Beck, Costa Pappas, Ellen Spiro, George Plagianos, Rob Kurilla, and myself. All TTL members were immediately considered members of DIVA, because we thrive as a loose affiliation that chronicles the commotion around City Hall, at the Stock Exchange, inside the Department of Health—some key



Transformer AIDS: Bob Kinney Looks at Media and Governmental Response to AIDS, Paper Tiger TV Southwest

targets of ACT UP/NY. By its very definition, DIVA stands in opposition to closed or hierarchical groups. As DIVA Peter Bowen writes, “Rather than having a fixed membership, a bank account, a solid identity, DIVA floats freely, making tapes with the money, technical resources and labor that is available at any one meeting. . . . I learned firsthand the political effects of such a democratic production schedule. Borrowing a camera for one ACT UP demo, I learned to shoot video. Abandoned in the editing room one afternoon, I learned to edit it.”³

Ah, if it *were* that easy. DIVA, like all activist collectives, functions best when the folks involved are excited about a given project, the end and the means of it, and the process of creating. But sometimes the flurry of the moment puts us all out of control. The saying “too many cooks spoil the broth” comes to mind. We can’t continue to have one group initiate and outline a given show, and then have three newcomers responsible for editing the segments together. Our last tape wallowed a year in postproduction for this reason, even though each week we renewed our collective commitment to get the piece out. A rational remedy looms before us: no more middle-of-the-show crew reorganization; at least one production team must remain in place from the beginning to the end of each project. Furthermore, never forfeit 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.

A sense of urgency propels DIVA through personality clashes, busy schedules when we’d all rather procrastinate, people competing, moving on, burning out, and arguing. And we have persisted through the loss of two of our most spirited members to AIDS. Actually, it’s hard to specify how much that hinders our process and how much it thrusts us headlong into grinding production. In any case, when ACT UP organizes a demonstration, DIVAs organize to be there, document, provide protection and countersurveillance, and participate. The final products, needless to say, vary wildly. Since DIVAs like to interview (hyper)activists mid-arrest and are often themselves learning how to run the rig mid-shoot, the images aren’t always steady. With all the hullabaloo in the background, the comments aren’t always perfectly audible. Still, we’re in good company, since the quick-and-dirty model has existed since the invention of the moving image.

Julio Garcia Espinosa begins his influential essay, “For an Imperfect Cinema,” “Nowadays perfect cinema—technically and artistically masterful—is almost always reactionary cinema.”⁴ This isn’t to say that any tape with low production values, glitches, and jerky camera movement is a progressive and deserving piece of work. It’s a question of priorities. “Armed propaganda” goes nowhere if bogged down by corporate approaches to the techni-

cal aspects of logo manufacturing and the unfathomable cost of crystal-clear images and sound. Plus, "perfect cinema" remains fundamentally incompatible with the unpredictable and spontaneous activist approach towards life-and-death situations.

Announcements

Announcements often serve as a reality check. They tie us and our concerns into a larger context of innovative community-based groups and individuals confronting traditional modes of representation:

One of the many aims of an AIDS-activist cultural practice is to explore and expose the gaps between such rhetorical terms as "the nation," "the family," or "the community," and the complex reality that they mask. Such gaps are especially significant in a time of crisis, when one may well discover that one's very life counts for extremely little. . . . How can one explain this to other people in such a way that they might be able to identify with one's desperate situation, and be empowered to act collectively on the basis of their new perceptions? Of what might such action most effectively consist?

—Simon Watney⁵

Information exchange among imagemakers and activists is vital. Video activists should organize among themselves, whether producing a collaborative project, looking out for each other at an event, or coordinating complete documentation. Organizing insures that important events get recorded.

—Ellen Spiro⁶

Art *does* have the power to save lives, and it is this very power that must be recognized, fostered, and supported in every way possible. But if we are to do this, we will have to abandon the idealist conception of art. We don't need a cultural renaissance; we need cultural practices actively participating in the struggle against AIDS. We don't need to transcend the epidemic; we need to end it.

—Douglas Crimp⁷

It was the early representations of AIDS and the "Don't do it"-type posters, coupled with the Tory posters: "Young, gay, and proud," "Policing the classrooms," and "Sex education taught in schools" and so forth—a whole hidden agenda specifically around race and sex. . . . I tried to combat it through *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement*, which is an ad for gay desires. I'm being a propagandist, using images and representations of sexuality to celebrate love and desire. . . . *Testing the Limits: NYC* . . . has a very politically activist agenda, but asks: how can you describe loss of friends

or the total re-direction we are taking in our identity, which we all have to negotiate now? Our tapes take a stance; there's an edge to them.

—Isaac Julien⁸

So the fight is for, let us say, representation, but in new forms; forms that are bound up more with participation than delegation, dependent on significant associations of people rather than recorded majorities, moving towards the development of a non-representative representation: the achievement of modes of presentation and imaging and entertainment and argument that are the realizations of collective desires, group aspirations, common projects, shared experience.

—Stephen Heath⁹

Who's Got the Power

Next on the agenda is countersurveillance, because there are demos this week that need to be covered; those activists committing civil disobedience and risking arrest are counting on us. Originally, DIVA TV came together because the cops who patrol our protests and arrest us like to do it with a heavy dose of gratuitous force. We need to protect our fellow activists by providing synchronized countersurveillance at the Centers for Disease Control, at the Post Office, on the Brooklyn Bridge, and in front of abortion clinics threatened by antichoice Operation Rescue fanatics. Whatever measures we can take to guard our folks—who handcuff themselves to desks, hang banners off the scaffolding of city buildings, interrupt the Stock Exchange—are always welcomed. So everyone in ACT UP who has a camcorder, some experience, or a desire to participate in a demonstration in a new way, can come to a meeting. ACT UPers with camcorders still bump elbows on the front lines but now at least we know each other's names.

Do we have camerapeople going to the protest in West Harlem at St. Luke's Hospital? They're closing Women and Babies Hospital. Will someone do demo support for the folks picketing at the trial of the Stop the Church defendants? Suzanne Wright and Gerry Albarelli will be covering Saturday's needle exchange on the Loisaída.

Sometimes our raw footage seems redundant, obligatory; more often it is sensational, if only because demo-graphics brighten even the most boring concrete edifice in the midst of a parking lot. All the rugged bods getting thrown around certainly look impressive, but, importantly, this footage has also served as evidence in court. After a big demo, the phone rings off the hook with demonstrators who need shots of their arrests. After we stormed the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, one ACT UPER faced a trial for assaulting an officer. He was acquitted after showing the

judge footage of himself passively resisting arrest (that is, refusing to stand up for the cop, which is resisting arrest, not assaulting an officer). We've got an image bank of cops bending peoples' wrists to the breaking point, of cops slamming protestors on the back and shoulders with billy clubs, of cops trying to intimidate AIDS activists with big yellow dishwashing gloves, of cops threatening nonviolent protesters with trumped-up charges of assault.

While compiling our first production, *Target City Hall*, which chronicles ACT UP's March 28, 1989 demonstration against then-mayor Ed Koch and his hideously neglectful administration, the late Costa Pappas came to a meeting with a half-inch, glitch-filled, brilliant, nine-minute segment complete with stop-motion images and a musical interlude. He had crash-cut this gem on two home VCRs. We promised to get him a new cassette for the next day's action, since he always used every inch of tape, recording more originals on the heels of a master edit. In the clip, Costa trails one affinity group, CHER (Cathy Has Extra Rollers or Concerned Homos Espousing Reality), for the entire day.¹⁰ He shows them deciding when to enter the fray, chanting and bouncing into the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge off ramp, being dragged away in stilled frames cut to a folksy '60s song, and finally processing their varied perspectives on the jail experience at the party afterwards.

The treasured alliance which emerges in this pragmatic approach to media production never ceases to amaze me. Street activists looking to us for technological confidence understand the process involved in, and thus the potential for, alternative television. They not only flock to screenings to see themselves and their ex-lovers going limp for the women and men in blue, but now they come to us during the planning stages.

By exploiting the mass production of consumer format equipment, we manage to rig several DIVAs, usually in pairs, for each event. We garner a lot of strength from sharing resources, costs, technical expertise, information, and editing facilities. We have created for ourselves a viable production community which gathers after-hours at the various nonprofit media centers where some of us work during the day as professional TV and video producers. Teams of two or three edit each segment at different locations, such as Gay Men's Health Crisis, Electronic Arts Intermix, Testing the Limits, Downtown Community Television Center, Paper Tiger, as well as the ad hoc production centers that several of our own homes have become.

The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over

It's time to talk about the current work, the tape which exists in pieces at the fingers of the team now laying control track, turning dials, monitoring

sound levels, and typing titles in the editing suite. Scanning demo reels for dramatic arrest images, good statements by onlookers, and useful cutaways, we spend countless caffeine-induced sleepless nights with cottonmouth from too many salty pretzels. For these reasons, this section was allotted thirty minutes, more than anything else on the agenda.

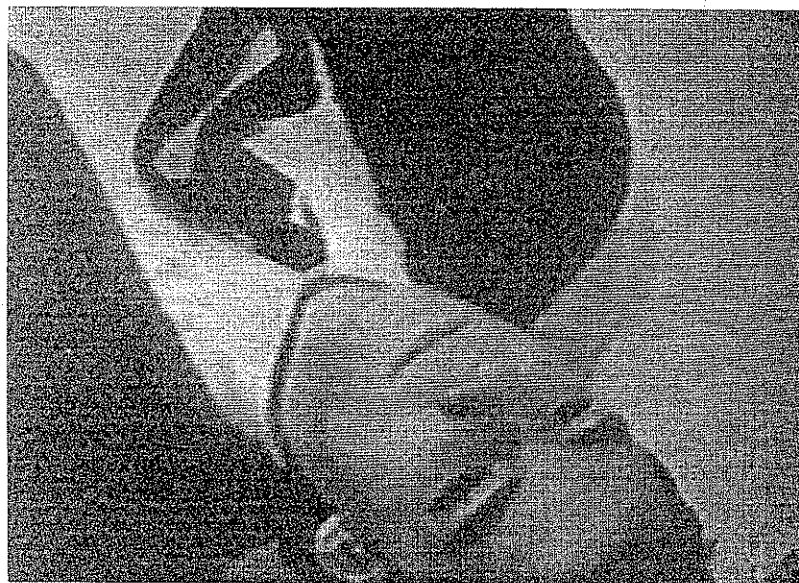
Although the working styles of TTL and DIVA were born from the same principles, the two groups have veered in opposite directions, partly as a reaction to each other's choices and to account for the diverse challenges we face. TTL received considerable pressure to produce a powerful and useful sequel to their first piece. But they couldn't have foreseen all the dimensions of their popularity and significance. The choice presented itself: institutionalize and prosper, or stick to principles more attuned to the quick-and-dirty approach—limited audience, inconsistent participation by collective members, and more process than product. Following some philosophical disagreements and divisions over these options, the remaining members decided to set up an office. Consequently, grant money must be earmarked for office rental and phones, applications to foundations must be processed efficiently, and precise scheduling takes the place of phone tag in assembling a crew. TTL became a formal group of three producers: David, Robyn, and Sandra; assistant editor Lisa Guido; scattered ad hoc camerapeople; and volunteer fund-raisers. Upon completion of *Voices from the Front*, TTL remains a vital component of the New York AIDS community, and they still generously share their impressive activist archive and three-quarter-inch off-line editing system.

Watching TTL evolve into an institutionalized organization reinforced DIVA's commitment to working as a collective. We remain fluid, make decisions with whomever comes to a meeting, and resist assigning a treasurer by dedicating any income to buying tape stock. Yet, despite the structural differences, many of the same processes endure in all of the collectives.¹¹ People are supposed to bring in rough cuts or raw footage, either of segments (DIVA), shows (PTTV), paper edits (TTL), or interviews (House). This is what holds us together: the material we've mulled over since the previous meeting. For DIVA, edited segments appear according to very strict deadlines. Whatever appears on the night chosen for rough cut previews may get minor revisions, and then goes into the completed show. That the sections connect coherently speaks to a shared vision of the uses of radical media: how to make it, stretch it, challenge it, change it. And the enormity of the AIDS crisis dictates the passionate approach. On the other hand, the fact that the segments are also stylistically distinct speaks to the influence of television. We either act in entertained accordance with or in critical opposition to the tube. For example, some producers are comfortable rapidly

chopping shots to house beats, while others who don't like voice-over narration favor talking heads.

After *Pride '69-'89*, (about the weekend that lesbians and gays spent commemorating it), DIVA churned out *Like a Prayer*, an assembly of five- to seven-minute perspectives on the ACT UP/WHAM! demonstration Stop the Church at St. Patrick's Cathedral, on December 10, 1989. Protesting Cardinal O'Connor's deadly policies on AIDS, homosexuality, abortion, and safe sex, activists demonstrated ingenuity of costume (clown noses and fluorescent wigs), posters and slogans ("Cardinal O'Condom"), and commentary (including lesbian and gay ex-Catholics expressing their disgust with Catholic bigotry).

The wafer group met at Craig Paull's off-line office equipped with half-inch editing equipment. Craig set up his hi-8 camera on the tripod to interview ACT UP member Tom Keane, who was responsible for "desecrating the host." His was the story that garnered the most media attention, and crumpled wafers evolved into a raging public debate perpetuated by political personalities casting about for votes. Another section is presented as a fable, centering on an evil sorcerer who speaks to his people, "filling them with ignorance and blinding them with lies." The promotional shorts which



A protestor participating in the ACT UP/WHAM! action at St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York City, in *Like a Prayer*, DIVA TV

advertised Stop the Church in advance are incorporated to provide a thread. In one, the late Ray Navarro, playing his favorite role of Jesus with a crown of thorns, toga, and jimmy hat, tells the audience to "be sure your Second Coming is a safe one. Use a condom, every time."¹² Shot with the same cruddy camera, faulty mic, and desk lights, another has apples being bagged in condoms to the tune of "New York, New York." Parodying a simple safe-sex dictum, it ends with Ray's nimble fingers topping off a statuette of the Empire State Building with a condom, Christoesque, wearing its politics on its sleeve.

We dedicated *Like a Prayer* to Costa, a DIVA supreme and a fierce AIDS activist who died of AIDS-related complications on December 26, 1989. We used footage from different demos where he was shooting or dancing, always wearing his DIVA press pass, and, once, expounding on the pleasures of being a DIVA. *Target City Hall* is dedicated to Steve Zabel—an unassuming man who single-handedly stocked the most thorough video archive of lesbian, gay, and AIDS activism in New York—who was murdered in his apartment on February 28, 1989.

Making memorial tapes collectively has been one of the only revitalizing aspects of grieving. The memorial tape for Ray Navarro stands on its own and was spontaneously produced by an ad hoc group of his close friends: John Greyson, Gregg Bordowitz, Jean Carlomusto, and myself. We had worked in different combinations on videos before. We had worked on deadline before. But faced with Ray's death, the four of us found ourselves conceptualizing a reservoir for our friend, a reservoir which turned out to be the power of collective action. For two days we were there, exorcising, purging, processing, crying, giggling, and longing for an image to last forever, or better, to come back to life. We scoured the raw material of many videographers. Looking through footage of the Thanksgiving dinner before he got sick and the demo at the FDA, pausing for Ray's wide grin at a midnight gathering in his studio, trying to identify him at the takeover of the Sixth International AIDS Conference in Montréal, searching everywhere to find even the back of his head or his elbow, we plotted to preserve and to persevere. The finished tape was ultimately for the people who would crowd into his memorial service the next day. But for us, it was a defense, our last word about losing a collaborator, a lover, a best friend.

Spreading the Word

The facilitator gets nudged from poring over today's paper. "Let's go on to distribution. Two announcements. ACT UP needs more VHS copies of *Target City Hall* to sell at the Monday night meetings. And we gotta get

volunteers to answer these calls for tapes and mail preview copies. Now a report from the cable group. We've got fifteen minutes for this, so let's rock and roll through this section."

Instead, a new guy raises his hand, talking at the same time: "What audience are these tapes directed to? Who are we making them for? Should we address them to people who don't know the meaning of all the acronyms in the alphabet soup?" The old members want to know if the constituency of ACT UP isn't reason enough for our efforts. The shows function as propaganda for empowerment and recruitment, for education and enjoyment. None of the allotted time takes into account this unexpected inquiry into our theory and practice. We have to vote to extend this section by five minutes. After ten minutes of discussion about the vote itself, the proposal to go on another five minutes passes unanimously. We can see the future projects section getting bumped to next week, again.

Originally, we needed imagery by, for, and about us. People with suppressed immune systems never speak at the same time *about* themselves and to other seropositives on TV, and activists don't know how dishevelled, vulnerable, and strong they look after all the heat and fury of an action has passed. DIVA shares with House of Color a quality of "amongness" between the producers and the audience. We make work for the people featured in it and formed our collective identities from talking to each other. When the producers in House were asked after a screening who their second tape, *Probe*, was directed to, they made the point that, insofar as no images like the ones in their videos exist anywhere else, they create these images for anyone who will look.

The *Living with AIDS Show*, Channel L, and *Out in the '90s* have screened completed DIVA productions and used unedited demonstration footage for their weekly cablecasts in Manhattan. NBC, CBS and ABC have each called to request "whatever we have," and we've sold it to them. Sometimes they become insistent and belligerent about our duty to further their beneficent intentions; other times they coax us with endearments and then ridicule and manipulate our material for their own, biased stories. We have to fight about this every time. What constitutes an intervention? When does a DIVA credit alter an image which is immersed in a barrage of unsympathetic coverage? When does earning a couple extra bucks make us feel OK about denigrating our work?

Suzanne had rare footage of the Church demo because she went inside as a regular activist while the acknowledged media mavens were corralled into a distant corner. Sleazy-tabloid station Channel Eleven offered to buy it and give her DIVA credit, but they never even replaced her tape stock and the only credit she received was being the butt of a joke. When our name appears, the newscaster says, "Activists turned holy mass into a holy mess." We

incorporated a part of this distortion into *Like a Prayer*, which deconstructs the entire media mishigas and, at least, empowers DIVA producers through the act of decoding.

Of course, when we rip off *their* imagery, it's a different matter altogether. Gran Fury, another collective in ACT UP, which concentrates primarily on poster campaigns and public art projects, has produced a series of thirty-second public service announcements (PSAs) that mimic the ubiquitous advertisements for the "United Colors of Benetton." Likewise featuring a multiracial cast, the Gran Fury PSAs consist of same sex couples smooching in every thinkable combination. Originally intended for MTV, they haven't been aired except on scattered pay cable shows and in public access slots. Nonetheless, they've been in several shows, including a program of music videos that travelled across the country, as well as in film festivals and art galleries.

The tapes of DIVA, House, PPTV, and TTL are used in teach-ins and at fund-raisers. They are programmed in galleries, museums, and video festivals. Italian TV station RAI subtitled a segment from *Target City Hall* for a news program. Tapes are made available free of charge to other ACT UP chapters and sold at Monday night meetings for only twelve dollars, a compromise between our anarchistic desire to give them away and the needs of ACT UP/NY's fund-raising committee. The tapes provoke varied reactions from all kinds of audiences, and ultimately demonstrate *for* us in different settings.

Show and Tell

People in these collectives speak well, speak through many media, and speak a lot. But this section of the meeting should take only about ten minutes. We have a few upcoming speaking engagements and presentations. City University of New York, Wesleyan, Harvard, and Cooper Union have invited a bunch of people to screen tapes and talk shop. At Brown, they put a tube on a table in the snack bar and looped *Target City Hall* all day for the rotating, munching crowds. For World AIDS Day, 1990, the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston ran our three half-hour productions continuously.

DIVA is sponsoring a benefit for ACT UP at Brand Name Damages gallery in Brooklyn, under the Williamsburg Bridge, and no one can find a flier. "Who's got the flier?" asks Rupert, who just seconds ago passed it around. "I swear to God I don't have it," says a guilty, overtired facilitator. "But we need help coordinating this event. Who can we call to do outreach . . . ?"

Everyone then suggests the person: "She's not here anymore, so she can do it."

As we all expected, future projects have been tabled until next meeting. Also for next time, think about DIVA T-shirt imagery. We've been offered free silk-screening. If no one comes up with any more ideas, we'll have to decide between color bars—activist video in jail—or Lady Liberty with a camcorder leading the people.

Is this meeting adjourned?

Notes

1. DeeDee Halleck stresses this purpose in an interview with Judith Mayne and Lucretia Knapp, "Feminisms Does Media Activism: An Interview with DeeDee Halleck," *Feminisms*, vol. 3, no. 3 (May/June 1990), p. 4.
2. *Ibid.* p. 3.
3. Peter Bowen, "Collect Yourself," *Outweek*, no. 52 (June 27, 1990), p. 108.
4. Julio Garcia Espinosa, "For an Imperfect Cinema" [1969] in Coca Fusco, ed., *Reviewing Histories: Selections from New Latin American Cinema*, (Buffalo: Hallwalls, 1987), p. 167.
5. Simon Watney, "Representing AIDS," in Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta, eds., *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990), p. 174.
6. Ellen Spiro, "What To Wear on Your Video Activist Outing (Because the Whole World Is Watching): A Camcorder's Manifesto," *The Independent*, vol. 14, no. 4 (May, 1991), p. 24.
7. Douglas Crimp, "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism," *October* 43, (Winter 1987), p. 7.
8. Isaac Julien and Pratibha Parmar, "In Conversation" in Boffin and Gupta, p. 100.
9. Stephen Heath, "Representing Television," in *Logics of Television: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Patricia Mellencamp, ed. (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press and BFI Publishing, 1990), p. 298.
10. An affinity group usually coalesces for the planning stages and the duration of a demonstration in order to carry out specific, small, group actions. As many as twenty coordinated affinity groups have participated at one time in a large ACT UP protest.
11. Other activist video collectives, with multiple overlapping memberships, complement the work discussed here. For example, Media Against Censorship (MAC Attack) was founded by Dean Lance, Maria Beatty, and Branda Miller in August 1990. The group is a collective of video artists and media activists documenting acts of and protests against censorship. In May 1991 they produced a one-hour documentary, *State of the Art/Art of the State*. ReproVision, the video collective affiliated with WHAM!, was founded by Julie Clark, Dolly Meieran, and Dana Nasrallah. In September 1991 they produced *Access Denied*.
12. Arch-conservative Reverend Donald Wildmon got his hands on a copy of *Like a Prayer*, and he searched for a way to connect it with his attempts to embarrass the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). He discovered that the Second Coming clip played in

New York's lesbian and gay New Festival as part of Ray Navarro's memorial tape. His frantic and skewed call to arms included the following bit of hysteria: "Considered most shocking of all was the fact that twelve hundred dollars of Council money paid for the Festival's movie guide which promoted the film, *Jesus Christ Condom*, produced by militant gay activists who call themselves DIVA-TV." In response, the NEA drafted a fact sheet about DIVA: "That organization, a small group working in media-based AIDS awareness programs, never received a grant from the NEA." And we probably never will.