

[Following is an excerpt from the ACT UP Oral History Project interview with Avram Finkelstein conducted by Sarah Schulman on January 23, 2010. Avram describes the beginnings and the design of the Silence = Death poster.]

I had a close friend who I knew from the music and club scene, Jorge Socarras, and Jorge, a friend of his had just become sick, and he knew Don. Actually, he co-wrote some songs with him. He did some work with Don. I introduced them, because Jorge had a band called an indoor life, which he worked with Patrick Cowley, actually, who did some of Sylvester's stuff when they were in San Francisco. So, I had introduced them, and Don really liked his music, and they co-wrote together.

But because Don's death and his illness, up until his death, were secret, Jorge didn't know that he was sick. But afterwards, he, of course, did. I'd made dinner plans with Jorge and he brought Oliver Johnston along with him. I have no idea why. Oliver, for anyone who remembers him – Well, I don't know that anyone – You'd have to know Jorge also, but you couldn't have two diametrically opposed personas at a dinner table. Oliver was a southern boy, blond, one of those people who wore statement glasses, kind of one of those dandies, but with specious taste, and Jorge was like a vampire. He was dark and intense. I had no idea why Oliver was at the table with us.

We started, and I thought, "Well, maybe Jorge's interested in him." I asked Jorge about this recently, and he has no memory of the dinner. But I couldn't figure it out. We started talking about AIDS, and it became very obvious that we all needed a place to be to continue this conversation, so we decided to form a group. None of us had been in a group therapy situation, so we didn't feel like that's what we were talking about, and we didn't know at the time, but we

formed a consciousness-raising group. We didn't know how big it needed to be, but we decided we would all start by each bringing a person that the other people didn't know and see how it went. We were going to talk about issues of being gay in the age of AIDS. That was the idea behind it.

So, I brought Chris Lione, Jorge brought Brian Howard, and Oliver brought Charles Kreloff, and that was the group that we met every week. We had a potluck. We'd be at a different house every week. We'd all bring a course. We met every week and we talked about our fears and dating and loneliness and being gay and AIDS. But almost every week we would end up, the conversation would end up talking about politics. So, it became very obvious to me, after about six months of that, that we were a political consciousness-raising group as well, and that's how the poster idea came about.

Sarah Schulman: How did it come about?

AF: I wasn't sure if you were finished with the other questions.

SS: How many of the six of you were artists?

AF: Well, none of us were artists, but there were four graphic designers.

SS: Out of six?

AF: Yeah. And Jorge was a writer, and I was an art director. But, of course, I'm saying I wasn't an artist, but I didn't identify as one.

Because of my background and because I remember that period during the student mobilization in the antiwar movement — Do you remember Greenwich Village back then?

SS: Yes.

AF: Eighth Street was literally papered with posters, manifestos and posters and diatribes. It was literally like a billboard, the entire corridor between the East and West Village,

and I remember that as a very vital way that people communicated in the street. It was free. Everyone did it. I remember it as a part of my adolescence. So, I thought, well, this would be a good strategy for us, where we feel like we're in a raft in the middle of the sea. I didn't know whether other people felt the same way about it, but there really was no outlet for it, and we wanted to be heard and to see also if we could stimulate some conversation about it. So, I actually suggested it to the group. I said what I've just said to you. I said, "I'll pay for the poster if you all will split the cost of putting it up, and why don't we work on it." And everyone agreed to it, and then for the next six months we tossed around ideas that eventually became the "Silence=Death" poster. But it was originally conceived as a campaign, so that was the first poster. And because we weren't sure what kind of political responses we were going to be calling for, but we had a radical bent, we decided that it would be better to be anonymous, and we were anonymous until after ACT UP formed.

SS: So how did you come to the decisions that produced that poster?

AF: Well, I'd been looking through journals and looking at notes from the meetings, so it's very fresh in my memory. We tried on many different issues, as is typical with collectivity. It really is about tossing out a lot of ideas. Bill Buckley had done his tattoo recommendation, so for a couple of weeks we tossed around what that poster might be like. It seemed startling, it harkened to the camps where people were up in arms about it, it was controversial enough, we thought this would be a good issue for a poster, but as we began to really look at it, we realized, okay, well, so it's a photograph of a tattoo on somebody's butt. Okay, well, whose butt is it? Is it a man's butt? What about the women? Is it a white butt? What about people of color? The issues surrounding representation made it impossible for us to pursue that. We just thought it wouldn't be inclusive enough and discarded it.

Then we had some poster ideas about a call to riot, which was actually going to be the third poster, but we decided there would be no point in having a call for a political response that was that severe when there hadn't been the first levels of conversation that might lead to even developing a communal response, much less a radical one. So, we thought we would start with something that was a shot across the bow, which is what this poster was.

We're New Yorkers, and, as I've said, I have a deep history with the political poster. Sometimes I feel like I was raised with a political poster in my hand, I mean, it's so deep in me and in my family. I have a real affinity for this type of communication. At the time in New York, it was the height of Reagan, and there was building everywhere. In New York City, the place where you're allowed to poster, there are only select places, and building sites is one of the places because they're temporary structures. And there were tons of them. So, it seemed like that would be a good place for us to be. We made the decision that it not be hand-wrought, manifesto-ish, it not involve a lot of text, because we would be competing in the public sphere for people's attention, and text is not attractive. We couldn't necessarily narrow down the audience enough to know which neighborhoods to work in, so the text really can only be encountered in close proximity. So, we decided against text as the basis for the poster and decided it would have to be image.

Then we made the decision that in order to compete in an urban context during the height of Reaganomics, we would have to compete for the audience's attention in that context as well and that it had to look slick. We also decided that the poster had to be tiered in its message. This is where I think the most original part of thought that went into the poster was. It was the first time that, I think – Well, it wasn't the first time, but there wasn't a lot of political Lefty thought that was Machiavellian enough to appropriate the voice of authority and feel

comfortable doing it, but we set out to do it. That was the objective. And the reason we decided to do it was so we could imply – At the same moment we were trying to stimulate political activity within the lesbian and gay community, we wanted to seem threatening outside of the community. We wanted people to think that we were more organized than we actually were, so that when we did our subsequent posters, it would be all the more intimidating. So, it was really designed for two audiences, not that you could define either of them. One was inside the lesbian and gay community, which is, of course, very diverse, and then outside the community, which is, of course, the rest of the world. But that's how the poster was conceived.

So, it was going to go alongside the commercial posters of the day, and that was our decision, that it would be big, it would be glossy, it would compete in that visual context. We would have it professionally wheat pasted, which in New York you had to do. It's kind of like there are turfs, and there are only two or three services that do it. It's not technically legal, but I'm not sure how that works, but if you don't use them and you put up a poster, they'll tear it down. So, unless it's an eight-and-a-half-by-eleven on a lamppost, if it's in that turf, you have to use these people. So, we investigated all of that.

I'm giving you background to describe the actual poster. In order to define our space in that context, which was full of movie posters and fashion ads and stuff like that, we realized we had to create a dead zone. We had to make a vacuum for ourselves. A lot of commercial concerns use the strategy wheatpasting a series of posters, which has become much more popular now but was a new idea then. But we realized that we couldn't really afford that many posters. The way that this turf works is you pay for coverage by duration and by neighborhood, and the city is set up in quadrants, so you choose the neighborhoods, you choose if it's two-week coverage or four-week coverage, and then they will advise you how many

posters you need. That is based on weather, people wheatpasting you over or tearing you down, so the replacement posters, and we knew we couldn't afford blocks of posters, a wall of them.

So, we had to figure out a way to define our space discretely with one poster, and that's how we ended up with black, to neutralize the context. It was meant to be seen in that context, but it was meant as an intervention into that context, cleanly. So, then we began the debate over, well, if it isn't a tattooed body, what is the abstract image that will signal to the lesbian and gay community we're talking to them? What is that abstract signifier? And there really wasn't one that we agreed with. We talked about the lambda. We thought it was kind of antiquarian. Younger lesbians and gays might not even know what it was. It was never agreed on. It wasn't universal enough.

We loved the labrys but wasn't specific enough and the men wouldn't know what it was. We felt like it had the right attitude for what we were about to talk about, but it didn't seem appropriate. We talked about the rainbow flag. We *hated* it. It was ugly. It also intoned coalition work, which didn't exist. It intoned something celebratory. It was too friendly and, I'm not going to lie, just too ugly.

Then there was the pink triangle, which we also hated. We hated all of them. The pink triangle we hated because it intoned victimhood, obviously, but it seemed like it might have the most chance of being clear enough to the lesbian and gay community, more clear than the other images we were discussing that were abstract, and graphic enough to be intriguing, interesting, compelling, to people outside of the community who didn't know what it was. Then for a long time we thought about designing a new logo, a new image, for the lesbian and gay community, but realized as we talked about it, that would be a separate campaign. And people were dying, and we didn't feel comfortable doing that.

SS: Why was the victimization issue so problematic? I mean people with AIDS were victims and martyrs, so why was that difficult?

AF: Well, because in the context of Bill Buckley's comment about quarantine, the idea of a concentration camp intoned agreement with the Right Wing, and we felt like we were in dangerous turf there. Plus, as you know, Jews are not so comfortable with the concentration camp as a metaphor. It defangs it. It generalizes it. There are many reasons why people object to it. I don't have all of that baggage. That wasn't really the issue for me, but it was for other people in the group, and it appeared to be passive, but in every other way also appeared to be true, undeniable, which is how we ended up with it. But as our little caveat, our redesign, we inverted it, a little New Age-y, but a little gesture towards action, not passivity.

SS: What about the text? How did you come up with that?

AF: Well, the text, to go back to the original strategic thinking, we realized that there were two levels of encounter. There were not only these two audiences. I should say we worked on this for about eight months, off and on, not constantly. We talked about many other things, and we didn't work every week on it, but it took us a long time to get to what I'm telling you. We realized that the poster would be encountered on two levels. One would be very personal, in the street. Well, as personal as a public street space can be, but New Yorkers are accustomed to being personal in public. And we would need modifying text, and that would be where the text would go. That would be where the explanation would be.

We talked a lot strategically about what we wanted to say, but it became very obvious that we had no prescription. There was no conversation yet. The way we felt would best engage the audience would be in the interrogative voice, which we weren't the first people to do that, but, as you well know, it was very much Gran Fury's strategy as well, to not tell you

what to think, to lead you there, like a good teacher will do. They will get you there by asking you, not by telling you.

There were those turn anger, fear, grief into action. That was our vote, boycott, defend yourself, that was ours. That we were definite about, but everything else was a question. What is really going on at the CDC, the Vatican? Why is Reagan silent about it? What is to intone the politics, the greater question, not the death and dying, not the drugs into bodies part of it, but the cushion on which it all sat? So that was the personal encounter with the poster, and then the other was the peripheral one, the casual passerby, the person who might be in public transportation or in a cab or in a car.

Also, we were aware if you live in New York, there is a thing called bridge and tunnel people, which means people from the outer boroughs, who New Yorkers think of very derisively, but every Friday, Saturday night they're in town. So, we were aware that that was part of our audience, too, and that they would very likely be in cars. And the best way, the only way to draw somebody who only peripherally saw the poster would be for it to be mystical, threatening, hostile, provocative, interesting, intriguing, and that's how we came up with the text, "Silence=Death."

SS: So, when you did you contract with these quasi-mafia poster people, how much time did you sign up for?

AF: We decided two weeks, which meant three thousand posters. We targeted the East Village, the West Village. Chelsea didn't really exist then, but we decided to do the entire West Side, the theater district, because I lived in Hell's Kitchen, so I knew there were a lot of artists who lived there. So, it was SoHo; East Village; West Village; Chelsea; Hell's Kitchen; and the lower Upper West Side. We were looking for areas that were art-related so there would

be non-lesbian and gay audience who might be sympathetic, or, as we say in advertising, influencing influencers. That is the strategy of it. But then also to be specifically in the gay ghettos.

SS: So, what kind of reactions did you get?

AF: Well, here's the thing. As I said when we were speaking at Harvard, there's a very interesting thing that happens when you're engaged in public dialogue in a public space. You don't always get to gauge the response. You don't. Sometimes you do and it's very clear, and sometimes you don't. It's my contention that if ACT UP hadn't come along, that poster could have come and gone in New York streets and been our little secret. Of course, I'm incredibly determined when I set my mind to something. We would have continued to do posters, which might have eventually led somewhere, but all of that's moot, because the first week that they went up, or actually it was the tail end of it, we decided to put them up in the spring because anyone who lives in New York knows that during the winter, street life dies down. We didn't finalize the poster until December of 1986, and realized we should wait until spring, and thought, "Okay, well, if it's really full spring, people start to go away, so it can't be April." I mean, we were so specific about this. So much thought went into it. So, we decided on March, and as we know, that's when Nora Ephron cancelled and Larry spoke and then –

SS: So, which came first, the posters went up or the meeting at the Center?

AF: The posters went up.

SS: Then how much later was the meeting at the Center?

AF: I think it may have been that week. Larry spoke, I think it was on the tenth. It was the first week, and it was a Tuesday, I remember, because it was the day that we met.

In fact, I should also tell you this. Here's another interesting aspect to this poster. I firmly believe in the power of the individual voice. Now, that's contradictory in that ACT UP was communal voice of some sort. It wasn't an individual. But from a feminist perspective, asking permission is always a bad idea, and it plays into power, and I think it's just a bad idea. I don't agree with it. So, I think that when I say the power of the individual voice, if you ask people if you should do something, you are shifting the power differential, and most times people will have reservations about whether they think you should do it or not. It's a mistake to ask, but nonetheless, I did ask a lot of people what they thought of the poster. I didn't listen to all of them. And almost everyone said, "I don't understand. I don't think that's a good idea. What are you asking people to do?"

I went to Lou Maletta at Gay Cable News. He's like, "Well, what's your group?"

I said, "There is no group."

"Well, so what are you – I'd like to cover it or talk about it, but I don't really know what it is. When you have a group, come back."

Then I went to Richard Goldstein. "Oh, I don't really know if I agree with it. I don't really think there could be a response like this." Nothing.

I wrote a letter to Larry Kramer, actually.

SS: Why?

AF: Sorry, Larry. But he knows that I wrote this letter. Because he was the loudmouth. He was the only one in the New York community who was talking about the politics of it, and he was getting ink in the *Native*, which was the only way I knew it. I thought, okay, well, here's a person who might have some ideas about it because he sees the picture as closer to – I don't know that I'd say as we saw it, but more closely aligned. So, I contacted the *Native* and

they wouldn't give me his address, but they told me if I gave it to them, they'd give it to him. And I never heard anything from them. I don't know if he ever even got it, actually.

And I asked an old boyfriend who was living in Portland, and it was like I was getting nowhere. I was getting no love. But I wasn't deterred by that.

Jim Hubbard: Okay, just a couple of things. All this questioning of Larry and other people, was that after it went up or before it went up?

AF: No, before. This was as we were conceiving of it. This is all 1986.

JH: Where did the expression "Silence=Death" come from?

AF: Well, it was actually a volley. I had read in *The New York Times* something about the silence of a community being deafening. I don't remember what the context was. It was in reference to a social issue. As collectives work, again, it's about brainstorming and saying everything that pops into your head and everyone's doing it and people are summarily rejecting things and it leads to other ideas. There's frequently a volley, but I remember the actual volley. I could quote it, and it's not because I wrote it down. I don't remember everything, but things I was present for, I can quote things that people have said to me twenty or thirty years ago.

I wrote in my notes, "Gay silence is deafening," and I brought that to the group and I said, "What about gays?" While we were tossing around ideas for the poster, we were trying to talk about the fact that there was no communal response, which was, again, connected to what Larry was maintaining. I said, "What about 'Gay Silence Is Deafening'?"

Either Jorge or Charles said – Oh, no, it was Oliver who said, "What about 'Silence is Death'?"

And then I'm not sure who said, "Oh, no, it should be 'Silence Equals Death.'"

And then someone else said, “We should use an equal sign.” It was literally that fast. It was four comments.

Then we lived with it for a while before we realized that actually was what we wanted to say.

JH: And why Gill Sans serif?

AF: Gill Sans serif was the font that was popular at the time. It had a deco reference, but more to the point of visibility, it was quite tall, and Gill Sans serif extra condensed, which was the actual font, was incredibly narrow and very tall, and the poster was an oblong. We designed it as an oblong because we thought from a graphic perspective if the triangle were within a square, it would be separate from the text and also be very complete as a geometric formation and in some way soothing and in another way inevitable because of its formality, which meant that we really only had that bottom part of the oblong for all of the text. And it was narrow because of the standard sheet size, but it also had to be as big as it could be in that narrow space, and any other font in that narrow space would only be about yea tall. So, Gill Sans serif extra condensed would be this tall, and that’s why we chose that font.

But what we discovered, because the leading was so severely close, people thought it said, “Science Equals Death,” and once the debate about how science interfaced with AIDS treatment, we realized that it could be misconstrued, and in subsequent printings we gave more space between the L, the I, and the E.

SS: Now, can you just say the names of all six people and who’s still alive?

AF: We’re all alive but Oliver, who died in 1990. Oliver Johnston; Chris Lione; Charles Kreloff; Brian Howard; and Jorge Socorras.