

PRETTY QUEER INTERVIEW W/ JIM HUBBARD & SARAH SCHULMAN

2/10/2012

By Morgan Goode for prettyqueer.com (no longer active)

What made ACT-UP successful? (SS – I've heard you describe this many times, I'm thinking of your comments on the successful simultaneity of actions with people at different levels, specific demands, etc)

JIM HUBBARD: I made a movie to answer this question and anyone who really wants to know what I think should go see *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*. The universal lesson of ACT UP is that a small number of people who study the issues intensely, who understand them better than their adversaries and who are absolutely focused on their objectives can change the world.

SARAH SCHULMAN: From ten years of studying ACT-UP and from my own experience as a member from 1987-1993, ACT UP was successful because it allowed each person to act in a way that made sense for them. As a result there was an exhilarating simultaneity of action that resonated together, creating a larger force. ACT UPers were desperate for success and so everyone was welcome. It was an activist organization-theory emerged organically from actions. Its

aesthetic and language emerged organically from people's lived experience. It was not derivative. There was no theoretical conversation that was not applied. Also, it attracted a particular kind of person, someone who was characterologically unable to stand by in the face of injustice. There was enormous empathy, unity and group support, even though almost everyone told us that they'd felt like an outsider. People were valued for their strengths and hard work above all else. Many ACT UPers did not know each other's last names or what they did for a living. All social status was irrelevant. What mattered was how effective you were at your active task. These are great values, and I carry them to this day.

Within ACT-UP there were a range of actions from the 7,000 people action at St. Patrick's cathedral to smaller actions. How long did it take to plan an action, from conception to execution, and what were the steps?

JH: It depended on the action. Complex demonstrations like Seize Control of the FDA and Storm the NIH took months of planning. Changing the CDC definition of AIDS took 4 years and consisted of many demonstrations and related events. Zaps could happen overnight. The Kiss-In at St. Vincent's Hospital to protest the abuse of queer people and people with AIDS at the hospital was decided in minutes. There was a discussion of the problem and what the

SS: Each action had its own life. Some of the national actions like Storm the NIH (National Institute of Health) were huge endeavors that took long commitments from large numbers of people. Other actions could be thought of in literally five minutes.

response should be. I remember it took less than half an hour and then everyone left the meeting and walked over to St. Vincent's and took over the place.

Whatever the length of the planning the process, the steps were essentially the same:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Learn everything there was to know about the issue.
3. Decide on the best response.
4. Logistics: Do outreach to ensure the largest possible turnout, create chants, rent buses, make signs, etc., etc., etc.
5. Do Action!

In learning about ACT-UP one of the things I was struck by was the lack of emphasis on consensus. In my own activist life I've either had the experience of working with people where consensus is a requirement or I've worked with organizations that follow a corporate model wherein the people in charge hand down the orders and the rest of us are required to follow it OR ELSE. So I'm fascinated by what the members of ACT-UP were able to accomplish acting completely outside of either of these two models. With that in mind, can you explain the structure of ACT-UP and what this structure allowed it to accomplish?

JH: Because of the urgency of the situation, there wasn't time for consensus. If you got 75 – 90% agreement that was fine. The people who didn't support the action didn't have to go. ACT UP was always flexible enough so that if someone had a good idea and could

SS: Consensus is the folly of control freaks. It is not effective nor expressive. In ACT UP, if I wanted to do something and you did not want to do it, I would find other people who wanted to do it and you would go do something else. Doesn't that make sense?

convince enough people, whether that was 5 or 500, then the action or zap would happen. The best example of this is Stop the Church where the idea of going into the Cathedral was exciting and necessary to some people, troubling to others and beyond the pale for many. The planned silent die-in went terribly awry when some people just started shouting. I think this conflict is vividly portrayed in the film. What allowed all these complicated thoughts and feelings to flourish within a culture of action was a bottom up structure that fostered a continuously engaged membership and constantly evolving leadership. All ideas for demonstrations came from the “floor,” which meant the hundreds of people who showed up every Monday night for meetings. The floor thoroughly discussed the ideas behind the actions, the possible consequences and always analyzed the results on the Monday night following the action. There were committees that refined the ideas, worked on logistics and did outreach, but ultimately all the power resided in the floor. There were pairs of facilitators elected for 6-month terms to keep things moving along. All this served to keep the energy flowing and effectively channeled to accomplish the ultimate goal of ending the AIDS crisis.

Collaboration only works between people with similar goals and desires.

Another thing that the Non Profit Industrial Complex has created is the phenomenon of messaging, where how we are supposed to speak about the issues – right down to the

exact words, is controlled and planned based on polling data. And within that only certain people are allowed to speak on the issues and even those that do speak have to follow the talking points generated by those in charge or risk losing their jobs. This seems to be the opposite of the environment ACT-UP created where regular people were empowered to speak up and take action in whatever ways there were interested and able to do. Given that, I'm curious what you think about messaging – is it ever a useful? Does “proper messaging” even make sense as a goal or concept? To put it more concretely, Silence = Death is probably the most well known ACT-UP slogan, how did that slogan and graphic come about?

JH: I don't know anything about messaging. I am often completely befuddled by advertising and need my boyfriend Nelson to explain to me why that ad would cause anyone to buy that particular product. I make movies about the complexities of thought and feeling. This has not been very helpful to my career, but it's what I'm interested in. My films frequently present images that require the audience to make judgments about what is on the screen. I don't make pre-digested, easy-to-understand, made-for-TV movies. This is true of *United in Anger* as well. The crucial point in the film is when Sandra Elgear says: “we didn't want to have the voiceover telling you, ‘This is what is happening. This is the truth. This is the story.’ We wanted to say, ‘There it is. You tell us what it means to you.’”

You must remember that people in ACT UP weren't simply empowered to speak. There was a continuous educational process that included loads of printed information and

SS: Two different questions here: First about speaking to the media. ACT UP's philosophy was that "People With AIDS are the experts." That's why in our film you will not hear authoritative opinions from employees of Merck Pharmaceutical. Jim scrupulously sorted through almost 2000 hours of footage, which he digitized and preserved and immediately made available for free to others. From this he only chose footage taken from ACT UP's point of view. From inside demonstrations, from inside meetings. There is no narrator in this film. Mike Signorile and Ann Northrop were two of a number of media geniuses who worked for ACT UP. Mike came from People Magazine and Ann from CBS. We also had our beloved friend, the late Bob Rafsky, who had been an ad executive. For the action, Seize Control of the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) the ACT UP media committee invited the national regional press, and then presented people with AIDS from a wide range of states, so that the

teach-ins so that everyone knew the issues and could speak articulately about them.

The creation of the phrase Silence = Death took a few minutes. Designing the poster took a year. I've attached the section from Avram Finkelstein's oral history interview that tells the story of the whole process.

regional papers could talk to People With AIDS from their areas. It was brilliant.

Regarding what you are calling "Messaging" which I believe we called "politics" - The purpose of slogans and posters and floats, banners and chants was to inform the public and to recruit activists. Silence=Death was aimed at the gay community. It was meant to confront them with the truth, that if they didn't do something they would die. It was accurate. The problem that you are referring to is that many of the slogans that we are inundated with today are not truthful and are not accurate. One of my least favorite is the utterly false "It Gets Better."

ACT-UP is known for being very media savvy – from the compelling posters and slogans to the use of video and the ways actions were planned to generate media attention. Can you give some specific examples of the ways in which ACT-UP used media to its advantage and/or a campaign you think was particularly successful?

JH: What's most important to me is the AIDS Activist Video movement that ACT UP fostered. There are dozens of videotapes ranging from a few minutes to feature-length that tell the story of the AIDS crisis from the point of view of people actually fighting the disease. ACT UP's media savvy and compelling graphics caused the mainstream media to pay attention and ACT UP was able to get its sound bites on TV and its quotes in the newspapers. But the mainstream media

SS: There are so many. Scheduling demonstrations to coincide with live feeds for the local 6 pm news. One of the inventions of video activism (since the camcorder was invented in the middle of ACT UP) was to shoot our own footage and then send it to the tv stations. But we also did not respect the boundaries of mainstream media. John Weir and others notoriously interrupted Dan Rather's live news broadcast shouting "Fight AIDS, Not Arabs." I also recall, when faxes

was always going to simplify the ideas, slant the story to fit their worldview and give far more credit to straight, white men than they ever deserved.

The only way to tell your story is to tell it yourself. And that's what AIDS Activist Videomakers did. It is because they created so much footage that I was able to make *United in Anger* and I see this film as a continuation of that tradition.

were first invented, that we faxed the hated NY TIMES (we called them the New York Crimes) a mile of black paper and made it impossible for them to receive faxes. Etc. Etc.

Popular media tends to paint every struggle within a linear liberation narrative or progress narrative as Sarah has mentioned, so I really appreciate what you've both done with this film as a way to counteract that misconception. What are some of the most staggering examples you've seen of the false memories of the AIDS crisis or of the LGBT movement in general?

JH: The most staggering example of false memory in the AIDS crisis is the idea that the valiant straight white government scientists and their great allies in the pharmaceutical industries cracked the code of HIV and discovered the medicines that saved people's lives out of a selfless devotion to pure science and to humanity. This is a lie. They were forced by thousands of dedicated activists, many of whom gave their lives so that those scientists would pay attention and do their work.

SS: The most egregious fuck-up in recent memory is running the Don't Ask Don't Tell Campaign- not as an issue of employment discrimination, but as a patriotic desire for queer people to join immoral wars and kill Muslims. I also personally hate the men-who-have-sex-with-men rhetoric and have seen no evidence that it works.

Speaking of things that run counter to a linear narrative of things just "getting better" - one of the things that really haunts me about this film and about ACT-UP is the way in

which all these diverse people were able to work together to create change, different races, different classes, different genders – while the present LGBT movement/community in the US is very much segregated, and in many instances racist. How did we get from ACT-UP to a media that is saturated with the belief that black gay and bisexual men are to blame for AIDS and black people are to be blamed for the lack of marriage equality and locally we have bourgeois white gay men in the west village who – instead of fighting homelessness – just want to get rid of the queer and trans youth of color that are sullyng their streets? Is this backsliding into racism part of the function of homonationalism?

JH: To be frank there were always issues of race in ACT UP and a tension between those who were interested in drug development and those interested in universal drug access that too often played out in racial terms. But people struggled to think about and confront these issues in ACT UP in a way that I think is missing in contemporary LGBT politics. But I also think much of what you point out is the result of the fundamental racism in American culture and not unique to queer culture. The mainstream media is largely responsible for blaming black gay and bisexual men for AIDS. My feeling is that there aren't very many bourgeois gay men left in the Village. They died of AIDS and have been replaced by straight, white families who don't want the kids of color on the pier.

As someone who has been in a loving and supportive relationship with the same man for nearly thirty years, I am completely uninterested in gay marriage. We want to define our relationship on our own terms. I

SS: On one hand there has always been a racist and male supremacist wing of the Gay Movement. As you well know, gay male racial supremacist movements have overlapped with fascism in the past and continue to do so today in The Netherlands, Germany etc. There has also always been a feminist and anti-racist tendency in gay liberation. Today we see this split between the assimilationists who want military service and privatized family unites, versus those of us with global vision who are working against Occupation and war. I don't have an articulated analysis that explains this exactly, but it seems to be an ever present divide.

don't want to assimilate into American culture. I want to fundamentally transform it and make it better. If we had universal healthcare, if people had their rights because they were individual human beings and not because they were legally attached to another person, we wouldn't need gay marriage.

Another so-called sign of progress is the increased marketing to gay people or inclusion of same-sex couples in advertising. While on one hand it is awe-inspiring that something that was considered unmentionable in the not-too-distant past is now a marketing tool – this hardly seems like an admirable goal. What are your feelings on being marketed to as a gay person? Was this something you ever conceived of during your time in ACT-UP? Do corporations or corporate financing have any place in the movement?

JH: As I said before, I am completely uninterested in and largely immune to marketing. I find it curious when I see gay people portrayed in advertising. People in ACT UP were consumed by the AIDS crisis and didn't think about marketing except how to use the techniques of marketing to further their political goals. Corporations are not people and have no place in any political movement.

SS: Well, I wrote one of the first critiques of this in my 1998 book STAGESTRUCK: Theater, AIDS and The Marketing of Gay America (Duke University Press). Here I detailed- with data from the then emerging niche-marketing campaigns - how the Gay Liberation Movement was being transformed into a consumer market. It took about ten years for this to become commonly recognized. I have always been repulsed by corporate culture and encouraged and supported grassroots eclecticism. Hence the work Jim and I did co-founding THE MIX Festival 25 years ago, and our joy and pride that it is still a grassroots, community based event, where no one can make a deal or build a career. It's only about the work and the

community that surrounds it.

I think it is also worth mentioning that a lot of these ads are travel ads – which brings us to pinkwashing – how can queers avoid being used as tools to fiscally support human rights abuses in allegedly gay friendly countries?

JH: The U.S. government only cares about human rights when it can use them as a cudgel to increase its power and influence. This can easily be seen in Middle East. The government does not care about the human rights of people who live in countries that sell us their oil. It is happy to support the human rights of people who live in countries that deny us their oil. The U.S. government's support of Israel has nothing to do with warm and fuzzy feelings towards me and my fellow Jews. It even has little to do with the power of the so-called pro-Israel lobby. The main purpose of our government's support of Israel is to maintain constant turmoil in the Middle East so that we can play countries off against each other and get access to that oil.

People – and queer people in particular – should base their own personal foreign policy on the notion that everyone deserves the same human rights as everyone else, regardless of what kind of government they live under or how their government interacts with other governments. The allegedly pro-gay policies of the Israeli government don't

SS: This I cannot, at this point summarize. I have a book coming out in September from Duke University Press, ISRAEL/PALESTINE AND THE QUEER INTERNATIONAL, that I hope will expand that conversation.

justify the oppressive nature of the occupation any more than the legalization of gay marriage in Iowa justified the war in Iraq.

I know Sarah is an optimist so I'll try and end on a positive note – what keeps you both optimistic and inspired? Are there any activists or groups active today that inspire you or that you feel embody the spirit of ACT-UP? Are there any LGBT groups active in NYC today that fall into any of these categories?

JH: I make films, that's what I do. I funnel all my optimism into them and I continue to make them despite all the obstacles the world puts in the way of my making them and getting them seen. I think Occupy Wall Street is a cause for optimism. The ironic thing is that I made this film about activism in an office two blocks from Occupy Wall Street and I hardly had the time to get away from my computer and walk up there to see what was going on. The emergence of mass movements like ACT UP, OWS and the Arab Spring is cyclical, but the difficult work of political organizing has to go on relentlessly. The people who do that work when there's no glamour and no attention make it possible for larger movements to flower and that's real optimism at work.

SS: Jim and I have collaborated for 25 years on some really significant community building projects: THE MIX FESTIVAL, THE ACT UP ORAL HISTORY PROJECT and now UNITED IN ANGER: A HISTORY OF ACT UP. Whatever we have done we have found like minded people who want grassroots, authentic community institutions, projects, arena, art works and friendships, and these people have been our greatest inspiration.

In terms of contemporary movements, the Movement to end the Israeli Occupation of Palestine - especially the queer people working globally within that movement - is very very exciting and inspiring to me. It reminds me of the early days of AIDS Activism, when you have a group of people with no rights, who must have change. As a result they welcome everyone, and are united by the necessity of change. As novelist Susan Abulhawa (author of "Mornings in Jenin") said at the recent Boycott/Divestment/Sanctions Conference at the University of Pennsylvania

"Taking a moral stance when it is unpopular and difficult is when it really counts."