

UNITED IN ANGER:  
A HISTORY OF ACT UP  
A film by Jim Hubbard

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Discussion Guides for  
Activists and Organizers

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United in Anger: A History of ACT UP is an inspiring documentary about the birth and life of the AIDS activist movement from the perspective of the people in the trenches fighting the epidemic. Utilizing oral histories of members of ACT UP, as well as rare archival footage, the film depicts the efforts of ACT UP as it battles corporate greed, social indifference, and government neglect.

These discussion guides were developed by Sean Thomas-Breitfeld, Co-Director of the Building Movement Project, and Aliya Rahman, Lead Organizer at Equality Ohio. They volunteered their time to this project because of their commitment to the story told by the film United in Anger. They thank Jim Hubbard for his faith and patience as this document came together and hope that it is a useful tool for activists and organizers who are as inspired by this film as they were.



### **Why this Film and How to Use these Guides**

Thank you for your interest in the film [United in Anger: A History of ACT UP](#); and for preserving the legacy – and the *lessons* – of one of the most important and successful activist movement organizations in recent years.

The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power took creative, direct action in the midst of a politics and culture rife with homophobia, racism, sexism, corporate greed, and institutional elitism. These intersecting oppressions were at the root of the widespread indifference to the HIV/AIDS crisis, and the millions of deaths that resulted from their lives being written off by the government, media and medical field at that time. The fact that ACT UP was able to break through those entrenched interests to win real change is a testament to the revolutionary power that they unleashed.

There is so much for today's activists and organizers to learn from the example of ACT UP as we fight on a spectrum of issues – whether economic justice, inclusion and fair treatment for immigrants, or the continuing struggles for communities of color, women and LGBT people. This film's perspective is distinct from other documentaries because it offers an inside view into the organizational culture and organizing tactics of ACT UP, as well as the internal debates and strategic conflicts that often characterize grassroots efforts. The filmmakers' commitment to explore the diversity of ACT UP's membership and the highs and lows of ACT UP's organizing makes [United in Anger](#) an especially useful teaching tool for groups of activists and grassroots organizations.

This guide is designed for circles of activists and organizers, members of community groups, staff of social movement organizations or any gathering of individuals who are committed to working together for social change. Its purpose is to help inform deep reflection and new insights for organizations and activists today. The theory behind this guide is that through reflection on the historic example of ACT UP, groups will both re-affirm their commitment to direct action, and strategize about how to integrate lessons from ACT UP into their work today.

We have created two modes for exploring this film. The first guide is for a single 2.5- to 3-hour session where the film is viewed in its entirety. The second guide splits the film up into four distinct sections, for discussion sessions lasting 1.5- to 2-hours each.

The condensed guide outlines a single session consisting of a short introductory activity, watching the film in its entirety, and holding a post-viewing discussion with a next-steps conversation. An optional 25-minute activity is included at the end, which guides viewers through designing their own action using strategies and tactics that ACT UP pioneered.

The longer four-part discussion guide breaks the film into four sections, each lasting between 20 and 25 minutes. These sections of the film have accompanying facilitator's agendas with both discussion questions and participatory activities designed to help circles reflect deeply on the film and apply their

## United in Anger Discussion Guide

reflections to their organization and activism. This four-section structure is designed for groups to view the film over the course of a month, through weekly viewings and discussions.

Both guides – the condensed one and longer four-part one – have consistent learning goals; the difference is really a matter of preference on the part of the group. Whether you go with a single 2.5 hour viewing and discussion, or commit to a series of four sessions over time, these guides will help you create the space in the midst of your activism and organizing to learn and reflect on the example of ACT UP, and use those lessons to inject fresh energy and urgency into the movements of today.

***A Note about Effective Facilitation:*** In order to lead an impactful conversation about the film, it will be important for the facilitator to both watch the film, and review the suggested discussion questions and activities in advance. You will need to make strategic decisions about which questions are most appropriate to your group's learning goals, and should feel free to modify questions to make the discussion more relevant to your group's issue focus and/or organizing culture.

**Facilitator’s Background**

*The chart below summarizes key content, learning outcomes, and core discussion purposes, understanding the film as a work in four sections. To help plan the content of your discussion based on the group needs it could address, take a moment to look over the key points provided here.*

<b>Film Section</b>	<b>Key Content that People Will See in this Section of the Film</b>	<b>Hoped-For Outcomes of the Discussion</b>	<b>Overarching Purpose of Discussion</b>
<p><b>Section One:</b></p> <p><b>“We’re Fighting for Our Lives”</b></p> <p><b>Beginning through Chapter 3 (up to 21:20)</b></p>	<p>Speeches by Larry Kramer and Vito Russo</p> <p>People reflecting on why they joined ACT UP</p> <p>The FDA Action in Rockville, MD</p> <p>How ACT UP took the tools of mass media to tell their own story</p>	<p>Reflect on the deeply felt purpose of our activism</p> <p>Consider our media savvy and ability to tell our own stories</p>	<p>Reconnect to our purpose as activists and as an organization.</p>
<p><b>Section Two:</b></p> <p><b>“Our Job Was Not to Be Liked”</b></p> <p><b>Chapter 4 through Chapter 7 (21:20- 42:48)</b></p>	<p>Discussion of “Affinity Groups” and Civil Disobedience</p> <p>Demonstration at City Hall on March 28, 1989 to protest housing and hospital conditions; where they did civil disobedience in waves.</p> <p>The Protest at St. Patrick’s Cathedral of Cardinal O’Connor (the archbishop of New York), in November 1989</p>	<p>Reflect on how our organizational structure reflects the kind of action we’re willing to take</p> <p>Consider the direct action tactics of ACT UP and our level of comfort with not being ‘liked’</p>	<p>Explore our organizational willingness and readiness to engage in direct action.</p>

<p><b>Section Three:</b> <b>“ACT UP has gone through a lot of change and growth”</b> <b>Chapter 8 through Chapter 11 (42:48-1:05:56)</b></p>	<p>Discussion of art, agit-prop, and marketing as tools for organizing</p> <p>Discussion of the importance of sexual freedom for the community of ACT UP activists</p> <p>Discussion of the challenges ACT UP faced internally as a diverse community, especially when conflicts over privilege and marginality emerged</p> <p>Footage from the ‘Storm the NIH’ protest to demand inclusive clinical trials, and the multi-year campaign to “change the definition” to include women with HIV</p>	<p>Reflect on how we understand and manage issues of privilege and marginality within our own community</p> <p>Consider the role of fun and joyful living in our organizing</p>	<p>Explore how movements stay vital and energetic, even in the face of internal tensions</p>
<p><b>Section Four:</b> <b>“We wanted to show the unvarnished truth”</b> <b>(1:05:57-end)</b></p>	<p>Footage from the Ashes Action, 1991</p> <p>Footage from ACT UP’s public funerals, 1991-1993</p> <p>ACT UP organizers talking about the group’s decision to engage in public funerals and expressions of grief as a means of helping them to survive the worst years of the crisis – emotionally, spiritually, and professionally</p>	<p>Reflect on how ACT UP used its activism to help care for the personal needs of its members, and consider how we do/don’t use our organizing to help care for each other in the face of these challenges in present movements</p> <p>Apply the examples of ACT UP to craft an event or action that makes use of three strategies or tactics they pioneered</p>	<p>Discuss how movements sustain their message and energy, when ‘winning’ concessions from those in power isn’t enough to transform the lived-experience of movement activists</p>

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Condensed Version for a  
Single 2.5- to 3-Hour Session

## Facilitator's Agenda

### **Welcome and Warm-Up (10 minutes)**

Start with a round of introductions where people quickly share their name (if participants don't already know each other) and their familiarity with the history of ACT UP (a simple 3-finger scale should suffice to assess, low, mid and high starting knowledge). Affirm all levels of knowledge.

Set Up the film by saying something like:

"This documentary is called *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*. It covers the birth and life of the AIDS activist movement from the perspective of the people in the trenches fighting the epidemic. The film shows the efforts of ACT UP activists and organizers to battle corporate greed, social indifference and government neglect."

Give people an idea of what to watch for:

"There's a lot to notice in this film, but pay special attention to why people said they were drawn to ACT UP, and to the contributions ACT UP made to activism and organizing in general."

### **Play the film (80 minutes)**

### **Discuss the film (60 minutes)**

Options for discussion questions are on pages 8 and 9. It will not be possible to discuss every question in an hour, and depending on the size of your group, it may be difficult to do more than discuss one question from each section. Feel free to make your own decisions about which of the proposed questions are used for your group; or you can print all of the questions out and give participants the option to raise questions that are important to them.

### **Optional Practice/Activity (25 minutes)**

Page 10 provides guidelines for an activity where participants can use their creativity to brainstorm a protest or action, modeled on the tactics of ACT UP. This can be an especially useful activity if your group is in the midst of a real campaign or struggle.



**Discussion Questions****Section One: “We’re Fighting for Our Lives”**

1. Do we feel like our own lives depend on our activism or that the lives of others depend on us?
2. Where does our drive to “do something” come from? Is it about what we experience in our daily lives? Is it about political theory and ideology?
3. When AIDS emerged, it was a sudden and unexpected disruption of the normal social order – people who had been young, vibrant and healthy were suddenly sick and dying. Is the same true in our organizing? Are we fighting a sudden and unexpected attack?

**Section Two: “Our Job Was Not to be Liked”**

1. What is our level of comfort with making the powers that be uncomfortable? How does that level of comfort lead us to take or avoid risks in our activism?
2. Are we as specific as ACT UP was in choosing particular targets?
3. What is our relationship with the media? Are there media assumptions about us (and/or our primary issues/concerns) that we need to counter?
4. At the time, creating activist media required carrying videocameras in backpacks, today we can capture video on phones and cameras that fit in our pockets, post it to youtube and spread the word on twitter and facebook. How effectively do we use this new technology to create our own media?

**Section Three: “ACT UP” has gone through a lot of change and growth**

1. A lot of people talked about how sexy ACT UP was, and how people met both friends and lovers through their activism. How does this compare to our organizing and activism?
2. In traditional, Saul Alinsky-style community organizing, much weight is placed on the development of organizers’ public identities as separate and distinct from their private identities. How did ACT UP call that model into question?
3. What could we learn from ACT UP and the way they used images, posters, and video to advance their organizing?
4. How do we have fun together; beyond fighting injustice and winning campaigns? How could we make more space to live joyfully together in the midst of our organizing?
5. ACT UP was able to use some members’ sense of entitlement to galvanize them for action, while also transforming their understanding of their own privilege. How do we balance dynamics of privilege and entitlement within our membership?
6. As ACT UP started moving beyond the “drugs into bodies” demand that they started with, they

reflected an understanding of the multiple oppressions that their increasingly diverse membership faced. How do we tackle intersecting issues and forces in our organizing?

**Section Four: “We Wanted to Show the Unvarnished Truth”**

1. What were some specific things that ACT UP did to help activists manage the emotional toll of death during the worst years of the crisis?
2. What parallels do you see to present day crises in the United States? Who is responsible for our contemporary political death-tolls, and how are we making that clear?
3. (How) is your organization or campaign helping to address the emotional, spiritual, or other personal needs of the people who fuel it?
4. How could we lift up the caring practices in our own organizing (if they are already happening) or integrate some of ACT UP’s care practices to agitate leaders towards practices of care (if they are not already happening)?
5. Name specific examples that organizers gave at the end of the film of how ACT UP contributed to the practice of organizing and activism themselves. You may find yourself referring back to other sections of the film, as do the organizers.
6. Where do you see these practices in place today? Think of specific examples (a poster you’ve seen in the last few months, a direct action tactic that you’ve participated in, a structure for group meetings that you’ve been a part of)

**Optional Practice/Activity****Designing an Action that Makes Use of ACT UP's Strategies and Tactics*****Background:***

As we discussed, ACT UP pioneered a number of tactics and strategies that we use today, but whose origins we may not recognize. For example, ACT UP had an “art arm,” incorporated affinity groups in a strategic and meaningful way, and did intentional things to care for its members at a time when the human toll of the crisis was high.

All of these tactics are things we can use today, applied both to the still-living AIDS movement as well as a multitude of other movements for social justice.

***Supplies On Hand:***

- Markers
- Butcher block paper

***How to Run the Activity:***

- 1. Overview of background (above) and break participants into groups of 3-5 (5 minutes)**
- 2. Ask participants to design an action that incorporates ACT UP techniques or strategies (15 minutes in small groups)**
  - Pick a potential, doable date and place.
  - Decide both who is the *audience* (the people whose support or emotions you want to mobilize), and who is the *target* (the decision-maker you want to influence) of this action?
  - Write, in one sentence, the message or demand that this action should convey to the media, public, and/or target.
  - Pick three specific tactics or strategies that ACT UP used in its activism to incorporate into the program or design of this event or action, and explain how those could be used here. These could include, in either the planning or execution process: using pop art visuals, writing intentional practices of care into the process, incorporating an affinity group structure, etc.
- 3. Debrief the activity (20 minutes)**
  - Have each group share for 2-5 minutes on the idea they came up with. The debrief should include specific mention of the three ACT UP tactics/strategies they incorporated.
  - Ask if anyone wants to keep working on and actually execute the action they designed, and discuss potential next steps for doing this.

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Extended Version for a Series of  
Four 1.5- to 2-Hour Sessions

**Module One: “We’re Fighting for Our Lives”**

**Play from the Beginning through Chapter 3**

**Stop the DVD at 21:20**

**Facilitator’s Background**

**What People Will See in this Section:**

- Speeches by Larry Kramer and Vito Russo
- People reflecting on why they joined ACT UP
- The FDA Action in Rockville, MD
- How ACT UP took the tools of mass media to tell their own story

**Purpose of this Section:** Reconnect to our purpose as activists and as an organization.

**Hoped-For Outcomes:**

- Reflect on the deeply felt purpose of our activism
- Consider our media savvy and ability to tell our own stories
- Practice speaking compellingly and concisely about our purpose and commitment

**Agenda Overview:**

- |              |   |
|--------------|---|
| 10 min.      | Welcome and Warm-Up:  |
| 22 min.      | Play Chapters 1, 2 and 3 of the film (up to 21:20)  |
| 30 – 45 min. | Discussion and Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Core Purpose</li><li>• Strategic Thinking</li><li>• Media Savvy</li></ul> |
| 25 min.      | Optional Practice/Activity: 30-second Media Raps  |
| 5 min.       | Closing and Preview of Next Section   |

**Module One: “We’re Fighting for Our Lives”****Play from the Beginning through Chapter 3****Stop the DVD at 21:20****Detailed Facilitator’s Agenda****10 min. Welcome and Warm-Up:**

Start with a round of introductions where people quickly share their name (if participants don’t already know each other) and their familiarity with the history of ACT UP (a simple 3-finger scale should suffice to assess, low, mid and high starting knowledge). Affirm all levels of knowledge.

Set Up the film clip by saying something like:

“This documentary is called *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*. It covers the birth and life of the AIDS activist movement from the perspective of the people in the trenches fighting the epidemic. The film shows the efforts of ACT UP activists and organizers to battle corporate greed, social indifference and government neglect.”

Explain the structure for the discussion:

“The film is split into four sections. Today’s section covers the beginning of ACT UP, what motivated people to join, and how they developed media strategies to tell their own stories. I have a set of questions that I’ll use to guide our discussion after we watch this 20-minute section of the film.”

Give people an idea of what to watch for:

“There’s a lot to notice in this film, but pay special attention to why people said they were drawn to ACT UP.”

**22 min. Play the first section of the film, Chapters 1, 2 and 3**

(stop the DVD at 21:20)

**30 – 45 min. Discussion and Reflection**

**Facilitator’s Option:** Choose from the following questions, prioritizing the order based on your organization’s learning goal. You will probably only be able to cover two of these discussion topics before moving on to the practice/activity, OR you can spend more time discussing all three topics instead of (or in addition to) doing the practice/activity.

**Discussion Focused on Core Purpose*****Background:***

At 8:15, Maxine Wolfe describes the spirit in the room at New York’s LGBT community center where ACT UP meetings were held. She says:

*“I got the feeling ... that people felt like lives depended on them, it was*

*not an interesting political point. It was real, and that came through in that room. People were driven to do something.”*

Later on we hear people chant “we’re fighting for our lives” at an action, echoing that same point.

**Questions to Pose:**

- Do we feel like our own lives depend on our activism or that the lives of others depend on us?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *If yes, how do we already make that life or death urgency come through in our activism?*
  - *If not, how can we make our politics and activism feel more urgent?*
- Where does our drive to “do something” come from? Is it about what we experience in our daily lives? Is it about political theory and ideology?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *[if the drive comes mostly from lived experience] How do we sustain our drive when we feel like so much is riding on our success or failure in our activism?*
  - *[if the drive comes mostly from political theory] How can we more deeply connect our personal values and experiences to our activism?*
- When AIDS emerged, it was a sudden and unexpected disruption of the normal social order – people who had been young, vibrant and healthy were suddenly sick and dying. Is the same true in our organizing? Are we fighting a sudden and unexpected attack?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *[if no] Given that many issues (including but not limited to HIV/AIDS) have become tolerated as the ‘new normal,’ what can we learn from ACT UP about how to create a sense of crisis and outrage?*
- *[if yes] What can we learn from ACT UP about ways to expose the attack on our community?*

**Discussion Focused on Strategic Thinking**

**Background:**

At 11:35, Jim Eigo summarizes ACT UP’s strategy by saying:

*“if you could identify an obvious problem. If you could get the media on-board about it. If you could get two- to three-hundred people sitting in at a very particular target and making it very very uncomfortable for the powers that were, you could affect very quick change.”*

**Questions to Pose:**

- What is our level of comfort with making the powers that be uncomfortable? How does that level of comfort lead us to take or avoid risks in our activism?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *Does anyone wish that we were more confrontational?*
- *Does anyone worry that we are too confrontational?*
- *What are the trade-offs and how do we balance them?*

- Are we as specific as ACT UP was in choosing particular targets?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *If yes, when was the last time we directly targeted a specific person or institution and what did we learn?*
- *If not, what prevents us from being more specific and targeted? Is it due to the issue we work on (i.e. scale, geographic distance, power imbalance, etc.)? What can we learn from ACT UP's strategy?*

### Discussion Focused on Media Savvy

#### **Background:**

The motto of DIVA TV (which stood for Damned Interfering Video Activist Television) was:

*"we are committed to making media which directly counters and interferes with dominant media assumptions about AIDS & governmental negligence in dealing with the AIDS crisis."*

#### **Questions to Pose:**

- What is our relationship with the media? Are there media assumptions about us (and/or our primary issues/concerns) that we need to counter?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *If yes, how do we actively counter those assumptions? What more could we do based on the example of DIVA TV?*
- *If not, how do we use the media as an ally in spreading our views? Are the dangers of being co-opted by the media?*

- At the time, creating activist media required carrying videocameras in backpacks, today we can capture video on phones and cameras that fit in our pockets, post it to youtube and spread the word on twitter and facebook. How effectively do we use this new technology to create our own media?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *What new barriers does all of the technology create to being heard?*
- *How could we use technology to more effectively tell our story?*
- *What tensions are created when everyone can be a media producer? How do/can we manage our message among our members?*

25 min.

#### **Optional Practice/Activity: 30-second Media Raps**

#### **Background:**

At 13:08, a man named David Stern (1954 – 1991) skillfully responds to questions from the media (presumably with his wrists in restraints behind his back). The exchange goes like this:

David Stern: *"We're here because this government has the resources to deal with the AIDS epidemic and they won't do it unless we force them. So we're trying to force them to deal with the AIDS epidemic."*

Reporter: *"Tell me who you are and where you're from."*

David Stern: *"I'm David Stern, I'm a person with AIDS from San Francisco."*



Reporter: *“Do you think this has been a successful action? Do you think it will have an impact on the FDA?”*

David Stern: *“Yeah, and we appeal to everybody to make it have more of an impact by continuing these kinds of actions, because we have to keep the pressure up on the government. They won’t deal with the AIDS epidemic properly unless we keep up the pressure.”*

The whole exchange only lasts for 30 seconds, but he clearly and convincingly communicated to the press the purpose of the action, why he was committed to the action, and made a clear appeal to others to join in the action.

***How to Run the Activity:***

1. Using this same messaging structure, have participants take a piece of paper and divide it into three sections (either by folding it into thirds or just drawing lines) for:
  - Collective Purpose
  - Personal Commitment to that Purpose
  - Appeal / Invitation to Join
2. Give them 5 minutes to write down some notes and collect their thoughts, with the purpose of crafting a tight 30-second rap on the organization or an action (whether real/upcoming or hypothetical).
3. Then get people into small groups (of 3 to 5 people) and give the groups 5-10 minutes to have each person practice their 30-second rap and get some feedback/tips from the group.
4. As a final practice ask for a volunteer to practice with you playing the role of a reporter. Instead of giving the person 30-seconds to do their rap, ask the following questions as prompts:
  - What is this (group/action) all about?
  - Who are you? Why are you here?
  - Why should anyone else care?

**5 min.**

**Closing and Preview of Next Section:**

Describe the next section by saying something like:

*“The next section is going to look at how ACT UP organized itself, and the internal debates over one particularly controversial action they did.”*

Close with a quick assessment of how people feel about the discussion and the film clip, and their interest/energy for viewing the next section of the film.

If there are specific questions or concerns about the content or the format, use it as an opportunity to get other people from the group to step up and help facilitate the next session.

**Module Two: “Our Job Was Not to Be Liked”****Play from Chapter 4 through Chapter 7****▶▶ Press the skip forward button 3 times to reach 21:20 and stop the DVD at 42:48****Facilitator’s Background****What People Will See in this Section:**

- Discussion of “Affinity Groups” and Civil Disobedience
- Demonstration at City Hall on March 28, 1989 to protest housing and hospital conditions; this was the first action where they did civil disobedience in waves.
- The Protest at St. Patrick’s Cathedral of Cardinal O’Connor (the archbishop of New York), in November 1989

**Purpose of this Section:** Explore our organizational willingness and readiness to engage in direct action.**Hoped-For Outcomes:**

- Reflect on how our organizational structure reflects the kind of action we’re willing to take
- Consider the direct action tactics of ACT UP and our level of comfort with not being ‘liked’
- Practice some skills relevant to direct action and civil disobedience

**Agenda Overview:**

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 10 min.      | Welcome and Warm-Up:   |
| 25 min.      | Play Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 of the film (from 21:20 to 42:48)  |
| 30 – 45 min. | Discussion and Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Community Building and Organizational Structure</li><li>• Civil Disobedience</li><li>• Strategic Tensions Over St. Patrick’s Protest</li></ul> |
| 25 min.      | Optional Practice/Activity: Hassle Line Role-Play  |
| 5 min.       | Closing and Preview of Next Section  |

**Module Two: “Our Job Was Not to Be Liked”**

Play from Chapter 4 through Chapter 7

**▶▶** Press the skip forward button 3 times to reach 21:20 and stop the DVD at 42:48**Detailed Facilitator’s Agenda****10 min.      Welcome and Warm-Up:**

Start with a round of introductions where people quickly share their name and anything that stuck with them from the last section of the film and why people joined ACT UP.

Set up the film clip by saying something like:

“The last section of the film looked at what motivated ACT UP members and how they told their own stories about what it meant to live with AIDS. This section looks at how ACT UP was organized and some of the organizing and direct action tactics that they used.”

Give people an idea of what to watch for:

“This time, pay special attention to the protests. Notice what chants they used. Notice what kind of tactics they used (marches, sit-ins, etc.)”

**25 min.      Play the second section of the film, Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7**

(press the skip forward button 3 times to start at 21:20, then stop the DVD at 42:48)

**30 – 45 min.      Discussion and Reflection**

**Facilitator’s Option:** Choose from the following questions, prioritizing the order based on your organization’s learning goals. You will probably only be able to cover two of these discussion topics in 30 minutes before moving on to the practice/activity, OR you can spend more time discussing each of the three topics instead of (or in addition to) the practice/activity.

**Discussion Focused on Community Building and Organizational Structure****Background:**

At 32:00, Sharon Tramutola talks about the importance of ACT UP meetings:  
*“ACT UP was my life. I went to meetings every single night. All of my social events were ACT UP. All the people I met in ACT UP, some I’m friends with now, they became like my family.”*

After Sharon, a range of ACT UP members talk about the importance of the meetings and the community of people that ACT UP brought together.

**Questions to Pose:**

- How do we create community within our organization? What could we learn from ACT UP and the sense of community they created?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *Between the Monday night meetings and the additional meetings of affinity*

*groups, it was possible for ACT UP members to constantly be involved with the group 24-7. Do we meet enough?*

- *Some people talked about how important relationships were to providing the support that people needed to be willing to take action. How do we pay attention to the relational needs of each other in the midst of protest and action?*
- The affinity group structure was described by Anna Blume as “brilliant” and “organic,” and Maxine Wolfe said it “was from the civil rights movement and the women’s movement.” How does it compare to the way we structure ourselves and our organization?

*Potential follow-up / probing question:*

- *The affinity group structure allowed small groups (or cells) of like-minded people to do whatever they wanted, and did not rely on consensus. What are the benefits and pitfalls of this kind of de-centralized decision-making?*

### Discussion Focused on Civil Disobedience

#### **Background:**

At 25:00 there’s footage of ACT UP members getting trained on civil disobedience and practicing sitting together and locking arms. Amy Bauer says: *“We really began to talk about civil disobedience as a safe tactic for making a stronger statement and for getting media attention. For civil disobedience it’s absolutely critical to do an affinity group structure for safety. We really talked about getting everyone in the group trained for civil disobedience because you never know when it’s going to happen or when you’re going to want to do it.”*

#### **Questions to Pose:**

- What civil disobedience and protest tactics did you see and what did you think of those forms of action?

*Examples of protest tactics to follow up on:*

- *Wave system*
  - *Die-ins*
  - *Going limp*
  - *Blocking traffic*
  - What is our level of comfort with using civil disobedience as a tactic?
- Potential follow-up / probing questions:*
- *Does anyone wish that we did more direct action and civil disobedience?*
  - *What would it take to be ready and willing to carry out protest tactics similar to what ACT UP did?*

### Discussion Focused on Strategic Tensions Over St. Patrick’s Protest

#### **Background:**

The last section of this clip (from 34:00 on) shows the St. Patrick’s protest. ACT UP held the protest at the church to call attention to Cardinal O’Connor’s opposition to condom distribution and comprehensive sex education. From the beginning there were different opinions over what kind of protest would be

most strategic; and then after the protest happens there were different opinions over whether what happened was strategic or whether it had backfired.

**Questions to Pose:**

- What did you think of the debate over whether to offend the parishioners in the church by standing on pews and chanting vs. doing a silent die-in?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *What do you think about making the goal of a protest to offend and/or alienate people inside the church?*
  - *What alternative protest tactics could have been considered?*
  - *What would have been sacrificed by only having a protest outside of the church?*
- The St. Patrick's protest showed how the overlap between the women's health movement and ACT UP. Which other organizations/movements do we overlap with and how do we support each other's actions?

*Potential follow-up / probing question:*

- *Who else could we be working more closely with?*
- *What would it take to build that relationship so that we're ready to take action together on each other's issues?*

- Maxine Wolfe, Larry Kramer and Ann Northrop all believe that the protest was successful because what mattered most was that ACT UP demonstrated its power by turning out seven thousand people outside of St. Patrick's. What do you think?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *ACT UP didn't take action to get the public to like them, but to force people to pay attention to the AIDS crisis. Are we willing to not be liked?*
- *Are the powers that be afraid of us? Do we want them to be?*

25 min.

**Optional Practice/Activity: Hassle Line Role-Play**

This activity is adapted from [www.rhizome.coop](http://www.rhizome.coop). Additional practices for direct action and civil disobedience can be downloaded there.

**Background:**

Hassle lines are a common workshop activity designed to create an experience where participants explore their level of comfort dealing with confrontation in a direct action setting. It is designed to practice nonviolence, even though it involves physical movement and verbal interaction.

**How to Run the Activity:**

*Note:* It's best to prepare a second person to co-facilitate this activity with you.

1. Explain that this roleplay can stir up unexpected emotions. Although it activity is strictly verbal (no physical contact is allowed and definitely no violence, such as pushing or shoving), it simulates the interaction between protesters and authority figures.

Allow for people to opt-out of the roleplay and be “observers” instead.

2. Line participants up in two lines facing each other (make sure that each person has a partner by having them shake the hand of the person opposite them).
3. Explain the scenario (see **Example Scenarios** below) so that everyone has a general knowledge about what will happen.
4. Pull one of the lines aside to brief them on the specifics of their role (protester vs. authority figure). Then pull the other line aside to brief them on the specifics of their role. Alternate roles from scenario to scenario, so that people get to experience/practice both the protester role and the authority role.
5. Remind the participants that this activity is strictly verbal.
6. Have the two lines face each other with three paces between them.
7. To start the hassle line activity, have each line step forward to come together and begin the interaction.
8. For each scenario, let it run for anywhere between 30 seconds to 3 minutes.
9. Observe for interesting actions and reactions (fingers/fists waved in faces, one person looming over another, raised voices vs. calm voices, eye contact, smiling, silence, turning away, etc.)
10. Stop the action and have the lines take a step back. Encourage participants to take a break or shake it out. Debrief what happened and what people noticed as participants (if you have “observers” as for their insights as well). If you saw any interesting actions/reactions, call on those pairs to explore what happened in the interaction and why.
 

*Potential probing questions:*

  - *Who felt in the position of power and why?*
  - *What kind of behavior escalated and de-escalated the situation?*
  - *How did you feel when ...?*
  - *What nonverbal tactics (body language, eye contact, etc.) did you use?*
11. Swap roles with each new scenario and do a final debrief on the activity as a whole.
 

*Note:* You will probably be able to do three scenarios in 25 minutes, so be strategic about selecting how the scenarios escalate.

**Example Scenarios:** The protest scenario should be the same throughout, but the specific instructions for each role will change. Develop a scenario where the protesters are blocking the entrance to a building that has some significance as a target for an action. Before each scenario, brief the lines separately on the specifics of their role (protester vs. authority figure) so that there’s an element of surprise each time the lines come together.

- **First Scenario:** Brief the protester to react in whatever way comes naturally to them. Brief the authority figures to pretend they are police officers who politely ask the protester to leave and stop blocking the entrance.
- **Second Scenario:** Brief the protesters to try to de-escalate the situation, using calm and unprovocative body language and voice. Brief the authority figures to pretend they are police officers who politely ask the protester to leave and stop blocking the entrance.
- **Third Scenario:** Brief the protester to react in whatever way comes naturally to them. Brief the authority figures to pretend they are employees of the building (suggestions could include: staff of the target, staff who work for a different employer, cleaning staff, etc.).
- **Fourth Scenario:** Brief the protesters to try to de-escalate the situation using calm and unprovocative body language and voice. Brief the authority figures to pretend they are aggressive police officers who approach with shouting and swearing (if you think it's appropriate).  
*Note:* the police are trained to not be aggressive with protesters, but that the opposite can happen (especially during long, drawn-out, or repeated protests) and that it's better to experience the fear/aggression in a safe place first.
- **Fifth Scenario:** Brief the protesters to react in whatever way comes naturally to them. Brief the authority figures to work in 3s or 4s and "gang up" on one individual from the protester line.  
*Note:* during the debrief discuss whether the other protesters stand by or act in solidarity to support the person who is ganged up on.

5 min.

**Closing and Preview of Next Section:**

Describe the next section by saying something like:

"The next section is going to look at the role of art and sexuality in ACT UP, and how actions targeting the medical and research establishment led to real changes in the treatment of people with AIDS."

Close with a quick assessment of how people feel about the discussion and the film clip, and their interest/energy for viewing the next section of the film.

If there are specific questions or concerns about the content or the format, use it as an opportunity to get other people from the group to step up and help facilitate the next session.

**Module Three: “ACT UP has gone through a lot of change and growth”****Play from Chapter 8 through Chapter 11****▶▶ Press the skip forward button 7 times to reach 42:48 and stop the DVD at 1:05:56****Facilitator’s Background****What People Will See in this Section:**

- Discussion of art, agit-prop, and marketing as tools for organizing
- Discussion of the importance of sexual freedom for the community of ACT UP activists
- Discussion of the challenges ACT UP faced internally as a diverse community where conflicts over privilege and marginality emerged
- Footage from the Storm the NIH protest to demand inclusive clinical trials, and the multi-year campaign to “change the definition” to include women with HIV

**Purpose of this Section:** Explore how movements stay vital and energetic, even in the face of internal tensions

**Hoped-For Outcomes:**

- Reflect on how we understand and manage issues of privilege and marginality within our own community
- Consider the role of fun and joyful living in our organizing
- Practice developing striking visuals that call attention to the issues we care about

**Agenda Overview:**

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 10 min.      | Welcome and Warm-Up:   |
| 25 min.      | Play Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 of the film (from 42:48 to 1:05:56)  |
| 30 – 45 min. | Discussion and Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The Role of Art and Sexual Freedom</li><li>• Dynamics of Privilege and Intersectionality within ACT UP</li></ul> |
| 25 min.      | Optional Practice/Activity: Creating Compelling Visuals  |
| 5 min.       | Closing and Preview of Next Section  |



**Module Three: “ACT UP has gone through a lot of change and growth”**

Play from Chapter 8 through Chapter 11

**▶▶** Press the skip forward button 7 times to reach 42:48 and stop the DVD at 1:05:56**Detailed Facilitator’s Agenda****10 min.      Welcome and Warm-Up:**

Start with a round of introductions where people quickly share their name and anything that stuck with them from the last section of the film and why people joined ACT UP.

Set up the film clip by saying something like:

“The last section of the film looked at how ACT UP was organized and the important role played by affinity groups in supporting their direct action strategies. This section explores how ACT UP worked to reflect the diversity of people affected by AIDS and got beyond the narrower set of issues that it focused on at first.”

Give people an idea of what to watch for:

“This time, pay special attention to the diversity of images and people you’re seeing at the protests and actions.”

**25 min.      Play the third section of the film, Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11**

(press the skip forward button 7 times to start at 42:48, then stop the DVD at 1:05:56)

**30 – 45 min.      Discussion and Reflection**

**Facilitator’s Option:** Choose from the following questions, prioritizing the order based on your organization’s learning goals. You will probably not be able to cover each question within the two discussion topics in 30 minutes before moving on to the practice/activity, OR you can spend more time discussing each of the three topics instead of (or in addition to) the practice/activity.

**Discussion Focused on the Role of Art and Sexual Freedom****Background:**

At 43:26, Marlene McCarty talks about the importance of the visual images developed by “Gran Fury” – the “unofficial art arm of ACT UP”:

*“our mission was to get out in as raw and rambunctious a way as we could, certain messages that we felt were not getting out in the mainstream world, which is why we adopted the mainstream look of advertising.”*

And at 45:42, Bill Dobbs talks about the importance of sexuality for the community ACT UP created.

*“it was a given that sexual freedom had to be defended in the face of a deadly epidemic. And the whole atmosphere of ACT UP was a bubbling cauldron of tremendous political energy and ideas and action ... and*

*flirting and cruising.*

**Questions to Pose:**

- A lot of people talked about how sexy ACT UP was, and how people met both friends and lovers through their activism. How does this compare to our organizing and activism?  
*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*
  - *In what ways was it strategic – maybe even necessary – to weave sexuality into ACT UP’s organizing and public actions (such as the kiss-ins, and tagline “kissing doesn’t kill. greed and indifference do”)?*
  - *What risks did ACT UP take on in its embrace of volunteers’ sexuality?*
  
- In traditional, Saul Alinsky-style community organizing, much weight is placed on the development of organizers’ public identities as separate and distinct from their private identities. How did ACT UP call that model into question?  
*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*
  - *How does ACT UP’s strategy of embracing activists as whole people – with both sexual desire and justice goals – compare to our organization?*
  - *Do we tend to ask people to segment themselves – i.e. leave your sexuality, family, health problems at home?*
  
- What could we learn from ACT UP and the way they used images, posters, and video to advance their organizing?  
*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*
  - *What is the role of art – and artists – in our organization and activism?*
  - *ACT UP adopted the look of mainstream advertising, is that still a useful strategy?*
  - *Are there other ways to distinguish our organizing and message that differ from the strategies used by ACT UP two decades ago?*
  
- How do we have fun together; beyond fighting injustice and winning campaigns? How could we make more space to live joyfully together in the midst of our organizing?

**Discussion Focused on Dynamics of Privilege and Intersectionality within ACT UP**

**Background:**

At 55:55, Vito Russo acknowledges the way joining ACT UP transformed his understanding of his own privilege, and honors the fact that women involved in ACT UP saw the connections between the AIDS epidemic and a broader struggle for healthcare as a human right:

*“The healthcare system in this country has not worked equally for everyone. And that has been illuminated for me personally as a white gay man in dramatic ways. [But] women have always known this, I think that’s one of the reasons that lesbians in particular, but women in general, have taken such an active role in this struggle.”*

But then, the video shows footage of the campaign to “change the definition” of AIDS to expand it for women and low-income people, and at the end of the

section, Maxine Wolfe says:

“People came together to work on that campaign that everybody said would not work together, and that’s what was amazing about it. My affinity group had twenty-four people in it and only seven of us were women. Several of the men had HIV, several of them are dead at this point. They spent four years working on a campaign about changing the CDC definition of AIDS for women and for poor people and for drug users. And that is something that nobody says about ACT UP.”

**Questions to Pose:**

- ACT UP was able to use some members’ sense of entitlement to galvanize them for action, while also transforming their understanding of their own privilege. How do we balance dynamics of privilege and entitlement within our membership?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- Do issues of privilege and entitlement ever cause division or misunderstanding within our community of activists and organizers?
- *As the AIDS epidemic spread, ACT UP’s membership became more and more diverse. Anna Blume said that ACT UP had to constantly relook at itself, its privilege, and its demographics. What can we learn from ACT UP’s willingness to do that?*
- As ACT UP started moving beyond the “drugs into bodies” demand that they started with, they reflected an understanding of the multiple oppressions that their increasingly diverse membership faced. How do we tackle intersecting issues and forces in our organizing?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *The video doesn’t include interviews with the men who were involved in the campaign to change the definition. What do you think motivated their involvement in that campaign?*
- *How do we ask people to fight for issues that don’t obviously or immediately impact them? Is it a challenge or not? What would we need to do to continue that intersectionality if we were to grow to ACT UP’s scale?*

25 min.

**Optional Practice/Activity: Creating Compelling Visuals**

**Background:**

As we discussed, ACT UP had an “art arm” that produced posters, videos and other visuals for the movement (play from the beginning of the section again to show some examples – from 42:49 to 43:20). They used the style of mainstream advertising to get people’s attention. They also used striking images more than words.

Here are a few examples you might remember:

- Think of the simplicity of a black round sticker with a pink triangle (originally the badge Nazis put on homosexuals) and the words “Silence = Death”
- Imagine how much attention they grabbed with the slightly pornographic image of an erect penis with the tagline “Sexism rears its

- unprotected head. Men: use condoms or beat it. AIDS kills women”
- If you are old enough, you may have noticed that the poster designed to go on the side of the bus spoofed the ad-style of the Benetton brand. The original Benetton ad campaign featured diverse, interracial couples kissing in the brightly colored sweaters the company sold. The Gran Fury version switched things up by having same-sex couples kiss and including the tagline “Kissing doesn’t kill. Greed and indifference do.”

We’re going to create our own posters in the style of the ACT UP posters. But let’s focus on creating striking images or taking images that are already recognizable and turning them on their head in a creative way.

***How to Run the Activity:***

1. Have supplies available that people may need in the middle of the room and allow them to take what they want to create their own poster. Some suggestions include:
  - Magazines (preferably fashion, design or food magazines that will have a lot of advertisements and photographs that can be spoofed or whose meaning can be twisted to suit your organization’s purposes)
  - Paper
  - Glue
  - Scissors
  - Markers
2. Give people 15 minutes to create their poster
3. Have people who are willing, share their poster with the group. Honor and thank everyone for creating the images.

**5 min.**

**Closing and Preview of Next Section:**

Describe the next section by saying something like:

“The next section is going to look at the how ACT UP dealt with the continuing toll of deaths from AIDS, despite the movement having forced some policy changes. We will consider both the emotional toll that the attrition took on the organization and the way ACT UP members expressed their grief in moving ways that continued to push the public conversation about AIDS.”

Close with a quick assessment of how people feel about the discussion and the film clip, and their interest/energy for viewing the next section of the film.

If there are specific questions or concerns about the content or the format, use it as an opportunity to get other people from the group to step up and help facilitate the next session.

**Module Four: “We wanted to show the unvarnished truth”****Play from Chapter 12 to the end****▶▶ Press the skip forward button 11 times to reach 1:05:57****Facilitator’s Background****What People Will See in this Section:**

- Footage from the Ashes Action, 1991
- Footage from ACT UP’s public funerals, 1991-1993
- ACT UP organizers talking about the group’s decision to engage in public funerals and expressions of grief as a means of helping them to survive the worst years of the crisis – emotionally, spiritually, and professionally

**Purpose of this Section:** Discuss how movements sustain their message when winning isn’t enough, and craft an event or action that makes use of three strategies or tactics pioneered by ACT UP.

**Hoped-For Outcomes:**

- Reflect on how ACT UP used its activism to help care for the personal needs of its members
- Identify some real personal challenges that come with working in present-day movements, and identify how we (don’t) use our organizing to help care for each other in the face of these challenges
- (Optional) Craft a plan for designing an event or action that makes use of at least three of ACT UP strategies or tactics.

**Agenda Overview:**

- |              |  |
|--------------|--|
| 10 min.      | Welcome and Warm-Up:   |
| 22 min.      | Play from Chapter 12 of the film to the end (from 1:05:57 to end)  |
| 30 – 45 min. | Discussion and Reflection on: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Activism and Care</li> <li>• ACT UP’s Legacy of Strategies and Tactics</li> </ul> |
| 25 min.      | Optional Practice/Activity: Designing an Action that Makes Use of ACT UP’s Contributions to the Field of Activism and Organizing                         |
| 5 min.       | Closing  |

**Module Four: “We wanted to show the unvarnished truth”**

Play from Chapter 12 to the end

**▶▶** Press the skip forward button **11 times** to reach **1:05:57****Detailed Facilitator’s Agenda****10 min.      Welcome and Warm-Up:**

Start with a go-round in which participants fill in the blanks of the statements below:

*A personal challenge I face in my activism is \_\_\_\_\_; and one way the movement helps me feel cared for is \_\_\_\_\_*Model this activity by completing the sentence in a way that directs people to reflect on a challenge that is *not* about how to win, but how to take care of the people involved.

Set up the film clip by saying something like:

*“The last section of the film highlights the interdependent role that can exist between activism and care, and also talks with organizers about the role they believe ACT UP had in the history of activism in the United States.”*

Give people an idea of what to watch for:

*“This time, pay attention to the specific things that ACT UP did to both help its members survive the crisis beyond physical and medical needs and pioneer activist strategies and tactics that are still in use today.”***25 min.      Play the fourth section of the film, from Chapter 12 to the end**  
(press the skip forward button 11 times to play from 1:05:57 to the end)**30 – 45 min.      Discussion and Reflection****Discussion Focused on Activism and Care****Background:**

At the start of this section, Ron Goldberg explains the context in which ACT UP decided to make use of public funerals and turn toward expressions of grief as tactic for both surviving personally and messaging as a movement.

*“People who had survived a while – people were dying. AZT wasn’t working. It was a very tough time. So it was very much about literally bringing the bodies of our dead to where we thought the blame lied, or a significant portion of the blame, and making that quantifiable. It wasn’t just about nice things. Here’s a dead body. This is someone who we loved, who we valued.”*

This section of the film highlights the role that organizing and activism can have in caring for its members – rather than leaving care to be dealt with outside the sphere of the campaign or group. This section also lifts up the role of ACT UP in pioneering many of the strategies and tactics we use in present-day organizing and activism.

**Questions to Pose:**

- What were some specific things that ACT UP did to help activists manage the emotional toll of death during the AIDS crisis?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *How do we make space for people to express the grief and pain that they experience as a result of the injustice we are fighting?*
  - *The public funerals and spreading of ashes merged the personal and political by expressing grief in a way that targeted the people and powers responsible. How do we merge the personal and political in our organizing?*
- What parallels do you see to present day crises in the United States? Who is responsible for our contemporary political death-tolls, and how are we making that clear?

*Potential follow-up / probing question:*

- *Do we confront life-or-death stakes in our organizing and activism? If so, do we know how many people are dying due to the policies we oppose and how do we lift that up? If not, what can we learn from ACT UP about explaining the stakes of the political crisis and who is responsible for the suffering we confront.*

- How is our organization or campaign helping to address the emotional, spiritual, or other personal needs of the people who fuel it?

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *How could we lift up the caring practices in our own organizing (if they are already happening)?*
- *How could we integrate some of ACT UP's care practices to agitate leaders towards practices of care (if they are not already happening)?*

### **Discussion Focused on ACT UP's Legacy of Strategies and Tactics**

**Background:**

We often think of ACT UP's contribution as that of addressing the AIDS crisis in the United States – but this section suggests their role went beyond their core issue, and that the legacy of ACT UP really extends into the strategies and tactics of many movements that have come since.

**Questions to Pose:**

- Name specific examples that organizers gave at the end of the film of how ACT UP contributed to the practice of organizing and activism themselves. You may find yourself referring back to other sections of the film (as do the organizers).

*Examples of ACT UP's legacy to follow up on:*

- *Pop-art visuals on signs at rallies*
  - *Paste-Ups (using wheat/flour glue to past posters all over public spaces)*
  - *Die-ins and other direct action tactics*
  - *Affinity group structures (though remember that ACT UP adapted this model from the civil rights and women's movements of the 1960s)*
  - *Wave method for direct action*
- Where do you see these practices in place today? Think of specific examples (a poster you've seen in the last few months, a direct action tactics that you've participated in, a structure for group meetings that you've been a part of)

*Potential follow-up / probing questions:*

- *What other movements from history do we look to as models?*
- *How can we do more to learn about and honor the deep and long tradition of activism and organizing that we are part of?*

**25 min.**

**Optional Practice/Activity: Designing an Action that Makes Use of ACT UP's Contributions to the Field of Activism and Organizing**

***Background:***

As we discussed, ACT UP pioneered a number of tactics and strategies that we use today, but whose origins we may not recognize. For example, ACT UP had an “art arm,” incorporated affinity groups in a strategic and meaningful way, and did intentional things to care for its members at a time when the human toll of the crisis was high.

All of these tactics are things we can use today, applied both to the still-living AIDS movement as well as a multitude of other movements for social justice.

***How to Run the Activity:***

Have the following supplies on hand:

- Markers
- Butcher block paper

Ask participants to design an action that incorporates ACT UP techniques or strategies. This means they should work in small groups for 15 minutes to:

- Pick a potential, doable date and place
- Decide: who is the *audience* (the people whose support or emotions you want to mobilize), and who is the *target* (the decision-maker you want to influence) of this action?
- Write, in one sentence, the message or demand that this action should convey to the media, public, and/or target.
- Pick three specific tactics or strategies that ACT UP used in its activism to incorporate into the program or design of this event or action, and explain how those could be used here. These could include, in either the planning or execution process: using pop art visuals, writing intentional practices of care into the process, incorporating an affinity group structure,

Debrief the activity:

- Have each group share for 2-5 minutes on the idea they came up with.
- The debrief should include specific mention of the three ACT UP tactics/strategies they incorporated.

**5 min.**

**Closing:**

Close by thanking participants for making the commitment to participate in the four discussion sessions.

End with a quick assessment of how people feel about the series overall and any lasting



lessons that they will take with them as a result of this process.

If there is energy to continue meeting or discussing lessons from ACT UP, use it as an opportunity to do more reading and research as a group, and refer people to [www.actuporalhistory.org](http://www.actuporalhistory.org) for more interviews and background on the activists and organizers who led ACT UP.