



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

**Oral history interview with Avram Finkelstein,  
2016 April 25-May 23**

**Funded by the Keith Haring Foundation.**

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Avram Finkelstein on April 25-May 23, 2016. The interview took place in New York, and was conducted by Cynthia Carr for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic: An Oral History Project.

Avram Finkelstein has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

CYNTHIA CARR: There. So okay. This is Cynthia Carr interviewing Avram Finkelstein at his studio/home in Brooklyn, New York, on April 25, 2016 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is card number one. So Avram, again, say your name and spell it.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Sure, it's Avram Finkelstein. A, as in apple, V, as in victor, R, as in Robert, A, as in apple, M, as in mother. F, as in Frank, I-N-K-E-L-S-T-E-I-N.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. And when and where were you born?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I was born in 1952. My mother thinks I was born in Brooklyn, my sister thinks I was born in Queens.

CYNTHIA CARR: And your birth certificate doesn't solve the problem?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The hospital was in Queens, but when I—we were right on the border of Queens anyway, so I don't—and when I asked my mother once when we were driving around Queens could she show me the hospital, she said, "Oh, it burnt down." Like you'd think I was born in Soviet Russia and the village was burned to the ground.

[They laugh.]

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, right. Okay, so somewhere on the border between Queens and Brooklyn. And then the names of your parents, and if you could spell those.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. My mom was Frances, F-R-A-N-C-E-S, and do you need her maiden name?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, that would be good.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Schmilowitz: Yea, S-C-H-M-I-L-O-W-I-T-Z, is I think how it was spelled.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And my dad was Joseph Finkelstein.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And he was born in—she was born in New Jersey, and he was born in Philadelphia.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. And what did they do for their jobs?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: My mom was, I can tell you a much more organized version of this now. My mom was a lab technician. She worked at National Starch Products in New Jersey, and in order to get out of the house she decided, "Well I can do this and this is kind of fun," so she decided to become a career scientist and eventually got her doctorate in biochemistry and she did cancer research. I think she minored in microbiology, and she did cancer research throughout the '60's and then did pediatrics research in Meadowbrook Hospital until she retired.

And my dad was kind of a little lost; he had the soul of an artist but he didn't finish high school. And he, with a friend from the army, he started a lefty—he represented lefty show business acts. And he represented Professor Irwin Corey and Russian puppet troupes, but he lost a lot of money when a Russian puppet troupe that was booked cancelled the entire tour. His father owned a dry cleaning store in Harlem, which I totally forgot to tell you, and they had a second store in Freeport, so for a while my dad did that; he managed the store in Freeport. And I used to go up to Harlem with him sometimes and go to Freeport with him, and then for a while—then he sold that business to his manager. He hated it. And then he bought—he didn't buy art, he was actually, like, the leg person.

He did studio visits on behalf of two designers, one of whom worked at Knoll, who was one of our closest family friends. So he basically did studio visits and got Czechoslovakian circus posters for hospitals, stuff like that. But that business never really got off the ground and he didn't make very much money. He loved it, but he didn't make very much money. And then he became a salesman in the men's department at A&S [Abraham and Strauss Department Store] in Hempstead. And eventually, the wife of the man who hired him to buy art hired him to be this business manager for a school for emotionally disturbed kids that I, when I was a kid, I sometimes worked at. Working with autistic kids.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay. And you started doing art at a very young age, drawing. You were drawing right?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: When I was a kid. Yeah, I remember my dad took me to see the Matisse show at the Museum of Modern Art, the cut paper show. Which, I was a little kid, I can't—I know the show just recently came back, so I think it was there in '56, and I was so influenced by it, he used to bring shirt cardboards from the dry cleaning store for me to use as canvasses.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I drew a painting of a—I was so influenced by Matisse, and I drew an outline of a woman, a nude, and I was so embarrassed that I had done it that I started painting inside and outside her—these lines to sort of obscure it.

CYNTHIA CARR: And how old were you at that point?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I must have been 4 to 6 years old, somewhere in there.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow, okay. [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I did these sort of vertical strokes to try to obscure it and my father came over and said what is that, and I said, "That's death walking in the forest." [Laughs.]

CYNTHIA CARR: Death walking in the forest? Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. They took me to see a—you know; we didn't have babysitters—they took us to see *The Seventh Seal* when it was first out.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh my god.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I was so—you know how you bring a kid and you think, "Oh, they won't understand it." I had never heard of Christianity, I didn't know about self-flagellation, I didn't know about witch burning, I didn't know about any of this stuff. I was so traumatized by that film that I became somewhat death-obsessed.

CYNTHIA CARR: And you had seen that at age 4 or something?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: When was that film out? Yeah, I was a little kid. I have a really very vivid memory. I can quote people from like 1956.

CYNTHIA CARR: That's great.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, it isn't.

[They laugh.]

CYNTHIA CARR: For someone interviewing you, it's great.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Perhaps. So yeah, so I was very precocious. My dad took me, when my mom was going for her doctorate, to get us out of the house on the weekends so she could study, he took us to a different museum every Sunday. So I pretty much knew the permanent collections of the Whitney, the Museum of Modern Art, the Brooklyn Museum, the Museum of American Indian; by the time I was a young, you know, a tween, I knew every painting and would go straight for the ones I loved.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh boy, that's great.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And Stravinsky was a huge—I was a real big fan of atonal music. So he really loved to encourage it. I think everyone in the family leaned towards science and I was the only one who leaned towards art. And he wanted to be an artist I think, in his soul, so he encouraged it. And he took me to see every Stravinsky ballet and performance. So I became obsessed with atonal music when I was like 10.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow. And by this time you were living on Long Island, in Jericho?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. But I think because we—our apartment was right across from the Brooklyn Museum, it was one of my dad's favorite places to come. And it was closer to Long Island, if you didn't feel like driving all the way to the city, so we went to the Brooklyn Museum all the time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: In fact, that Frasconi woodcut there we bought together as a family in the gift shop of the Brooklyn Museum when they had a Frasconi show. He was a huge fan of Frasconi,

and there's another one in the kitchen that was his.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. So he was encouraging you in your art thing, and you had told me before that they even arranged for you to have a teacher, a special teacher?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, because I went to public school and it was Long Island, there wasn't really a very strong art department when you were young. So my mom hired—I don't know how she knew, I can't think of her first name, Jacobson was her last name. So I had a private art teacher. I would go once a week; she would take me to Carl Place. And I had instruction and I learned to paint and to sculpt. And I was a pretty good painter by the time I was in—I was kind of a photorealist painter by the time I was in high school.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, so this was the grade school era when you had this special class?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes.

CYNTHIA CARR: And then in high school—and what high school was it?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was Westbury High School, and by that time it was the 60's so they did have electives so I could take more art classes. So I spent a lot of time there, I learned how to do offset lithography, I learned how to do enameling. It was kind of fantastic. And I was, I guess, like a gifted kid and so they kind of let me loose a little bit.

CYNTHIA CARR: That's great. Now the other part of your childhood is the political side?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, yeah. Which is unavoidable. My mom and dad met at an International Worker's Order Summer Camp in Lumberville, Pennsylvania, which is where she was right in-between where she was from and he was from. And my dad's mom, Lena, was a cook at the camp. So they met at a lefty summer camp. And they went to see Robeson during the—it turned into the Peekskill riots.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We spent time at an artist colony. It was actually a utopian colony, and experimental colony that lefty Jews, a lot of artists, in Golden's Bridge, New York near Katonah. The Rosenberg's were there one summer, my dad worked with Ethel Rosenberg and we used to go on workers' retreats and folkdance weekends and a lot of the closest friends of the family were all artists and musicians—this entire family were artists and musicians and the father did graphics work for the WPA.

CYNTHIA CARR: And your parents were both members of the Communist Party?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And my parents were both members of the Communist Party.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Right, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, so I'm a red diaper baby. There's no way out of it. My brother gave me a copy of Mao's *Red Book* when I entered middle school, and I actually have the baby Lenin pin that he gave me.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mall's *Red Book*?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Mao. Chairman Mao.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, Mao, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I was the only one—and my sister was out at Berkeley visiting a friend during the free speech movement and she sent back all these buttons. So there I was in 7th grade in the cafeteria with a "free university in a free society" button, trying to explain it to the lunch lady.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, right. Now did you combine the art and politics in high school already?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, I did. I mean I became very politically active separately from that, but of course all the artists that we knew were lefties, so there was automatically a connection, a bridge between that for me. But I think I went to—Jim Fouratt did that Easter be-in at sheep meadow. Did you know he was the one that organized that, Jim Fouratt?

CYNTHIA CARR: I don't think I knew that about him.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, I didn't know that until many years later. So I met a lot of young people who went to Music and Art there. And I guess I was 16 then. And then I went to one of the first—one of the early anti-war rallies, and through that I learned about Martin Luther King's Poor People's Campaign, so I went into the city by myself and stuffed envelopes for the Poor People's Campaign, and then I canvassed for the Student Mobilization Committee in the town where I lived, and all of my friends in high school were very political and active in the anti-war movement.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I think I was telling you that it was the town, Westbury, which was where I ended up going to high school was originally Quaker settlements. So there were Quaker schools there and we always went to the Quaker fairs. I learned how to silk screen at the Friends' World College. Bonnie Raitt's brother Steve Raitt had just come from the May '68 strikes with a whole bunch of posters that he wanted to reproduce. And I happened to be in the common area at the school when he was there and he told me what he was doing. He said, "Do you want to help?" And I said, "Sure." And that's how I learned how to silk screen.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Now had you come out in high school?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, no I had not come out. I didn't come out until I went to college. It was very weird because it turned out all of my close friends in high school, half of them were gay. And they were completely out. But you know the left—

CYNTHIA CARR: In high school they were out?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: In high school, yeah. Some of them were out.

CYNTHIA CARR: That's sort of unusual at that time.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was pretty unusual.

CYNTHIA CARR: In the '60's, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But of course you know that the left—Stonewall hadn't happened, and the left hadn't wrapped its head around queer America yet. And my folks were homophobic. It was bad.

CYNTHIA CARR: So I know that you had wanted to go to Cooper Union?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I wanted to go to Cooper Union my entire life. Since I was a little kid I was like, "I'm going to Cooper Union." And I was on the waitlist; there was 90 slots and I was number 60, and I might've gotten in, but—

CYNTHIA CARR: 60 slots and you were 90?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: 60 slots and I was 90, correct. And I might've gotten in, but I applied to the Philadelphia School of Art because they had a good film program and at the time I was making films, in high school. And they also had a decent film program at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, so I went to apply for the Museum School. And the entire school had been transformed into a political poster factory during those years. When I very first moved there, I lived a few blocks from Harvard Square and I could hear the riots from my apartment. It was a very pitched moment. And so when I walked in and I saw them making political posters and the whole school—like everywhere—people were sleeping in the lobby and everyone else was churning out posters and I looked at my mother and I said, "This is where I'm going."

CYNTHIA CARR: And that would have been '68 or '69 or something? Or 70?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was '69.

CYNTHIA CARR: '69, yeah. Very peak moment for political activism in a way.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, I mean, Boston was a very political place to be and a very great place to be at that moment.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, so—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then I came out like that [snaps]. Like the second I went to—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh really, as soon as you got there?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. Yeah it's sort of funny because the really weird thing is that there were a lot of the friends of—the closest friends of my parents, and our family friends, had relatives who were gay. But it didn't feel safe to me to be gay.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, right. And then when you went there you intended to start as a film major when you went there?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I started as a film major, and I did my first three-minute film, which was a film of my boyfriend sleeping and it was sync sound. And it was \$325 for 3 minutes of sync-sound film, and I was like, Fuck this, I can't afford to be a film maker. And I was minoring in printmaking so I shifted to print making.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then the print department was right next to the ceramics department, and all of the lunatic friends from the ceramics department, who were doing—it was that transitional moment when ceramics was going in a very different direction as well. And so all of the sculptural ceramicists were right through the doorway, and I got to know them and then I became—I switched to sculpture.

CYNTHIA CARR: And you were doing ceramics as sculpture?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, sculptural ceramics. And it's very odd to say this, it sounds a little douche-y or like I'm making it up, but my work was all about gender, but we're talking about 1971. There's some of them on the bookshelves; I did a whole series of imaginary trophies to—I had seen the film *The Misfits* and was very influenced by this kind of Marilyn Monroe character having to navigate all of these self-destructive men.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I was thinking a lot about my own sexuality and about the ways in which masculinity is, as we now know after decades of queer theory, is performed. But that's what I was thinking about in my first year in college.

CYNTHIA CARR: And the Women's Movement was pretty active at that point, I think.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Oh yeah, big time, and I came from a feminist household. So all of my work was about—I did portraits of all of the drag queens that I knew. I actually was friends with Nan Golden and David Armstrong.

CYNTHIA CARR: Did she go to that school also?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. I was on the portfolio review committee and I got David into school. David said, "I think I'm going to apply for the Museum School," and I made sure I was there. He had these amazing drawings, they were oil pastels of neatly folded shirts, laundered shirts. This was way before he became a photographer. And then I think he got Nan into school.

And then P.L. DiCorcia, of course. So that was my crowd. So I did portraits of all of these transvestites, but as functional objects in the classical Zen pottery traditions, and was glazing my ceramics with white opalescent lipstick. And I was in the Student/Teacher Show at city hall and one of those—a picture, a portrait of a drag performer that both Nan and I knew was in the show. And the entire inside was filled with Vaseline, and they had wiped the Vaseline out. And so Nan and I were there at the opening and it was like they had taken the piece apart. So we had to run to the 24-hour drugstore on Beacon Hill, near where Nan and David live to buy a tub of Vaseline. And I had it in my sport coat and we were greasing the inside of all my sculptures. It sounds like I'm making it up, because it was so early to be doing Matthew Barney's critiques of masculinity.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But that was what I was doing.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow. And so in that way your work was political at that point, right? From that point on.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Extremely political and very much about gender. And I think we were saying earlier; when I was a kid I was very influenced—I went to the Matisse show in the '50s with my dad at MoMA and I was very influenced by Matisse, and then I was very influenced by the Fauves, and somehow as I began to explore that moment when I was a kid—by the time I was in high school I had already moved on to pop and anti-art and conceptual art. So by the time I was in college, I was really thinking very conceptually about my work, but I also was very influenced by the Situationist critiques because of the May '68 strikes. So that really paved the way for all of my later work, which was about institutional critique.



CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Now did you stay in Boston after you graduated?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I did, I stayed there for a few years.

CYNTHIA CARR: When did you graduate?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I graduated in '73. It was very expensive. It was only \$3,000 a year, but it was too expensive, and I was working during the summers and I thought—I got a year's extra credit for destroying a year's worth of work. Part of my practice was—I became very obsessed with, I don't know if you remember this incident with Laszlo Toth, who was a crazy geologist, knocked the nose off the *Pieta* with a little pick hammer, a geologist's hammer.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it really captured my imagination; it was during the height of these anti-art questions. And when he did that I remembered that on a school trip I had been taken to the Metropolitan Museum to see the *Mona Lisa*. So that must have been whenever that was, in the late '50s or early '60s when it was on loan for that period of time. And I remember thinking I didn't even know—I had no experience of that painting other than the fact that I knew it was the most expensive painting in the world, the most valuable painting. And as I was standing there in line as a kid and looking across this room with these rope lines, and eventually to be ushered in front of it for a split second, this brown painting that I didn't even know if I liked.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I realized then that the ways in which we're told to think about art are very different from our actual experiences of them. So I started thinking, well what would it be like if I knew the *Mona Lisa* was going to be burned the second after I left the room, would I have a different experience? So in college, I was experimenting with this idea of having the work function in a very different way, and removing the work, destroying the work, was a part of my practice. And I got a year's extra credit for destroying—for that train of thought, I showed shards of the semesters' work and walked them through my thinking about it.

CYNTHIA CARR: You had broken up all your ceramics?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: All of the ceramics were smashed. And I saved a few examples, one from each suite. And because I got the year's extra credit I thought, well, I'll just take some summer courses and graduate a year early. So I graduated in three years instead of four.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh I see. And then you stayed in Boston for—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Stayed in Boston for a few years, but I did not realize it was the height of the bussing crisis. I did not realize how racist it was until then. [Laughs.] And I lived on Mission Hill, which was this borderline area—there was a white side of the hill and a black side of the hill. And they were throwing rocks. And I was like, I can't stay here.

CYNTHIA CARR: So when did you move back to New York?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I moved back to New York I think in 1977—'76 or '77.

CYNTHIA CARR: And what—you got a job as soon as you got here, or?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, in your list of questions, you—it's very funny, because I took a somewhat dim view of my father. The fact that he didn't have one thing that he did his whole life the way my mother did. And I somehow thought that there was something wrong with that. But when I look back, I have done so many things for work. I was an art director, I've done production design, I've taught, I do graphic design, I—there's so many things that I've done in my life that I realize, I ended up just like my dad in a way.

CYNTHIA CARR: In a way, but yours is all focused around art and design, so—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Pretty much, but I write. I thought I was doing cultural—I was hired to do cultural criticism for an online journal called *Critical Mob*, and they loved my work so they basically hired me to do other work. Next thing I know I'm writing for Time Warner and for *hollywood.com*. So I'm trying to shoehorn this very particular outsider's perspective into just about everything that I do.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. But when you arrived in New York, what was the first job that you got?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I was an art director at Vidal Sassoon. So I hired and trained staff, I ran the press department for a while, I did all of the photography for their seasonal collections. I basically feel like I'm a working class dude who just got by on his wits and would pretty much do anything for work. I answered an ad in Craigslist to do PR for a company on Seventh Avenue, and when they found out that I did graphic design, I became the head designer within a couple of years.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well coming out of college and getting—it sounds like a very top job with Sassoon?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It happened very quickly and I think some of that was a function of my being overqualified for just about everything that I ever decided to do with my life.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think it was very easy to stand out in an international beauty company.

CYNTHIA CARR: That fashion world.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's my theory, yeah. That's my theory about it. I was the fastest art director promotion that they had ever had, or something like that.

CYNTHIA CARR: And apart from that, were you doing your own artwork outside of the job?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, the thing is, this transitional moment from coming out of college, in which I was destroying my work and so steeped in institutional critique, that I didn't want to become a part of the art world.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I moved to New York and literally the first person I fell in love with in my life started showing signs of immunosuppression by 1979 or '80. So, I feel like I would've had another life had it not been for the AIDS crisis, but Don was a musician, and he started showing signs of immunosuppression very early on, before AIDS even had a name.

In fact, when I first took him home to meet my folks, he spiked a fever in the middle of the night. And I was talking to my mom about it, and she said—I said, "He has these fevers, they come and go; he

has sinusitis, no one can tell what it's from, they treat him, it comes back," and she said, "There's something wrong with his immune system."

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Do you remember what year that was?

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was probably 1982. I literally remember it as the windows rattling when she said that, or like in the kitchen doing the breakfast dishes. And it was like I—it was so coded, but also, so my mother. Like, she drew blood at the kitchen table and, you know, and ran our bloods at the lab. We were raised in this way where that is how people talked, but it was also very like my mom to be—she diagnosed my cousin's wife with Epstein-Barr before anyone knew what it was.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: She was a very gifted diagnostician.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well do you remember that moment when the *New York Times* ran that article about gay cancer?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I do, but it's very funny about that, Cynthia. I feel like there's this very weird.- we have a very skewed idea of the historiography of HIV/AIDS. The fact is, *The New York Native* ran a column about it months before that. So it seems like a funny thing to, now as we look back on it, we've chosen markers that suit a dominant narrative. Which we can talk more about when we talk about the politic—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. So you had already—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —the work I'm most known for.

CYNTHIA CARR: You had already read about this, you know, what they were then calling gay cancer in *The Native*?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Everyone in New York knew about it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was not—we didn't need the *New York Times* to anoint the AIDS crisis. People were hearing about it, and when we heard about it, Don was flipped out about it. He was super nervous, and for some reason I wasn't, but when my mom said that I started to get very nervous about it. And he basically just got sicker and sicker until eventually he ended up with PCP [Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia] and he didn't have a doctor, he was a musician, so he ended up in Bellevue and they wouldn't bring his food into the room, and there was blood on the floor under his bed, and his sister and I went out and got cleaning supplies and cleaned his room. They—I literally went into the nurse's station and started screaming at them.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, I remember that phase, but let's back up a little bit now. What was his name?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Don Yowell.

CYNTHIA CARR: Don Yowell.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Y-O-W-E-L-L. He was a singer songwriter and he had just begun to—he had a song covered by Aretha Franklin, and he was co-writing with Luther Vandross, so we went to Luther's, we had him over for dinner, went to his place. He was like a musician's musician.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And like most musicians, looking for a record deal, but also singing back-up. He had perfect pitch—and he was quite brilliant.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Were you living together?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We—by the time we moved in together, he became so sick that he moved out within months—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, really?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —to move back with his family in New Jersey, but we were spending every second together at his place or my place.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, so you met him here, not Boston?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, I met him here.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Boy, so when he had, you know, PCP—did they know what it was at that point, or?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well they did and they told us. You know, we took him to Bellevue, he couldn't breathe, and after—there was no test for HIV and they basically they told me that he had AIDS, but I didn't believe them, and they couldn't say what was going to happen to him. They couldn't say what to look out for. They couldn't give us anything to give him. They basically just said, you know, "watch him," and they, you know, the orderly took us to the curb, you know, with him in a wheelchair and we got on the elevator and someone else tried to get on, and he just went like this.

CYNTHIA CARR: The orderly put his hand up? Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's just the way it was.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then he got PCP again just shortly after that and it was so traumatic, Bellevue, that he wanted to go to a hospital close to his family in New Jersey, in Englewood.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And he had PCP again. We had to requisition pentamidine from the CDC—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —in order to treat him. And that time he went in, they couldn't tell what was wrong with him. I think in hindsight he might've had CMV, but it was—people didn't make it past PCP for—you know, so it wasn't until later that we discovered the other hosts of horrors that can happen to immunocompromised people.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But he had some kind of a neurological thing. They did spinal taps, they, like, they couldn't tell what it was. He responded to the pentamidine and he was—but there was still some neurological thing. And he literally—I spent the last night that he was alive with him in his room, and he didn't—he slipped in and out of consciousness, I kept calling the nurses in, and there was nothing to be done. He just—he didn't—I was holding his hand, I don't think he knew I was there, and then he rallied in the morning and the whole family came around to say goodbye to him without really realizing it, and I left to go back to New York for the day, and when I came back that evening he was dead.

CYNTHIA CARR: And they hadn't called you or anything to say?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, they called me to say he was moved into the ICU.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, uh-huh. [Affirmative]. Oh boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And by the time I got there he was dead.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative] What year was that?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: 1984.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative] So they had just found, or just developed the antibody test at that point, or released it actually. I know that it existed before.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right.

CYNTHIA CARR: Now, that's a whole other crime in itself in my opinion.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Oh, please/ You know I told you I'm working on a book and I started to put together a timeline, and if you think that for the first ten years the Centers for Disease Control wasn't reviewing the epidemiology, the clinical epidemiology, surveillance epidemiology on women. It wasn't until 12 years into the crisis that, you know, the manifestations of immunosuppression in women were kept and included in the definition of AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: 12 years.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Actually I looked, I have my own AIDS timeline that I made up when I worked on the book and I had written down that the first antibody tests were available in March of 1985.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think I was aware of that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. March of 1985 is what I—I tried to do careful research on that; when did things become available.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was not commonly used though.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They were not—it was not something that was commonly used. People

worked by markers.

CYNTHIA CARR: That's right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was all about T-cells.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Yeah. Oh boy. Yeah, it's an outrage that's beyond the purview of our interview in a way, in a way, but only in a way.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Only in a way because my work was, as we were saying earlier, you're trying to trace the delivery from this childhood interest in art and politics and how I got to what we're here to talk about, and if you think about it there's an exact straight line between institutional critique, my wanting to withdraw from the art world, and meeting Don, him becoming sick, and then five seconds later I'm doing the *Silence = Death* poster and then ACT UP happens literally within the following year.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So the trajectory is very clear, and I think looking back at it for people who only knew me through my political work within AIDS activism who don't know any of those other things, that there's this whole missing piece of the story that led up to it, which was a life of institutional critique, politically and from a creative perspective. From, you know, from a class critique, a feminist critique, I was raised with that in the same way that you become a Republican if your whole family are Republicans, and my mom was a research scientist and I remember asking her one day—I went with her to the lab when she had to work when I was off from school, so I went with her to the lab, and I said, "So do you think they could,"—I was a kid, I said, "Could there be a cure for cancer?" and she said, "Never, it's too big a business."

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it's like I didn't—what happened, the set of realizations that were attached to the AIDS activist movement, I came to that moment with those things deeply instilled in me.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, and when Don died and, I mean, there weren't any groups together except for Gay Men's Health Crisis. Now that didn't start—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There was Gay Men's Health Crisis, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And did you think about getting into that group or?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: What I did was I formed the Silence = Death collective.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I had dinner with two friends of mine—actually one friend. He was also a musician, Jorge Socarras, and I knew him before. He actually even co-wrote with Don, and when Don got sick he didn't want anyone in the business to know that he was sick, because he was afraid no one would hire him. Like, he sang back-up for Jane Olivor. Like no one would hire him because of the insurance. What would happen if something happened to him on the tour? So he didn't want anyone to know, and after Don died, I of course—Jorge found out, so we got together. What I didn't know was—I did kind of know that he had a collaborator, Patrick Cowley, who was

Sylvester's producer, had actually died before Don, but he was very—Jorge was very hush-hush about it. He didn't say what he died of.

CYNTHIA CARR: Sylvester had died?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, Patrick died.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, Patrick had died? Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, Patrick died before Don did.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So there we were at dinner and he invited a friend of his who I didn't know, who I didn't know why he was there, I didn't particularly like him. His name was Oliver Johnston. He was this kind of Southern dandy and very not like the people that I knew. All of my friends were junkies and musicians and artists and art students and, you know he seemed really scrubbed, but he was a graphic designer. He came from Parsons, and we started talking about—it was like the flood gates had opened, and it was the first conversation I actually was able to have about it, and I realized that the one thing that came up at the table that really resonated for me was I realized that we couldn't get any of our straight friends to understand exactly what was happening, and what was happening was—we were furious.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that was a really hard thing to explain. It's hard enough to explain AIDS and, guess what, I might have it too, and so now what do we do?

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But then to also be angry about it, was a bridge too far for a lot of people, and once I realized that I said, "Why don't we form a group?" And I said, "Let's just do it like a women's C.R. group."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I said, "You know, it would probably be more effective, you know, it wasn't really group therapy, it was a consciousness raising group." And it would be more effective if we didn't all know each other, so why don't we just start by each inviting one person the other two don't know?

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so there were six of us in this collective, and we met every week, we had potlucks—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, mm-hmm. [Affirmative]. Met at each other's houses, and like that?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We just would—they would be at different people's apartments and we would each bring food, and we would end up every session—we would begin by talking about our fears and our anxieties, but by the end of each time we were talking about the politics of AIDS, and that's when I—something clicked, and I remembered when I was a kid when—are you from New

York? Were you—

CYNTHIA CARR: Midwest.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: In New York during the 1960s, during the height of the anti-war movement that corridor of Eighth Street between the East and West Village was literally like a bulletin board. It was papered with manifestos and meeting notes and it was like literally every square inch was papered over with information, and I thought—I remembered, when young people needed to communicate with each other that's what we did. We used the streets, so I suggested to the collective that we do a poster about AIDS, about the politics of AIDS, and that was the *Silence = Death* poster.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, and when—now this group came together, maybe, in what, 1985?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: 1985.

CYNTHIA CARR: 1985.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Don died in November of 1984, and I think we had our dinner probably in late 1985.

CYNTHIA CARR: Late 1985?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Late 1984 [1985–AF], sorry.

CYNTHIA CARR: Late 1984 [1985–AF], okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I think we started meeting in January of 1985 [1986–AF], and within a month, I said, "Let's do a poster."

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, so 1985 [1986–AF] you started working on that?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We worked on that poster for almost six to nine months. It wasn't the only thing we were doing, but there were many, many iterations, many ideas were rejected. It's a very packed poster, and I told you I'm working on a book, there's 60—the first 15 pages about the poster, like are just background and I haven't even gotten to the font. There's about 60 pages on that poster.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was very, very packed and you have to consider the fact that no one, except for Larry Kramer, was talking about the politics of AIDS in New York at that point in time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, and your group, had you given it a name at that point?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, we did not have a name.

CYNTHIA CARR: It was just a C.R. group, or you thought of as a group of friends, or whatever?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was a C.R. group.

CYNTHIA CARR: A C.R. group to talk about AIDS?



AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah to talk about what it meant to be gay in the age of AIDS. To like explore what this, you know, this terrible thing, in all of its complexity—what was happening to us, and it was the only way I knew how to do it. It was like I—it wasn't about a support group, you know, it wasn't a group therapy, it was a political group that I was proposing, and that's—and that may not have been everyone else's experience of it, but that's why I suggested that we structure it that way. So we—in fact when we did the poster I had it in my head that it was going to be a series that were going to lead up to a call for riots in the 1988 elections.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, uh-huh. [Affirmative].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I wanted to remain anonymous so we would be able to do that, based on my experience in the '60s, that if we were going to encourage people to break the law we should probably be anonymous, and the very first—when we finished the poster, we put it to bed in December of '86.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, so it took like a year or two to actually get it produced after you designed it?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: From the very first conversation to putting it to bed was about a year, yes.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, now the people in the group—were they artists or designers or?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They were. Everyone except for myself and Jorge were graphic designers.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I was an art director with a fine arts background and Jorge was a musician.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Charles Kreloff is the son of Bea Kreloff who started the feminist seders, and he was raised in a lesbian separatist household, so he also came from an extremely political background. He was the person who Oliver Johnston invited.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, I see. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I was really relieved to meet Charles because he was the most like me in the group.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I invited Chris Lione who—Chris was the brother of one of Don's closest friends and Chris took me in after Don died, and Chris and I became inseparable as a result of how it all went down around Don's death.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Uh-huh. [Affirmative].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So he was the first call I made and he said, "Yes." And he was the art director at *Art and Antiques* at that time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, cool.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And Brian Howard, he was the youngest in the group, and I can't recall

where he worked, but he was also a graphic designer [photo editor—AF], and then went on to represent artists and—fashion photographers, not artists.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, so that's, let's see you—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Jorge.

CYNTHIA CARR: And Jorge, Pat—no.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Charles.

CYNTHIA CARR: Charles, Oliver, Chris, and Brian?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Those are the people.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, those were the six.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. So when you—how did you settle on that phrase of Silence = Death? I mean that must—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well it's very funny, Cynthia, because it's—I remember exactly the volley. Unfortunately, I sent my papers to NYU and I had a journal in it, and the journal has the notes from these sessions.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It has the notes on the text. I wrote the text with Jorge, but I had written in my journal a line that I saw in a *New York Times* article that referred to silence as being deafening, but it was another type of silence, so it was a political situation, and it was one of those mythopoeic moments *the Times* occasionally sneaks into a report.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I thought that's a really interesting way to think about this, so I wrote in the journal, "Gay silence is deafening," and read it. I said, "What about—" you know and I had my notes, this was very late in the process. We had gone, already discarded a whole series of ideas about what this poster would be about, and we were then in the process of thinking about silence and what that means politically and socially, and, you know, what trying to pull it apart and pack something into this poster, and I said, "What about; gay silence is deafening?" And then someone else, and I think it was either Charles or Oliver, but I can't really remember because it happened this fast, said, "What about silence is death?" And then someone else said, it was a volley, someone else immediately said, "No, it should be Silence equals Death," and then someone else said, "It should be an equal sign," and literally everyone screamed. It was like—it was just after working on this for months and months and months we were sort of looking for this thing, and it happened like that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The rest of it did not.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Every other aspect of it, the color, the font, the subject, the, you know, we originally were going to—Bill Buckley had made that call for tattooing HIV positive people, and that was in 1986.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we were going to have that be the topic of the poster, and be the image, and then so we started talking about it and Chris said, "well, what color is this tattooed person, and what gender is this tattooed person?" And the more we thought about it, the more we realized it would be completely exclusionary to do an image of a tattooed person. We couldn't figure it out like if we did it hyper close up, could that obfuscate the gender, and if we made a black and white image and made it darker could that obfuscate the race? But we knew that we were—we were very keyed into the questions of gender and race that were also happening. It wasn't just what was happening with homophobia, and we didn't want to make that poster, so we started thinking about iconography.

We thought there must be a way to symbolize this, and my—the design problem that I gave to the collective was that I wanted it to have—was a political one. I wanted it to have a bifurcated audience. I wanted it to set the stage for the lesbian and gay community to organize politically around AIDS, but I wanted for everyone outside of that community to infer that we were completely organized and well-funded. So it was this sleight of hand, it was this kind of Yippie idea of appropriating the voice of authority and that was the design problem. So we wanted to signal to the lesbian and gay community in a very clear way, but there were only a handful of icons that did that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the pink triangle was one of the first things we considered, because Chris had just gotten back from a trip to Germany. Chris is half German, and we were talking a lot about the concentration camps during—when we were making this poster, but four [three—AF] of the six people in the collective were Jewish. So it's not something we took very lightly, and we spent a long time agonizing over whether we even liked the Holocaust image—analogy.

So we rejected the pink triangle, because it intoned victimhood and we felt like we didn't—we were trying to construct an empowering set of questions. We were trying to do so many things at once so we kept sort of vacillating, well this is going to kick the legs out from under that objective, and we kept weaving through these ideas, and then we thought the rainbow flag, but we all hated the way it looked, and it had kind of hippie baggage. It didn't seem to have gravitas. It did have meaning across many communities, probably more than the pink triangle did, but we felt that there were other things working against it, and then we really loved the labyris, but we knew most men wouldn't know that reference.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then we looked at the lambda, but I felt like it had some class intonations. And then we ended up back with the—

CYNTHIA CARR: With the triangle.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The pink triangle.

CYNTHIA CARR: And so you had decided on the black background and the pink triangle, and then

you needed the words.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well we hadn't decided there was going to be a black poster. That was a debate that went on for weeks too, because Oliver loved color, and in fact when Oliver died we did a sticker of the *Silence = Death* poster, as Oliver wanted it to be, which was a bright yellow background with green text—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —acid green text—

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and a fuchsia triangle.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He was all about color, and in fact I think Jorge has some of the sketches that we did on that night of playing with color, but Chris and I felt really strongly—I wanted it to—I had this idea that in order to create the illusion that we were more organized than we were, and we'd gone through many conversations about how didactic it should be, and I wanted it to be a manifesto, because they were such complicated issues, and Charles was like, "No. In the 1960s people would stop on the street and read a manifesto. This is Reagan's America."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: This is not a political moment to—it cannot be didactic in that way. But I felt like I wanted to carve—as a consequence of it not being a manifesto, and not being a political moment, I thought in order to intone this sort of fully authorized organized—this authorized voice in an organized community that we should actually pay to have it be pasted alongside movie posters. Which other movements may have done, but it wasn't a common practice at that point.

CYNTHIA CARR: Not—I mean I remember that era of wheatpasting, when everybody was out wheat pasting their flyers and stuff

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They were Xeroxed flyers.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, so you were doing a more professional approach.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That was the idea, was to—in order to appear fully authorized we should do it that way, and I knew people who designed the posters for the—BAM's Next Wave Festivals, so I asked them for their wheatpasters—they're called snipers, and Jim—there were only two people who did it in New York, and Jim Rogers was one of them, him and his son, and, you know, I'm assuming they had mob connections, because all of the sites were all construction sites, and pretty much they would guarantee that your—you know, and also it was illegal to do, technically, you know, so they must've had some relationship with the cops as well, so it was—you couldn't look in the phone book and find someone to snipe posters. It was word of mouth.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes. What size did you make the poster?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We chose a funny size because Chris was obsessed, Chris had a very formal obsession about the proscenium of the poster, and that in order for the triangle to be fully resolved

in the typography of the poster, it should be individual squares, so all the text would have to go beneath it, and as a consequence it was an off size, so we had to pay for a larger sheet to print it on and then pay for the extra trims. So it was a—I should know the size of it, but it was an off size 33 by 29 and three-quarters or something like that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, and the six of you paid for this to be produced?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, so what I said to them was when I came up with this idea of wheatpasting it professionally, "I'll pay for the wheatpasting if you all pay for the brunt of the poster." I basically staked this idea, I took financial responsibility for it, and the way that sniping works is you choose the amount of coverage you want, so we had many conversations about which neighborhoods and then you pay for duration in the locations, and so we decided we wanted a two week presence for the posters so they, Jim Rogers, came back to us and said, "We will need 900 posters to give two weeks coverage in the areas you decided on, which was East Village, SoHo, West Village, Chelsea, and Hell's Kitchen, and for two week's coverage we'll need 1,800 posters, because if it gets washed out or someone wheatpastes over it, so—," and it was roughly the same price to snipe as it was to print, and I don't have my journal, but I think it was a \$1.25 each to print, and maybe \$1.50 or, \$1.35 or \$1.50 to wheatpaste.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was not cheap.

CYNTHIA CARR: No. So you ended up paying—you paid a lot of your own money to get it put up. Yes?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, but I felt very strongly about that strategically.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, uh-huh [Affirmative].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And as a consequence, the poster's—not only packed in terms of this double audience—so the pink triangle and the Silence = Death is meant to step outside of—I'm using the word lesbian and gay community, because we did not use the word queer until after that poster was up, within the lesbian and gay community the Silence = Death was meant for—

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —meant for both audiences, but it was meant as a signal to people who only would have a casual relationship to the questions, and there were two lines of modifying text across the bottom that talked about, "Why is Reagan silent about AIDS?" "What's really going on at the Vatican?" "Why is the FDA and the—you know, what's going on at the CDC and the FDA?" It sort of opened, because I thought it would be a series of conversations, this was meant to be the conversation starter about the politics of AIDS, and then the second line was a set of proposals about agency that were very broad. It mentioned voting, it mentioned boycotts, it mentioned using your power, and then it went into this, the id of the question. Turn anger, fear, grief into action.

So it's like in this two lines you're transitioning, you're talking about—inside the beltway you're talking about research science, you're talking about religious leaders, but we're sort of lighting on all of these things knowing that you couldn't without a manifesto say it all, and it was going to come in the second poster, but guess what? We put the posters up—literally, ACT UP forms the week after the posted started going.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow. Well just to go back in the group of six, were some of them—had people been tested themselves? I know this is a period where people didn't want to get tested.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, this was not a period when, A) it was that easy to get tested or commonly known that one could get tested, and then people in the AIDS community were resistant to it because there was no protections for the results. They were doing surveillance on—you were basically being asked to report names, so there were people who resisted getting tested, and I assumed that I had HIV because Don and I had unprotected sex.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And everyone assumed that I was HIV positive, and so did I and I proceeded that way, and I think one of the things about the AIDS activist movement, the early days of ACT UP that's easy to forget is that there was this solidarity surrounding this issue that was in some way socially imposed, because nobody knew who had HIV and who didn't, and not everyone wanted to know so everyone proceeded as though we all did, which is a very different circumstance than from how it is now with the viral divide. But as it happens, it turned out that Oliver, now, again, Oliver died in 1990 so, and Oliver was very goyish, he was like, you know, he kept his cards very close to his vest, and he was very controlling, so I never got a straight answer about this, but Charles and I have figured out that he must've decided to join this collective knowing he was HIV positive, but he didn't reveal it until four months in, and he told Charles first, and Charles was furious. It was a consciousness-raising group. That was what we were there to do, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So there was a huge amount of tension around this starting with Charles and Oliver and then once Oliver came out, I was furious that he didn't feel safe enough to tell us earlier, which was not the appropriate response, but that is how it went down.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Well did you get a lot of response to all these posters going up all over town?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No we didn't, and the other thing that I took responsibility for doing was to contact the press and to try and get it placed in advance of it going up. I decided that, you know, that transitional period in New York when the weather's really bad and no one's going out and there's no street life—that we'd wait until just the beginning of that and try to target March, because weather's good enough that people have cabin fever and the streets are activated and it's before people start going away on the weekends in April and May. So we had this very definite window and then I started meeting with—I met with Lou Moletta of Gay Cable Network, I met with Richard Goldstein of *The Voice*, I sent a letter to Larry Kramer—never got a response from him. I don't know if it ever made it to him, and we did get one piece placed about it in *The Native* with Mike Salinas. Chuck Ortleb thought it was a good idea—can't remember if I went through Mike who I didn't know, so I don't know how I would've gone through him, but he agreed to interview me anonymously—as an anonymous collective, and everyone else is like, Lou Moletta was like, "Well, who are you? What's your organization and what are you doing? Or what are you asking people to do? Is this very New York gay community Democratic Party pols all focused on the civil rights legislation in New York?" It was a very particular set of ideas about what political engagement might be and this poster was very capacious and Lou had no idea what to make of it. He was like, you know, "I don't know what you're—I don't know how to—what you're asking." And Richard Goldstein was very, took this journalistic perspective. He was like, "Well all of these things that you're implying about the FDA and Reagan and the Vatican, I would need you to provide me with

journalistic proof from two sources in order for—because I can't write about this without it being accurate."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: "Without the—you know, speaking to the contentions, and since you can't do that, I'm sorry I can't write about it."

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then, this is literally the month before ACT UP formed, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laugh.] Richard!

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then I took the poster to—there were two gay bookstores in New York at the time, Different Light and Oscar Wilde. Different Light put it in their windows. They didn't ask any questions about it. They just, like that, and Oscar Wilde said the triangle's pointing in the wrong direction, so it's historically inaccurate so we will not put it in the window. And Uncle Charlie's put it right by the bathroom, and Boots and Saddles put it up, and no other bars would put it up.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So there's the answer to your question. It was of—I have always said we designed *Silence = Death*. It was the community of activists who were in New York at that moment who created it. Because it could've come and gone on the night and you never would've seen it, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Well one thing I was going to ask because you're—in terms of the silence. What about other gay groups that—this is before ACT UP. What about other groups apart from GMHC? Was anything coming up in other groups?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well you know I made the rounds, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's like, ACT UP hadn't formed, and I had this collective project but I felt like it wasn't enough for me and I really wanted to find out where the action was so I went to Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights meetings, I went to GLAAD meetings and demonstrations, I was involved in the early conversations about the March on Washington, and no one was talking about it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Really? No one was talking about AIDS?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: GLAAD was, but they weren't focused on it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They weren't doing political demonstrations focused on it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They had a very different—everyone had their very own little way of thinking about it, and the only reason why—when I heard that Larry was replacing Nora Ephron to talk at the Community Center that night—I said to the collective, "He's the only person talking about the

politics of AIDS. Let's instead of meeting—let's go there that night. Let's have our meeting there."

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we were there at that meeting and I had—again, it's in the journal. I have notes from that conversation, which was two days before it officially reconstituted itself as ACT UP, and it's shocking when you look at those two first meetings, which happened two days apart.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Or three days depending on how you count. Every single idea that ACT UP went on to do, every issue came from the floor. It didn't come from Larry, it didn't come from Tim Sweeney, it didn't come from Vivian Shapiro, Marie Manion, any of the people facilitating it. It came from the floor; all of it. Everything that ACT UP went on to do was there from the beginning: women's issues, communities of color, communities of color, changing the gay pride march into a gay rage march, blocking the bridges and tunnels, blocking the New York Times, demonstrating, all of it— from the beginning.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah I remember the Larry Kramer. "Gay men will have no future here on earth." He said, "If my speech doesn't scare the shit out of you, we're in real trouble."

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was very funny, because I came to that—I didn't know who Larry was. I didn't know anyone in the theater community. All of my friends were like, you know, I knew The Contortions, I, you know, I knew Marcus Leatherdale, I knew Robert Mapplethorpe, I knew Amos Poe, I knew Maripol, I, you know, I knew Debbie Harry. I didn't know anyone who knew Larry. No one in my circles knew Larry. So I came cold to it, but I came to it from this political background from the '60s and from my family, and what was happening in that room as I saw it was undoubtedly very different from a lot of people who were there because they knew who Larry was.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, and I remember, you know, before that he'd already done that cover story in *The Native* about—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that's how I knew about him.

CYNTHIA CARR:—"1000 something or other and counting" of the people who had already died.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, and that's how I knew about him.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I sent him a letter, because Mike Salinas had done this interview, and I said, "Could you give me Larry's address?" And he said, "I can't do that, but give me a letter and I'll get it to him." So I'm pretty sure it got to him, and I basically—it was like a half page and I just said, "I'm working on this project. It's a poster, you know, it's about the politics of AIDS, you know, I'd love to sit down and talk to you about it." And I don't know if he got it, or if he did get and didn't respond to it. I don't know, but I think the thing about history is we love to think in terms of storytelling. We love to—there are two ways in which history happens. One is an actual historian's idea of history. The other is the way in which history functions, which is very mediated by power structures. So the storytelling surrounding AIDS has been mediated by power structures since the very beginning and every aspect of it is somewhat skewed by that, and I think it's very easy to forget that. So I think it's easy in hindsight to see all of these things as having happened at the same time by the same people, so Silence = Death sort of became the ACT UP logo, but it wasn't. It was a consciousness-



raising project by six individuals a year before ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was a part, it was a component piece of what many people were thinking about, but when you look back at it, it's the elevator pitches: ACT UP had this really great logo, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But that isn't actually what happened. That isn't how it happened.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. That's good, I mean, I think that until I did some research on it, I think I also assumed that ACT UP had somehow come up with that phrase, and the t-shirt, and the button, and the, you know, posters.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, no that all happened and I sort of, you know, since our collective then became folded into ACT UP and I was sort of—I proposed the buttons and there was very tremendous resistance to it, and I said, "I'll pay for them."

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I wanted their—I knew that we were talking about some, tabling at, the GMHC AIDS walk, and I thought, okay well the buttons, it will cost \$180 to make 1000 of them, and if we can—I didn't care if we sold them, but we did—so ACT UP made \$1000 that day which went into paying for things for the, you know, posters and flyers for the next two demonstrations. My objective was that there would be 1000 more activists walking the streets of New York with that button on them.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was a consciousness-raising project, so, you know, I think the constellation effect, the cloud effect of what was happening is the true meaning of this work, and it's very easy to, you know, in a book or in an exhibition, you know, for a curator to be saying this poster, the *Silence = Death* poster was, you know, it was the voice of a generation, or it captured this moment in this perfect way, and you're like, if you were born, you know, ten years or 15 years after it happened you would have no idea of what any of that means. You're just looking at a poster and it's stripped of all of its agency, and I think that's where political graphics are very different from video, in that video carries context with it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You look at video, you see what people look like, you see what the streets look like, you hear the sounds, you—but when you isolate this poster on a wall, it was never meant to be on a white wall. It's a defanging of all of these other questions that have to do with agency, community, the activation of social spaces, the amount of thought that went into the poster, how packed it was, and then all of the people who disseminated it, and the many iterations that went into creating this monolithic idea of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, and then it eventually was translated into other languages and, you know, really started—it's something, it's like a little a pebble thrown in and a huge wave resulted in this ocean or something, but—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I believe that to be a testimony to collectivity.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative] Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Not just our collective as six, but basically, I expanded our collective to include everyone in ACT UP, I just didn't tell them that I was doing that.

CYNTHIA CARR: [They laugh.] Right. Do you want to, like, go back for a minute to say something about the typeface? Is there something you want to say about that?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes. We spent a lot of time talking about the font.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because the typography of the poster was narrow and somewhat tall, and I had this idea that I wanted it to have this bifurcated audience. I thought that there would be many people who would see it from a car or a cab, because New Yorkers at that time didn't have cars. It was very, very uncommon.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: New Yorkers used the subway and this was going to be above ground so this wouldn't be for that audience and that's why we planted it in the lesbian and gay community and also in areas where people in publishing lived and worked. So the smaller text was for the intimate encounter. The larger text was for this—what is this about, who are these people, what do they want, what does that text say? It was the slogan, and as a consequence, in order to be visible, the letters had to be very tall, but the space was quite narrow so both—I think it was Charles and Oliver—I think Charles suggested Gil Sans Serif, and Oliver said, "Extra Condensed, so it would be super tall and fill the poster," but there was, in graphic design, there was something called kerning, which is the space between letters, because it was a super condensed font and the kerning was very tight after we produced the poster and ACT UPs—you know, there was a community of activists and I started getting feedback about the poster. A couple of people said to me, "Well, why does science equal death?" and I realized that the S and the I and the L and the E were too close together to be read accurately, so in the subsequent posters we increased the leading—the kerning on those between those letters.

But it was also the font of the moment. They were—on every level we were trying to intone a knowingness. We chose—I wanted black because it would carve a quiet space in a cluttered setting. It was going to be alongside other posters, and I knew that it would be a very lively context, and I felt that this would sort of create a meditative zone and give it some gravitas, but black was also the color of fashion, the color of music, like everyone in New York in the, you know, in any design community or creative community wore black, so it was a part of the code and the pink that was used in the actual concentrations camps was a much paler pink, but we decided to make it a more saturated fuchsia so it would also feel a little, like, MTV-ish. So they were, all of those design decisions were a part of this sort of sleight of hand of who produced it, what it's for, and what it's saying. What it's meant to do. Remember we did not know ACT UP was about to form.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah, and after the Larry Kramer meeting it was—what, like two days before this, another meeting to really form ACT UP took place.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, he spoke on the Tuesday and I think it was a Thursday was the first meeting of this—it was an unnamed group at that point, and we didn't choose a name until just

before the Wall Street demonstration, because we had to put something on the flyer and Steve Bohrer who raised his hand, he's—he died quite a few years ago, I don't know the spelling of his last name but it's funny, it's B-O-E-H-E-R or something [Bohrer –AF]?

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He raised his hand and he just said, "I always had this idea it would be great to form a group called ACT UP, and it would be the AIDS Coalition To—and I don't know what the UP would stand for, but it would be a great name," and then people started tossing around ideas and that's how Unleash Power came about, but it was basically Steve Bohrer who named it the week—at an open meeting.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Came up with this cool name he had always had in his head and everyone was just into it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, boy. I should've called you before I wrote my David book, but anyway. I heard so many different stories about how that name was formed, but—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, that's exactly how it was formed, you can take it to the bank, and it was Steve Bohrer.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay, and so you were part of that first demo on Wall Street?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes. Oh yeah, in fact all of this is in NYU now, but there's the picture in the *Daily News* is me and my boyfriend at the time, Simon Doonan, and Chris Lione who was in the Silence = Death collective right there in the smack dab in the middle of the *Daily News* photograph. It was a small demo. It was not a big demo. It was just a bottleneck. That part of, you know, just as you're entering that part of lower Manhattan traffic is really tight, so it was very easy to make it feel like a lot of people were there, but there were not that many people there.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. At what point did the six of you become the Silence = Death collective? When were you given a name?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I know exactly how that happened.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it was probably the third meeting and because we were such a small collective we had decided that two people could be a quorum if there was a time-sensitive issue, and I think it was—the reason why I think it was the third one was it was the first ACT UP meeting that was upstairs and it wasn't in the south side of the building, it was in the north side of the building, and we only met there one time and it was because there were no other spaces available, and in the announcements—so I was there with Oliver. We're the only two people from our collective there and in the announcements section before the business of the meeting, Neil Broome who was with the Lavender Hill Mob, he did some work with Lavender Hill Mob before ACT UP—raised his hand and he stood up and he said, "Has anyone seen these posters around New York," and like, "Does anyone know who made them or?" and Oliver looks at me and, since I was the one who had asked for anonymity, he said, "Should we tell? Should we say it?" and I shrugged. I didn't say no, and as soon as I shrugged Oliver jumped up and said, "It's us. We did it." And, you know, as Neil was asking the question there was like—I could hear people behind me like, "Yeah, who did

that?" And like the stage whispers sort of going through and, you know, so Oliver and I are thinking about it and before I really had a chance to actually say what I thought Oliver jumped up, and then we were out. And so I think Neil said, "So who are you?" And I said, "We're a small consciousness-raising group," and that's all I said about it, and then there was some applause, and then I realized that, you know, all of these thoughts were going through my head. I realized that this—the thing that I was being anonymous about; this group might be it. So we chose the name the Silence = Death Project post factum after that point.

CYNTHIA CARR: You and Oliver together, or the group?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, the entire collective.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay. So you were still meeting with the collective?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, we continued to meet together for another year probably.

CYNTHIA CARR: Along with going to ACT UP meetings, or?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Oliver was on the outreach committee and so was Chris Lione. I was voted one of the first two at-large members with Eric Sawyer who is now the community liaison for UNAIDS, and I was in the logistics committee, but I also did work with fundraising because I did the button project and we worked with the fundraising committee to do the T-shirts, and Chris and I—Chris's next door neighbor was a fashion rep and Chris's brother worked in her showroom, so we were the ones who sourced the T-shirts and I don't know if we found the printer. I think fundraising—it was Dee Finch. Do you remember her? She did a—

CYNTHIA CARR: Dee Finch? No.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: She was great. She did the Gran Fury. She did all the ACT UP T-shirts. She had a shop out in Brooklyn, I think. This kind of scrappy, working class dyke, really funny, and soulful, and sweet, and tough. She did all the ACT UP stuff and she did the "Men Use Condoms or Beat It" sticker for Gran Fury.

CYNTHIA CARR: So how—what was the process of getting Silence = Death, you know, into—like integrating it into ACT UP, and saying let's make T-shirts that say that and let's do—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well it was a very informal process, and I think that ACT UP very quickly grew, and once it grew I doubt that any of the organic kind of looseness that existed around the dissemination would have been possible, but in fact it was Simon Doonan who was the display director at Barney's at the time who was my boyfriend who said, "For the second demonstration, which was the Post Office demonstration on April 15—it was a few weeks after the Wall Street—he said, "Why don't we bring posters?" And I was like, because I was thinking of it as a consciousness-raising project—we had had no conversation about it on the floor of ACT UP and I didn't feel totally comfortable, and he was like, "Everyone brings posters to a demonstration," and I was like, "Yeah, but that's different. This isn't like me handwriting a sign. This is like our project and I don't know if I feel comfortable." He said, "Just give them to me. I'll do it. If there's any blowback I'll take responsibility for it." And I said, "But they're flimsy," like they were coated stock, it was, you know, so it was heavier than a Xerox, but it wasn't board stock, it wasn't card stock, it was for wheatpasting. I said, "How are you even going to hold it up?" He said, "We'll mount them on foam core. I'll have the kids in the display department do it." So it was not only Simon who first did it, he was the first person to mount an ACT UP poster on foam core which then became the thing. It was

light, it was durable, it would hold up in the rain.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You could stack them.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it was actually Simon who pushed that. I pushed the buttons Fundraiser—I think outreach decided on the stickers. Oliver's long gone, so I haven't—it's been so long since I've had this conversation and Chris's memory isn't as keen about everything. But I think that they may have been involved in the sticker project, but if not, it was Peter Staley in fundraising who thought that would be a good idea, and I think that the reason why I'm highlighting this is I consider it a really essential part of the ubiquity that was created. The stickers could go anywhere, and literally you could carry around all the stickers in your pocket, and it was almost like a fugue, like this communal fugue. If you saw a sticker, you would put another one next to it, and it was right at the beginning of ATMs—that was a new thing. I remember when Don got a Citibank ATM card, I was like, "Why do you need to take money out in the middle of the night, again?" It was like—it was a new thing in the mid-1980s, but if you went to an ATM and saw a Silence = Death sticker you would put another one, and so pretty—and the same the inside of mailboxes, the interior lid of a mailbox. These were sites that everyone in New York was beginning to use, and they were cluttered with stickers; there wasn't one sticker, there were 20 stickers. And then when we started having demonstrations and meetings in Washington DC—those toll booths inbetween in that corridor which is the media and the political capital of America—our drives back and forth for meetings, there were those coin tosses if you didn't want to stop you would just throw quarters in and people would put them there, like every time anyone went to DC. So every—on that corridor of power, and in places where people mailed things and got money, there was a sticker, so I feel like that that was an essential part of the ubiquity that was created.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, you know just at that moment ACT UP is starting and what about the rest of your life? Where were you working at that point?

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, the thing about ACT UP—and I think anyone who will—who you speak to about it will say that every waking moment was—I mean, we went to meetings every night of the week.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] I know in the interview I did with Joy, she said that she stopped doing her own artwork. And she did—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Oh, yeah. Everything stopped.

CYNTHIA CARR: —you know, everything was focused on ACT UP.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Everything.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we still felt like we weren't doing enough.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was—you were there. It was bad.

CYNTHIA CARR: Because it was such a crisis. Yeah. It was horrible. Really.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was bad. It was really, really bad.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it's really hard to explain that. It's—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —it was—we were in a war zone.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And— people were slipping through our fingers like sand.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we were doing everything that we could think to do.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, it became my entire world. And my entire circle of friends, and the Silence = Death Collective got folded into it. And my affinity group became my closest friends. I still have Passover with them.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: These are—this is my family. And I think the thing that I sort of—I sort of think of ACT UP as like a barn raising. We were building a home. It wasn't—we weren't just building a community. It was safety, protection, information, creativity. And then there was—the rage was an essential part of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I feel like it basically kept me alive. So, I didn't take anything else seriously. And, basically, everyone I knew stole from all of their clients—like, billed everything we did. Avon paid for "The Four Questions" poster because Vincent Gagliostro was working for Avon at the time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I have—I have the typesetting bill. It's like we were basically squatting on New York.

[They laugh.] And using it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. But I was—I—well, I thought today, and I've thought this before also. Like, what if there had never been an ACT UP? I mean, it's—I think ACT UP made such a difference.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think it did.

CYNTHIA CARR: It did.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I really do think about it conversely. I think about it in the reverse. Like, ACT UP had to happen.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And ACT UP already was happening.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And because I do these workshops where —Flash Collectives, I call them— where I assemble a limited duration collective to mount a public project. And the point of it being limited duration is that it removes a lot of the obstacles that we place—that we throw in the way of our political agency. You know, who's going to see it? You know, who am I to say something? Like all of those questions—like, if Silence = Death had it said, "Who are we to say what should be done?" Then—and we didn't create ACT UP. We were one of the many component pieces to the creation of ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I look at it in the reverse. I feel like it would have—something else would have happened in its place from this exact same group of people who were in dire need and looking for a—for their voice.

CYNTHIA CARR: Because, clearly, something had to happen. Something had to—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was happening.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: If you think about—again, if you think about Silence = Death as coming out of ACT UP, as opposed to coming the year before. And then you think, "Okay. Well, what else was happening the year before?" The Lavender Hill Mob was like doing quiet little zaps against everyone in, you know, the medical industrial complex, and the gay leadership. I mean they were— there were other things that were happening.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It just became—there was a catalytic moment that ACT UP—you know, that Silence = Death was a part of. But, again, I don't think ACT UP needed a poster to become ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: What was needed—the reason why Silence = Death was needed was by— let's think in context. We're in deregulation-mad, Reagan America. The cable news cycle had just started, literally within minutes after ACT UP. They had 24 hours—a 24-hour cycle to fill.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: People thought you could get AIDS from a mosquito bite.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, you had an audience. You had city editors and producers who, if you pitched an AIDS story, knew they had an audience for it. And then you had a media savvy group of people who were intent on using every resource we had. It was this perfect storm.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it may have been called something else and it may have had a different image. It just wouldn't have been Silence = Death. But that doesn't mean there wouldn't have been an ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: There was this group that Lucy Lippard was instrumental in starting. It was called PAD/D, P-A-D-D [Political Art Documentation and Distribution].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I know. I—

CYNTHIA CARR: Political Activist Design—something.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I dealt with them—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, you did.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and sent them all the stuff.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And PAD/D gave—didn't PAD/D give their archive to MoMA?

CYNTHIA CARR: I think so.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Something like that.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes. I know them.

CYNTHIA CARR: But the idea behind it was that, if we're going to be political activists, and we're in this visual, this television age, where everything is on screen, we need to make visuals—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right.

CYNTHIA CARR: —that will be, you know, for the cameras. You know, and that was the idea. But I thought, I mean, ACT UP was so good at that.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: You know? But because of your work, I think, and others, but—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, and many, many people.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's like the whole Gran Fury story.



CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, again, the compacted history is that Gran Fury designed *Silence = Death*. But Gran Fury didn't happen until a full year later.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it happened because Bill Olander at the New Museum wanted to offer the windows of the New Museum to ACT UP. And David Meieran, from the Testing the Limits Collective, who was in the Whitney Program—and I don't know if that's how we knew Bill—but David called me up and said that, "Bill wants to speak to someone in the Silence = Death project about ACT UP doing the, you know—"

CYNTHIA CARR: Doing the window.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —doing an installation in the windows. And I didn't want any part of it, to be honest with you, because of my Situationist critique of museums.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I didn't want a part of anything having to do with the art world.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I said that to David. And David said, "But it's not really our decision, is it?"

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I said, "No. You're right. I'll bring it to the floor of ACT UP," which is what I did.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I organized the committee that, then—and went to the first meeting, and made sure it got off the ground —and then disappeared until after the installation was taken down. And it was a friend from my same circle of friends, Mark Simpson—

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —that Don—that I met through Don—Mark Simpson—who was the first person to, when I formed the open committee in ACT UP—the first person in the back of the room.

CYNTHIA CARR: Now, you formed the group to do that window.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Was it the Silence = Death Collective that was part of it, or none—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We were not part of it at all.

CYNTHIA CARR: None of them were a part of it?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. So, that group was sort of winding down, or something—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No. We did the *AIDSGATE* poster.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then we did—we were—we were still meeting.

CYNTHIA CARR: Was that the second poster? You had talked about the—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That was the second poster.

CYNTHIA CARR: The—okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We did three posters.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The second poster was *AIDSGATE*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I knew that—but to complete the thought about—

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. That committee—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —about that open committee—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There were about 50 people, I'm told, who worked on that window. It was an open committee in ACT UP. And anyone could come and work. And people brought skills to the table. And, because I knew Mark—at the opening of the New Museum window, I was there at the opening. And Mark was there, and Loring McAlpin from Gran Fury. And I think it was Don Ruddy who was in Gran Fury at that point, but left as he got sicker. And possibly Tom Kalin was there, although I can't remember. And we're sitting—standing out in front of the window. And Mark was like, "We should stay together and work together." And, apparently, there were people in—who had worked on the window who also agreed with that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, shortly after the—my boyfriend at the time died, which was the following—within two months.

CYNTHIA CARR: So, not Simon?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No. Steve Webb.

CYNTHIA CARR: Steve Webb. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. He wrote the—what did they call them? The—it was the organizing

document for ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: With Steve Gendin—

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —who—that came—

CYNTHIA CARR: Steve Gendin? Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. The working document. *The ACT UP Working Document*. Steve coauthored it with Steve Gendin.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, shortly after Steve killed himself, I joined Gran Fury. And left Silence = Death.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Well, let's talk about those other two posters first before we leave Silence = Death.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, the *AIDSGATE* poster—

CYNTHIA CARR: That's the one with Ronald Reagan.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's correct. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And it's sort of green—a horrible, you know—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Correct.

CYNTHIA CARR: The horror color of green. And—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Correct. Yes.

CYNTHIA CARR: And it says AIDSGATE across his face.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's correct. And then the lines and modifying text on that went to the tune of—I could pull the poster out if you—uh, later So, we could get the text into the record, if you'd like.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it basically said—it gave a list of stats.

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You know, the percentage of women who were affected by HIV, the percentage of—they were very high percentages, above 50 percent—of people of color. And the percentage of gay men.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so, what is—it starts out by saying, "What is Reagan"—it gives these stats. And then it says, "What is Reagan's real policy on AIDS? Genocide of all non-white, non-male, non-heterosexuals?" So, basically, what we were attempting to do in that poster was to circle back to the questions of race and gender that we did not put into *Silence = Death*, but were supposed to be what the original poster was going to be about.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Tattooing IV drug users, and sex partners of IV drug users.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. So, when you made this poster you were—ACT UP had already started. It was already going—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: ACT UP had already started. And we decided we were going to do an action at the International AIDS Conference. And it turned into a national coalition, civil disobedience in front of the White House. With lesbian and gay leaders—about AIDS. It was organized through a series of national organizations.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I knew that it was going to be a significant moment because it was ACT UP's first action in DC. It was the first [national-AF] civil disobedience that I knew of about HIV. And I felt it would be—we were going to be in the belly of the beast, and it would be an opportunity to highlight Reagan's role.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Within the weeks that we were working on this poster, he formed the Presidential Commission on AIDS—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —literally within two weeks of this poster. So, this was a really important transitional moment. And that's why I felt like we needed to do this poster about Reagan.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The word "AIDSGATE" actually came off the floor of ACT UP, and it's in my journal notes from a meeting—an earlier meeting. And I think somebody just tossed it out as—when we were brainstorming posters for another demonstration—not that one. And it stuck with me in the same way that I wrote deafening is—silence is deafening. I've—I'm a note taker.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I brought this idea to the collective, and everyone agreed that that would be the perfect slogan piece of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I really—this time I wrote the text by myself, because I really wanted it to be very focused on gender and race. And also to sort of circle back to the question of genocide and the Holocaust, which we didn't really talk about, but I did say that we struggled with the

Holocaust analogy. But I was very surprised during that very short period of time between when ACT UP formed in March and when the committee that decided to do the installation at the New Museum began to meet in August, I think. And the installation was in November. But I wasn't a part of that, except when the committee asked the Silence = Death Collective if we would have trouble with them doing a neon sign of it. And that was my only involvement before I saw that it was about the Nuremberg Trials. So, think about it. Between March and November—this very short period of time, not only had people responded to the pink triangle and not had an issue with it—the same issues that—reservations we had.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Then there was the Gay Pride March float—which it was—I was on that organizing committee as well.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was decided by the floor of ACT UP that it would be a concentration camp float.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And there were serious conversations about internment and segregation of people with HIV.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, at that point in America—and I think Gregg Bordowitz has talked about this to—numerous times. We really did think it was a possibility.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It wasn't just a metaphoric gesture.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well, people in Congress were proposing it.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Actual—House of Representatives—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: —Senators, you know, they were proposing it. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. It's—we were dangerously close to it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, then there's a concentration camp float. And then there's the Nuremberg Trial window installation at the New Museum. And, when I was standing in front of it that night, looking at the *Silence = Death* neon sign over it, and I just—I remember thinking it's like—you know, "AIDS activism is open for business," is what—I didn't really get the neon sign. But, in fact, in the collective we thought it was kind of kitschy and we didn't understand why they wanted to do it. But this sort of—this through line about the Holocaust was something that many people came to

agree on. So, I wanted to circle back to that— with the *AIDSGATE* poster, and name it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I wanted to use the word "genocide" in connection with him.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, that was that poster.

CYNTHIA CARR: And then—probably it was used in the march. You, like, mounted it on—you know, so you could carry it.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: On foam core. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. On foam core and everything. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. But it—so, we debuted it. And I think it was June 1st or 5th. I can't remember.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It could—because I—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —I should have held my journal back, before we had the—

[They laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —but I didn't know we would be having this conversation.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Well—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I think it was—it was the first week in June.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. And then the third poster that your group—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The third poster ended up being a vote poster.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because the elections were coming up, and we didn't—I felt like the original poster—and, again, another person who's working on a book just—I just delivered the journal. So, she has just seen it, and saw the page with—I actually have sketches for the *Riot* poster in my journal.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it didn't seem—if I didn't want to superimpose the idea of violent response on ACT UP—if I was already squeamish about superimposing my ideas on ACT UP to begin with, I wasn't going to superimpose that idea. I felt like that's up to ACT UP now. There's this community of activists that's heading in a very radical direction. This could happen. Maybe it won't.

But that isn't what this poster is going to be about. So, I thought, why don't we do a vote poster and take the exact opposite—you know, a much more insider's set of responses?

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, it was an American flag with "Silence = Death," superimposed over it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it didn't get a tremendous amount of play. We pasted it around New York. It's not a great poster. And that was the last poster that we did.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that was late '87.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. For the election. Now, after the—so, after the New Museum, that committee decided to stay together. But it wasn't 50 people, I don't think, anymore.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No it wasn't.

CYNTHIA CARR: The one—the ones that stayed together, at least.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It wasn't. It was—but Gran Fury didn't actually become Gran Fury until—it was still an open committee within ACT UP when it first formed. And anyone could—and then chose the name to make the first poster, which was *1 in 61*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, it then chose the name, but it was still an open committee in ACT UP. And it literally—there were 30 people, and they would come and go. There was a core, but it was an open committee in ACT UP. And it was structured in the same way everything in ACT UP was.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But, in order for us to work, we decided that you couldn't—we couldn't work because we wouldn't—you wouldn't—you'd make a set of decisions and not know who was going to show up the next week.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, sometimes, whatever was decided on the previous week would get tossed out. And it was just impossible to sort of get through any project to completion. So, we decided to do something that ACT UP had actually done. ACT UP was—you couldn't vote on an action until you had been to—I can't remember if it's one or two meetings. We did the same thing in Gran Fury.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. How did you come up with the name?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was actually—I wasn't present in—I didn't join Gran Fury until they had already designed the *1 in 61* poster.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I—what happened was Steve committed suicide in the middle of February.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Then I went to the war council.

CYNTHIA CARR: Is this '88?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: '88.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Then I was one of the members of ACT UP invited to the war council, which was national meeting—meeting of national lesbian and gay groups—in—outside of DC— in Virginia someplace.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, as soon as I got back, which was the middle of February, that's when I joined—Gran Fury. And the name was already chosen, and the first poster had already been done.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I'm pretty sure it came from Mark Simpson.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. That he came up with the name?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I'm pretty sure.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it was done collectively. But it's the—it was the name of the type of car that off-duty police officers in New York used.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it was—the reason why I was pretty sure it was Mark, because I remember him saying it so many times and laughing about it. Mark was from Texas and had this very particular kind of Southern radicalism. You know, it's like with a smile, like very—he was a very radical person, but adorable.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Like people adored him. Whereas, I'm like dry as toast, and flatfooted, and very didactic.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Mark was like the person everyone loved. And the name was so Mark— that I associated it with him. And he got such a kick out of it—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.



AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and out of saying it.

CYNTHIA CARR: I've always liked that name somehow, but I don't know. It's a very appealing name.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I think Don Moffett may have had something to do with it too.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He was from Texas.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I'm pretty sure it was a communal decision to use a script font, to use a cursive font.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because it was effete, and fairy-ish, and self-deprecating, and funny.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So, at the point when you joined it, how many people were in Gran Fury?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, again, it was like every meeting—

CYNTHIA CARR: Every meeting different?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It would never be more than 15 people at a meeting. But they would frequently be 15 different people.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, at the time, Todd Haynes was in the collective, Robert Vazquez. Todd left to make his first movie, I think is why he left.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I didn't really get to know him that well. Robert Vazquez was in it, Loring McAlpin, Mark Simpson, Michael Nesline, Tom Kalin. Amy Heard. Mackie Alston was in it occasionally. But people sort of came and went, because there were—a lot of people were in residency programs, and they would leave for three months, and mean to come back and not come back. Mark Harrington was in it. Richard Deagle.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Don Moffett.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. It's funny, just because I know from—well, say talking to Joy—like the—it—was Gran Fury considered an affinity group?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, it sort of—it really wasn't.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it went from being an open committee to being a closed collective.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that came about towards the end. You know, Loring and I disagree with this. I think we began to talk about it very early on, but we didn't actually decide to do it until late '88. But we had also—were beginning to accept outside projects. And it was impossible to meet deadlines and, you know, be assured of an outcome—with a fluid membership.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, all of these things were a contributing factor—the fact that we got our first commission in the U.S. through "Art Against AIDS on the Road"—which was an AMFAR funded project—which wasn't mounted until the following year, but we started working on it that summer.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We had our first show in Berlin, which didn't happen until that December. But, again, we did a billboard for the U-Bahn stations—that needed to be produced and finished. We did the *Riot* painting. And, in the—

CYNTHIA CARR: This catalogue here.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —in the catalogue, I squared the areas that were inaccurate. It's written in chronological order. But, at the time during—when we were doing the catalogue, I was in the middle of a 23-year relationship dissolving.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: With somebody who was in—I met in ACT UP—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and was in my affinity group, coincidentally. So, I wasn't a part of that—the catalogue raisonné piece of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But we couldn't have done the civil war billboard and the *Riot* painting before we did the money and the "Act Now" stuff. And I was pretty sure about that, because there were no conversations in those early days that I was a part of.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so, I contacted Frank Wagner, who was the curator. And he said, "No. We didn't—you didn't tell me about—maybe you were working on it earlier, but you didn't say anything to me about it until that summer."

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, we were in the midst of doing all of these projects that needed—that had definite deadlines. And the group was sort of winnowing down to a core group. And we were beginning to have conversations during that summer—about how we were going to continue to

work together. And then it was compounded by the complexities of the way we interfaced with ACT UP. So, we weren't taking commissions at that time, and had no funding for projects.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, we decided, since we were doing these T-shirts—the *Read My Lips* T-shirt became one of the biggest sellers for ACT UP. We would ask ACT UP if—we asked the fundraising committee whether they would be willing to give us a stipend based on sales.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And fundraising didn't have a problem with it. But, when it was brought to the floor, it was a huge controversy.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Then we did the *Kissing Doesn't Kill, Greed and Indifference Do* bus side for AMFAR.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And during that period, AMFAR requested we remove the phrase "corporate greed" from the rejoinder. It said, "Kissing Doesn't Kill, Greed and Indifference Do. Corporate greed, public, and"—"Kissing doesn't kill." Yes. It's public indifference. "Kissing doesn't kill. Corporate greed, government inaction, and public indifference make AIDS a political crisis." And we'd completed it, and—completed it, and we were asked by the funders to—into a meeting, and were told that we couldn't use the phrase "corporate greed." And I wanted to withdraw from the project. But Gran Fury decided that—because I felt like it didn't make any sense at all to just say, "Kissing doesn't kill. Greed and indifference do," with no rejoinder.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it also wouldn't have the word AIDS on it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But there were enough members in the collective who felt like there were no images of same sex couples kissing in America at that point. Remember the first same sex kiss on TV didn't happen until 1991.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: This is 1988 when we were doing this.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And felt like it would be important to do it anyway. So—but then we decided to—as a concession, to ask the funding agency to—the funders to pay for a poster version of it, which we would donate to ACT UP—to use as a fundraiser to work against pharmaceutical greed. That was the deal we struck.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But, when we—when we showed the poster on the floor of ACT UP, people hated it, and wanted to design it, and wanted to know, like, "Why was it blue on the bottom? Like, shouldn't we change the color of the blue?" And it was like—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —there were so many effects at work that were making it difficult for us to work—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —that we decided we needed to—during this period we had a series of painful conversations, in my recollection, that we eventually closed the collective, and we would start accepting—we would become independent from ACT UP—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —because it just was too difficult.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. I can see that. It was sort of like, well—the same thing happened with TAG, right? The—didn't TAG become—sort of separate itself?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: In a very different way.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I do think there's a correlation in the following way.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We talked a little bit about the dominant narrative suiting power structures.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the uses of history, as opposed to actual history.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the primary uses of the story of AIDS, which is frequently capped at viral suppression, the protease inhibitors—which is one telling of the story, an embattled community stood up for itself, changed the system. The system was moved.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Protease inhibitors came about. And now people don't die of AIDS anywhere near as often.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, that's a very—that's one story arc that really suits the idea of participation in democracy, as opposed to resistance. It's not a—it's not a story of resistance anymore. It's a story of the system changing to adapt to its citizenry.

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so, I feel like there are two institutional uses for the story of HIV/AIDS. One has to do with science, the pharmaceutical-industrial complex, with research and with AIDS policy. And the other has to do with cultural production. Those are the two essential uses for this story. So, we represent, "The art world responded. And look how brilliant it was." And—you know, it's like we represent some other version of the—"viral suppression as the political objective to this activism."

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, in a certain respect, I think that TAG and Gran Fury are direct parallels.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But they're only parallels looking back at it from—

[END OF finkel16\_1of3\_sd\_track07]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: — power structures.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think looking from a grassroots organizing perspective, they were decidedly different. Because TAG, in fact, incorporated before they split off.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, really? [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Peter—I—Peter Staley has admitted that he trademarked the name.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, basically—you know, I wouldn't say that he hired—that it was a brain drain. But it was like he wanted to go in a different direction.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And he set the stage for it, and that is what happened—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —which isn't what happened with Gran Fury. So, that's why I'm quibbling with the idea of our leaving as being the same thing as TAG. But there is something very interesting about this, which has to do with the way images function in an image culture.

Nobody cared when Gran Fury became a closed collective and started working independently. Nobody knew it. Nobody really cared. When TAG split off, it destabilized ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I think there's something very interesting about that, for obvious reasons.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It has to do with the kinds of things that one privileges when you're thinking about social movements. And so, to what extent—what pieces of ACT UP were a part of a social movement, and what pieces of it were actually part of an—institutional power structures?

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay. I'm sure that's a whole—maybe that story is in your book that you're working. [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It is in my book. [Laughs.]

CYNTHIA CARR: That's good. I'm thinking maybe this is a place to stop for now.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Okay.

CYNTHIA CARR: And I will press stop.

[END OF finkel16\_1of3\_sd\_track08]

[Blank audio.]

[END OF finkel16\_1of3\_sd\_track09]

CYNTHIA CARR: Let's do—let's do a test of this, if you can say something. Testing. Testing.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Sure. Yeah. So, can you—are you—how are my levels? [Laughs.]

CYNTHIA CARR: [They laugh.] I think we're okay. Now, I'm going to stop it.

[END OF finkel16\_2of3\_sd\_track01]

CYNTHIA CARR: This is Cynthia Carr interviewing Avram Finkelstein at his home and studio in Brooklyn, New York on May 3, 2016, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And this is card number two. Okay. Now, last time, we talked quite a bit about the posters that you made with the Silence = Death Collective. And I thought it would be good if you could read the texts from *Silence = Death*, and then from the *AIDSGATE* one.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Sure. So, the *Silence = Death* text—in large letters it says, "Silence = Death." And then the—in quite a small font it says, "Why is Reagan silent about AIDS? What is really going on at the Centers for Disease Control, the Federal Drug Administration, and the Vatican? Gays and lesbians are not expendable. . . Use your power. . . Vote. . . Boycott. . . Defend yourself. . . Turn anger, fear, grief into action."

And I should say that the "gays and lesbians are not expendable," are the second line. And the first line is the setup for it. And the inaccuracy on "Federal Drug Administration" was we didn't have the internet in those days. And I gave them as acronyms to the person who was typesetting it. And he said, "Well, we should really spell those out." And I said, "Yeah. Go ahead and do that."

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And he didn't research it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. [Laughs]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, there are two errors. One is the—it says, "Center for Disease Control," as opposed to "Centers." It's plural.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the "Federal Drug Administration" is supposed to be—should be the Food and Drug Administration.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Okay. And then the—there was a text on the one that said *AIDSGATE*.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. So, *AIDSGATE* has—in small letters it has a heading. Again, it's—the font of the expository text is considerably smaller. I don't know the exact point size.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, first, it says, "This political scandal must be investigated." And then, underneath that is a series of lines. And it says, "54 percent of people with AIDS in New York City are Black or Hispanic...AIDS is the number one killer of women between the ages of 24 and 29 in New York City...By 1991, more people will have died of AIDS than in the entire Vietnam War. What is Reagan's real policy on AIDS? Genocide of all non-whites, non-males, non-heterosexuals? Silence = Death."

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay. Very good. We also spoke last time about the window installation done at the New Museum. That was in the fall of 1987, after Bill Olander asked ACT UP to do something there. And you were not—you were not involved in working on that.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I didn't—I organized the—I was the contact person. So, I organized the committee that then did the window installation.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I went to the first meeting. I called for the meeting on the floor of ACT UP, and I explained the project. And I said, "Anyone interested, meet me in the back corner of the room." And then, organized that first meeting and went to the first meeting. And then I dropped out.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because I had no interest in a museum project. It was just not my politically—I can explain why that is. But I felt like, politically, there was—I didn't agree with cultural production as the kind of work that I wanted to be doing. So, I didn't participate, until Mark Simpson, who was in the—he was one of the first people in the back of the room. And he organized the window and invited me back in to ask if they could use *Silence = Death* and make a neon sign of it. So, we were, you know, temporarily drawn back in during that moment.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Right. But no one from your collective worked on it?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No. I was the only one from the Silence = Death Collective that worked on the New Museum window. And that was the capacity in which I worked on it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. I wondered if we—I mean, just for purposes of this, I wondered if it would be good to maybe say what came of that, or what it looked like—that it was images of politicians, and then quotes from them.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. It was—I remember when I saw the—when I saw the installation I was somewhat astonished. And I think we talked about this a little bit. Within the Silence = Death Collective, we had some reticence about the Holocaust analogy—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and had given a tremendous amount of thought to whether we wanted to use it, and what it would mean to use it, and how we could use it. And I was very surprised that ACT UP didn't seem to have those conflicts.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: ACT UP was not a largely Jewish organization. In fact, there were very few Jews in ACT UP, relatively speaking. So, I think that might be part of it. But it was also a different moment. And people felt differently about it. But I was very surprised to see that they had—it sounds ridiculous to say it, because we had proposed this analogy with *Silence = Death*. But I was surprised to see that the Nuremberg Trials were the—a very large photograph of the Nuremberg Trials was the background of the installation.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, right. Yeah. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it was—and over the window—the New Museum at the time was on Lower Broadway. And it had a semi-circular window above the main window. And in that window was the neon sign of the *Silence = Death* poster. And then, in the background, was a very large photo mural of the Nuremberg Trials that were lit in a slightly warm light. It read like it was sepia, but I don't believe it was a sepia tone photograph. And then there were a series of stanchions—individual—in the foreground of the window. There were individual sections of window, each with a different political or religious leader, and something very pernicious that they had said, cast into concrete. It was meant to be like it was carved in stone.

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, it was the indelibility of their own quotes was what—and the name of the installation was, *Let the Record Show*. So, it was one of the primary strategies of ACT UP—and definitely influenced Gran Fury—to let people's words speak for themselves, which is what *Let the Record Show* was about.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was about reading—and the Nuremberg Trial was in tone that we were reading it into the historical record. And, in fact, after the window came down, that following year at the Gay Pride March, ACT UP chose *Let the Record Show* as the theme of their marching presence.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.



AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I think it's important to understand that it—during the moment of the making of the window, but also that, within that first year or so, Gran Fury was not a separate collective or—it came to be thought of as an affinity group and then later as a collective.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But, at that point in time that—those boundaries were very vague. And we were participating in a larger set of conversations. And ACT UP was definitely part of it. And, in fact, many fact sheets from ACT UP used the LED text that we assembled for the window. That was— one other component of the window was it had LED with a running text giving international and national facts about HIV/AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And many of those were taken from ACT UP fact sheets, and ACT UP deployed many of those things that were in the New Museum window as well. So, it was—it was very much a cross pollination.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Now, sometime after that I think you were—you worked on this thing called the *Wall Street Money Project*?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I didn't work on *Wall Street Money*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: *Wall Street Money* and *1 in 61* were the two projects that preceded my coming back to—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —my joining Gran Fury —as it was—had reconstituted itself as a collective.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: During that first month, I think I told you, the Silence = Death collective disbanded, and my boyfriend at the time committed suicide. And then I went to a war council, which was organized by national lesbian and gay organizations in DC. And, when I got back, I joined Gran Fury. And, during those first couple of weeks, the *1 in 61* poster and the *Wall Street Money* were created.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I didn't—I didn't participate in either of those projects.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. So, the first thing that you would have worked on—was that *Read My Lips*?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. And, now, that was—what was the genesis of that idea? What was the—you had the sailors in that—it was just—it was a poster, right—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CYNTHIA CARR: —with two men—the two sailors kissing.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. The—that work—that poster came out of a series of posters for 10 days of actions, nationally coordinated AIDS activist actions, by a group called ACT NOW—which ACT UP was a member of, and, in fact, it was responsible partially for forming. And to advertise the posters in New York, we made a different poster for every day of demonstration. Now, in fact, we only made AIDS and Immigration—the *Read My Lips* was the AIDS and Homophobia Day. There was an AIDS and Women Day.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There was a people living with AIDS—at the time we called it People With AIDS Issues Day. And there was a Prison Issue Day —that Gran Fury made posters for those five.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But not all of them. There was an international demonstration that somebody else made a poster for. But those were the ones that we were involved in. So, *Read My Lips* was for the AIDS and homophobia day. And ACT UP decided to do a kiss-in.

CYNTHIA CARR: A kiss-in? Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: A kiss-in. Yeah. At the time—it seems startling to realize now, but images of same-sex couples kissing was—were very, very rare in America. And, in fact, it wasn't—we did this poster in spring of 1988, it would've been.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it wasn't until 1991 that there was—the first kiss on television happened. On *L.A. Law*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, it was a—it was a dangerous thing to do. And there were visibility campaigns that some activists and affinity groups within ACT UP used to do at this Irish bar in the East Village named McSorley's which was particularly homophobic. If you went in there as an out gay person you were—you could be in some danger.

CYNTHIA CARR: They also didn't allow women to enter until—I can't—it was during my period living here in New York, I think. No, maybe in the '70s. But they would never allow women in the bar.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. It was very old school.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And very homophobic. So, we did—ACT UP did quite a few kiss-ins at McSorley's.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. [Laughs]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, in fact, the—my affinity group, which was named The Costas—

CYNTHIA CARR: Costos?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Costas, C-O-S-T-A-S, after Costa Pappas who died—and was a member of DIVA TV, and died very early on.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, out of my affinity group [circle—AF] came Queer Nation, amongst other things. So, I was very—my group was very involved in visibility campaigns, and organized the first Queer Nation March, which I don't know if you were there for. But we marched all the way from the West Village through the East Village, and then back through the West Village at night. And during—we're talking about 8th Street over to Avenue A, and then down on Lower Broadway to 4th Street, and then over to Waverly Place. We're not talking about the wilds of New York.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: In that short march somebody pulled a gun on Michael Signorile, somebody pulled a machete on marchers—

CYNTHIA CARR: Boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And people were throwing bottles of milk out the windows at us.

CYNTHIA CARR: Jeez.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We're talking about 1988, '89.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I think the image of same-sex couples kissing were extremely charged.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And they probably still are.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But at that moment, exceedingly charged.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And Tom Kalin, who was in the—in Gran Fury, and was in the Whitney Program at the time, had been doing a lot of videos around same-sex kisses, and was very interested in it as an image. And, at the exact same moment that we were constructing this AIDS and Homophobia Day, Tom came in and he said—he reminded us that George Bush Sr. had just begun using the phrase, "Read my lips," in his stump speeches for his presidential run.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, right. Yeah. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He was—he was accused of being—of—what was the word they—it wasn't a wimp factor. Just he was accused of being too gentlemanly. And he was in the process of trying to redefine himself as having some spine. So, he came up with this phrase that tested very well, and he got great response. "Read my lips. No new taxes."

CYNTHIA CARR: I remember. Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it became a part of his stump speech.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, Tom came in and he was super excited about this development, and said, "What if we combined an image of the same-sex couple kissing with that phrase, and reread "Read my lips"?" And that's exactly how the—it literally happened within three or four volleys over—in one meeting.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then we all felt very enthusiastically about it. We thought it was a brilliant idea. And then we sort of went away in between meetings to look for images. We were all going to bring in images. And Mark Harrington, who was—went on to form TAG, Treatment Action Group—was in Gran Fury at that point in time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And Mark came in with this image from a 1950s softcore porn magazine of two sailors kissing.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And he was—he was kind of like—what's the phrase? In the catbird seat?

[They laugh.]

He was like super excited about this image. And he held it up. And everyone just like, "Yes. That is it."

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: "That is it."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then we knew that we wanted to have same-sex—images of same-sex—a same-sex female couple kissing as well. So, we went to the Lesbian Herstory Archives and explained what we were looking for. And, of course, the questions of women kissing for the male gaze is very different from what we were looking for. We were looking for a very charged image.

And the only one within those parameters that the Herstory Archives produced at that time, which they felt fit that parameter—that was it definitely a lesbian image. It was not done for straight men's enjoyment, was a Victorian image that, when we submitted it to the women's caucus, it was—it—we didn't love it. But we were like, "Well, let's see what the women's caucus thinks." They were not enthusiastic about it at all.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. [Laughs.] I can imagine.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, we all went back to the Herstory Archives, and we said, "Do you have something a little more contemporary, or a little more sexual, or a little"—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and they produced a second image, which is what we ended up using as the women's counterpart for that poster announcing the kiss-in. And it was an image of two flappers, two women in the '20s. And, in fact, they're not kissing.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: One of them is looking—is—I can't remember if she's kneeled on the floor, but she—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right here. There.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Oh, you have it right there. She—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. She's—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —she is kneeled on the floor, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: She's kneeling. There—one's kneeling on the floor in front of the other one who's sitting on a chair.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And she's looking longingly at her. And she has her hand cupped in her hand. It's—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —incredibly chaste compared to the men's image.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. They're looking into each other's eyes. But it's not necessarily sexual. But—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's not necessarily sexual, but we were running out of time.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because the demonstration had to happen. And we didn't like it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But we felt like we didn't have any choice. But we decided, subsequently, when we did our first commission project in America, which was—a few months after this we began to work on that—which was the *Kissing Doesn't Kill* image.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We decided to use this image that we shot for that as the *Read My Lips* image, which then became the—it was two members of ACT UP, actually. It was—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. It was Julie Tolentino—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And Lola Flash, the photographer.

CYNTHIA CARR: —and Lola Flash. Oh, she's a photographer.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay. So, yeah. Then they—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, that became the postcard, the T-shirt—like every subsequent image. The first two women's images were only for the street announcement of this demonstration.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then every subsequent image involved that picture. Which, in fact, they're not exactly lip locking in the same way that the men are. They're about to kiss, but it's so charged, and fun, and sexual, and modern that—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —it just really captured what we felt was missing.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. It's good.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Subsequently, the men's image—it was a porn image, so, they were exposed —the two men. So, we cropped it there.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, in fact, we did have a brief conversation about whether we should remove the—they're sailors.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Whether we should move the sailor insignia from their uniforms. Because that was—that layered another set of questions on it—on top of it. And this was way before the "Don't ask, don't tell" debacle. But the question was, "Did we really want to appear to be advocating the military?"

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: In this particular case. And I think it was Mark Simpson, and I both entered into a conversation during that meeting about whether we should do it, and could we retouch it out? And most people felt as though it wasn't necessary. We talked about maybe moving the band up to obfuscate it. But no one else felt really strongly about it. So, we did not do that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Did you ever get any reaction to it being sailors? Was there any—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, I—about a year later, after we had done the T-shirt versions and the—so, the fundraising committee of ACT UP asked if they could make T-shirts out of these two images. And they ended up being bestsellers.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They out sold *Silence = Death*, in fact.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so, sometimes after that—shortly after that—and that would have been—I think we produced them for that summer of '88. So, it may have been as early as fall of '88.

But it could have easily been spring of '89. I got a phone call from the person who managed the ACT UP workspace. We had a meeting space that ACT UP rented. And I think—I think it was Robert Rygor was the—managed the workspace at that time called me. But I could be wrong about whether it was—whether he was the manager at that time. He called me and he said, "There's somebody who wants to speak to someone from Gran Fury about the *Read My Lips* image."

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I said—he gave me the number and I called him. It was an LA number. And I—so, I called this number. And this man picks up. And he sounded like an older person. I don't know why I thought that, but I'm sure I pieced that together subsequently as the conversation wore on. And I said, "You know, I'm a member of the collective that produced that. And what can I do for you?" And he said, "Well, I'm one of the two men in that image."

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I knew that we—it was part of our practice to appropriate images. But this is the sort of thing one fears if you're an artist appropriating other images.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I should say it's also way before the many rulings about intellectual property that have affected other artists. But I was nervous. I became very tense. And I said, "So, what can I do for you?"

[They laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And he said, "Well, I just—I wanted to tell you the story of that image." And he proceeds to tell me they in fact were both sailors. They were stationed on the same ship. They were on shore leave in San Diego together.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: When a photographer—and they went to a gay bar. And there was a photographer from the east coast and his assistant, who were in LA shooting, who had come down to San Diego to go to the bars. And they asked him if they could photograph them. And I immediately said—I had recently met Horst, the photographer, who was an older gay man at that point, and very much a flirt, and had a reputation.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I said, "Was it Horst?" And he said, "Yes." But he sounded a little vague. So, I think I—he might not—I might have planted that suggestion.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But there's a chance that it was Horst's— Horst and his assistant. And then he goes on to tell me, "So, we went—you know, they asked if they could photograph us. And we said, "Sure." So, we went back to the studio with them." And then this—and this is exactly what he says—"And then we got a little—he asked us if we would kiss. And we started to kiss. And then we got a little carried away." That's a quote from him—

[They laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —which is the explanation of how they came to expose themselves.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Now, I didn't see any other images from this shoot to know whether it—if this was the only shot in the shoot. But he seemed coyly apologetic about it, or slightly embarrassed.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And he said—and then he said—and the whole time I'm thinking—I assumed it was staged, that they weren't really sailors. It was like an erotic fantasy, and, you know, I was so sort of overwhelmed by what he was telling me—about what this actually—what I was actually looking at.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then he said, "And then—I didn't think anyone would ever see that photograph."

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so—I got the impression he may not have known that it was published in this magazine.

CYNTHIA CARR: What magazine was it in?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I don't know the name of it. But we—it's actually—we found out has been published on the Kinsey website.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And they may have the original source on the website.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, I see. Yeah. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it was not at that time. I think it was on the Kinsey website as a result of our use of it, potentially.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, then he went on to say, "And I thought no one would ever see it. But I was at Gay Pride in LA. and I saw someone with this image on a T-shirt. And I asked him where he got it. And I went over to the ACT UP booth and saw they were selling this."

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I was like—the whole time I'm like kind of holding my breath thinking, "Okay. Here's the cease and desist."

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.



AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's about to come.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The hammer's about to come.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So, I'm sort of gingerly, like listening, and riveted by the story. And I said—he—I said, "So, can I send you one? Would you like a T-shirt?" And he said, "Oh, no no no. I would never wear it. No. It's—it was—it would be too embarrassing." And I said, "So, what can I do for you?" And he said, "Well, I just wanted you to know that, you know, it gives me a tremendous amount of pride to think that this image that I was a part of could be used to help the community at this time of need."

CYNTHIA CARR: Boy, that's great.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. It was—it was the last thing I expected to hear.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it was just so completely wonderful. And I think—I never told anyone that story until Gran Fury interviewed ourselves for the 20 Washington—80 Washington Square East show. And I told the rest of the collective that story. And since then, people have picked up on it. But I think what's super interesting to me is that that is what it was like at this moment. People were declaring themselves during this emergency—

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —what was a queer national emergency.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And this was an example of that, from a total stranger whose life had been basically plucked out of some alternate trajectory and brought into this conversation by us.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Wow. Was it taken in the '50s originally?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think it was taken in the late '40s or early '50s. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, late '40s. Okay. And the two men—they were lovers at that point?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They were boyfriends.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Stationed on the same—

CYNTHIA CARR: On the same ship.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. That's how they met.

CYNTHIA CARR: [They laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They met in the Navy on the—on the ship.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Wow. Boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Isn't that a great story?

CYNTHIA CARR: That's—it is great. Yeah. [Laughs.] It is great. So, all of these things—it's this one that was on the T-shirt, right? The Julie and Lola one?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Julie and Lola were on the tee shirt, and the postcard, and they were the same—it was—I think it's the exact same image we used in this one—in *Kissing Doesn't Kill*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's just the black and white version of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. I was thinking that, before we go into other specific projects, maybe say something about the process of Gran Fury?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

CYNTHIA CARR: Like you had weekly meetings, along with—there'd be an ACT UP meeting.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes.

CYNTHIA CARR: And then, on another night, there'd be a Gran Fury meeting?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes. Yeah. There were committee—the structure in ACT UP was there were committee meetings of—regular committee meetings that met every week—treatment and data, logistics, outreach, fundraising. And then there were project-by-project committees that were basically to make a demonstration happen, or do research into a very specific issue that related to some other work that the organization was doing. And this—the committee meeting that I started—that went on to become Gran Fury, that did the installation at the New Museum, and then went on to become Gran Fury, was sort of an informal meeting. It wasn't—we named ourselves Gran Fury when we decided to stay together and continue to work. But it was still an open committee within ACT UP. Which meant anyone could come to a meeting.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Affirmative.] Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I have some early ACT UP contact sheets. They're in NYU at the moment.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I—none of the ones I have list Gran Fury as a committee. But, when we were working on the window, it was listed as a committee.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But, also, the period of transition between—I think by then we were sort of—we did have formal announcements of committees and we had mimeographed, Xeroxed lists of all of the contact people and all of the committees. I think that was—that began in late 1987. So, it would have been true then.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I don't happen to have any—

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Proof that we were listed as an official committee within ACT UP at any point. I'm just surmising that, based on how it went.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we met every week. For the most part, in the early days—well, I was not there for the making of those two first works, for the first month and a half, or month. So I don't know where we met at that point in time, but many of the meetings were at the Whitney Program, on Lower Broadway, because David Meieran from Testing the Limits was in the Whitney Program, Tom Kalin was in the Whitney Program. Amy Heard, who at the time was in Gran Fury, was also there. There were quite a few people, in ACT UP, who were there. So we frequently met in the common rooms of the Whitney Program, on Lower Broadway.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And pretty much anyone could come, and the meetings were sprawling and kind of messy, and there were sometimes as many as 20 people in them. And we would be discussing a project, and then come to a certain sense of resolution amongst the people attending that meeting. And then the next week a whole other group of people might come in and want to re-have that conversation.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it became very difficult for us to work collectively, and as we—once we began to transition away from using ACT UP as a funding source for our projects, and seeking outside funding, we realized that we should probably think about closing the collective. So it was over that summer—there was a series of informal, sometimes uncomfortable, varied, unresolved conversations about whether—who we were going to be as a collective. And eventually by the end, some disagreement, Loring McAlpin thinks it wasn't until later that year or early next year that we closed, but I'm pretty sure we closed somewhere around mid to late summer, because we had a series of commissions at that point. And I think actually what happened, although there are members of Gran Fury who might recall differently, was we—the group had sort of winnowed down, there were always core members.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the group had sort of winnowed down, and during some of those more winnowed-down meetings, these conversations about closing the collective happened, and it was never formally announced. We just basically stopped telling other people where and when the meeting was going to be.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And sort of self-selected.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. In here, it says the end of '89 is when it closed. Does that sound right?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That can't be right.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. So it happened, do you think, closer to the end of '88?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think it happened—it began to happen in summer of '88, and it may have happened at the end of '88.

CYNTHIA CARR: Maybe while you were working on *Read My Lips*. That was also going on.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was shortly after that. But the thing about ACT UP in general, and about Gran Fury in particular, if you look at this body of work, much of it happened during that first six months to a year.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And in fact, the reason why the Act Now demonstration posters were so significant is, I think, is that out of them came *Men Use Condoms Or Beat It*, which basically was recycled to a sticker funded by GMHC, and eventually became one of the two billboards at the Venice Biennale. *All People with AIDS Are Innocent* came out of that week, that was the People with AIDS Day. We did a banner for the Henry Street Settlement, it was in the *AIDS Democracy Show*, it was like that—

CYNTHIA CARR: That was all in '88?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: This was all within April and May of 1988.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It all happened in a two or three-week period.

CYNTHIA CARR: Boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it became the sort of—and *Kissing Doesn't Kill* was when we were offered that commission, we wanted to further consider the question of the same-sex kiss, and in fact expand it to talk about saliva transmissibility, which was wildly controversial at that point. And that's what that project was about. But we didn't—That project didn't happen until the following year, but it was based on *Read My Lips*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So those ten days of actions, which are actually only a—we didn't do ten posters—are the genesis for a lot of what happened subsequently.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But no, we—I'm certain it was not 1989 that we closed.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Certain of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: So '88, it closed?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. I also—in my journal, which again I don't have in front of me, or I would show you, it's also at NYU. We began a series of conversations right after the Act Now demonstrations of what kind of work, what our next project would be. We hadn't been offered any commissions yet. We had been offered to do the restaged *Let the Record Show* in Berlin—which happened in December of that year. So we had begun to work on it, but we were also thinking, like, what would we want to do that isn't surrounding a series of ACT UP demonstrations? What are the general topics?

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And out of those conversations, and there was a period of about three to four weeks where we had a series of conversations and straw polls about a possible billboard project, or a poster project. We zeroed in on what became *When a Government Turns Its Back On Its People, Is It Civil War?* Which we mounted in December in Berlin. And the idea, the genesis of the idea for *Welcome to America*, which was done for the Whitney show.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Oh, for the Whitney show, there was the—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The Image World show?

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay. And they commissioned it, or they—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, it was commissioned. What happened was, the Whitney wanted to put—well, to go back to our general practices thing. There were many conversations within the collective as to how involved we wanted to be in the art world, and the ways in which we would do that. I was on the extreme left of that. I didn't want any involvement whatsoever. And there were members in the collective who were—not everyone in the collective was an artist, but there were members in the collective who were.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And almost everyone in the collective had studied art, or had some relationship to the art world. But there were members who were interested in an art career. So there was a broad spectrum of how we would approach this question of institutional critique, and I was on the radical left of that set of conversations. But one thing that we agreed on as a collective was that we would only mount works in the public sphere.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We came to later on accept works in gallery settings. And the Venice Biennale was the first one that there was a major kerfuffle about, and I was at the center of it. I did not want us to do that project.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But what we came to later do, or the way we accommodated the fact that some of us were opposed to it, and some of us wanted to explore those possibilities, we decided when we were offered a gallery installation to insist on a public project as a spin-off or an ancillary project. So when the Whitney was doing their Image World show, they wanted to use *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, in the show. So the bargain that we struck over that was, "Only if you put it in the windows, based on the idea that it's less rarified if people could actually see it without going into the museum. Of course, how [less-AF] rarified Upper Madison Avenue ever was is debatable. But it

was less rarified than having to go into the museum to see that. So theoretically, if you were on a bus traveling north through that neighborhood, you might see this project, or be exposed to this set of questions. But so we said, "Yes, if you put it in the window, you can display that. But we also want a billboard. And that was our first billboard commission in the States.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. So the billboard shows a baby, who is African-American, or possibly African. And it says, "Welcome to America, the only industrialized country besides South Africa without national healthcare."

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Correct.

CYNTHIA CARR: And the billboard was placed on Houston Street?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was placed on Houston Street, right above—right next to the Pop Shop billboard.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, the Keith Haring—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The Keith Haring Pop Shop. And above that kiosk, which up until this last year, the fruit stand, which has been there forever. It kills me that it's gone.

CYNTHIA CARR: I know, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that's where it was, and I think that the—I'm not really sure—I know the Gannett, I think it was Gannett at the time, was where the people who ran outdoor advertising in New York. I don't believe they do anymore, or if they do, they have competition. So I think that Gannett reserved a certain amount of public spaces, and I think since this was an arts community, they had reserved this as one of the spaces that was available to the—that the Whitney took advantage of. That's my understanding of how it ended up being there.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay. Okay. So in your meeting, you decided on this image, and commissioned a photographer, or maybe one of you took the picture, or—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, it's from a stock house, actually.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, really?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. And in fact, the image that you're looking at is reconstructed. When we came to be mounting the retrospective at 80 Washington Square East, we realized that we didn't have original artwork for some of the works that were in that show.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we had to—or we didn't have access to the photograph, or we didn't have the mechanical, the original mechanical, so some of it had to be reconstructed. A fair amount of it, in fact. The *When A Government Turns Its Back On Its People, Is It Civil War?* billboard, which was done for Germany—we had the photograph, the original mechanical, from which the German billboard company made the photograph, but they did it in German, and they used a dot screen. The kind, it's a Ben-Day Dot pattern. It's how newspapers, I believe they may still be done, although now it's CMYK separation, so—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN:—because they use color photography. But at the time, it was a very specific kind of dot screen that you would apply to a photograph when you were exposing it, that would break the image down into black and white only. It would take an image that wasn't high-contrast, and reinterpret it. Through these—through tiny dots.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So when we were reproducing it for 80 Washington Square East, the artwork we had did not have the dot screen applied. But since I frequently do environmental display, and was very familiar with the process, I took it on myself to—We knew we wanted it to have the feel of the original.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I took it on myself to extrapolate what size, in order for it to have appeared on a 7x10, how big the dots would have to be in order for it to appear on a whole wall in the gallery. So even that aspect of it has been recreated. So what you're looking at is not the original baby.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's my understanding. We could not find that image again. So that's rebuilt.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, I see. It looked like—I mean, there's a picture of how it looked on Houston Street, that looks very similar to this, but—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It looks pretty close, and when I saw that image, I wondered. The constructing of the show went on for a full year, and during that period I had the breakup of a 23-year relationship. So there were parts of the meetings that went into the making of this catalogue and the show that I wasn't part of.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I think it is possible that I was only part of the conversations in which we agreed we couldn't find the original image, and then subsequently found it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because it does look very close to me.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, here it is. So that came from, like, the sort of catalogues of stock images available to art directors and whatever.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right, that's correct, yeah. Yeah, a stock photo house is where a lot of images that—for institutions that can't afford to do their own photography, because this kind of photography can cost thousands of dollars for one day to hire the entire team of people it would take to make that simple image.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You can purchase these. Photographers make arrangements with stock photo houses for general use of their images at a much, much lower cost.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, right. How long was it up on the billboard there?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It wasn't up very long. I think it would have been probably a month or so, surrounding the opening of the show.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Around this time—no, maybe later. Well, also in '88, and I assume maybe after the group, the collective, closed, you also did *Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head*?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, that was when we—that was the AIDS and Women Day.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We did that with Mark Simpson and Don Moffett. I worked with Tom Kalin and Mark Harrington—and Don Moffett I think was in and out of that on the *Read My Lips* poster. And Mark Simpson and Don Moffett worked with the women's committee on the AIDS and Women Day. At the time, it didn't have—we didn't have a scheduled event for that day.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Which had ended up being the Shea Stadium action.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Was the AIDS and Women's Day. So this poster was just meant to be a general one about sexism. And it was during that same period, it would have been done in the same month and a half.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. And where was it going to be? Was it going to be put on the street, or—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was going to be—all of these were demonstration posters, and they had—if we had a date when the poster was produced, it gave the time and the place. If not, it had the issues. This one didn't have a date on the poster, but they were all meant to be wheatpasted advertisements for this series of actions. And I was—my affinity group, out of which came Queer Nation, and also the Women's Caucus, the Dyke Dinners, the CDC campaign—all of it came out of my affinity group. So they were—about a third of my group were women. So I went with my affinity group when we were wheatpasting these, as opposed to going out with the team of Gran Fury. And so I was there with Heidi Dorrow, and we're wheatpasting them. And they're literally—when we went back later that day to look at them, they were all gone.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So somebody was—But there wasn't even a trace of a tear on it. Somebody was following us around, pulling them down while they were still wet.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, my God. Well, I think we should say for the record, that there's a large erect penis on this poster.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There's a large erect penis.

CYNTHIA CARR: Under the words, "Sexism Rears Its Unprotected Head." So—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then underneath that, it says—



CYNTHIA CARR: "Men use condoms."

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: "Men use condoms, or beat it. AIDS kills women."

CYNTHIA CARR: "AIDS kills women," yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we felt like this—the dick didn't get the airing it deserved.

CYNTHIA CARR: [They laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But we realized that it was—we thought it was very funny.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the Women's Caucus thought it was howlingly funny.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They, you know, they loved how aggressive it was.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And within the collective, you know, I've explained to you that some of us worked on these individual posters, but we worked together. We would then come back to the larger general meeting after having worked on them, to show what we had done and get feedback. So I was aware of this poster even though I didn't participate in it, and heard about it from my affinity group as well. The women who were in my affinity group, and members of the Women's Caucus. And so there was a tremendous amount of hilarity around who posed for the erect penis.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And all this speculation about which ACT UP member's—it was pulled from a porno image.

CYNTHIA CARR: I figured it was pulled from a porn magazine.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was, but Don Moffett was very coy about it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And there was a lot of joking surrounding. So it was sort of an in-joke, this poster. You know, it—and the reason I'm saying this is, I feel like it might give insights into how ACT UP functioned as a community. It wasn't just a political community, it was a social community, it was a familial community. There were affinity groups. It was a very deep set of connections.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I feel like looking at this poster, you would just think of it in the continuum of political posters, and be detached from what it meant to feel as though people wanted you dead, and you had finally discovered a community of people who would have your back, if it came to that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So there was a certain amount of levity and hilarity. It was also part of this communal experience that was also deadly serious at the same time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Right, which—what was distributed at Shea Stadium? That was another action. Was that Gran Fury?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, no, that was—the Women's Caucus organized it, and I did the banners for it, painted the banners with Chris Lione from the Silence = Death collective. We helped the committee that was making the banners for Shea Stadium make those banners. And it was an action that was—many of the people in my affinity group were involved in.

And it was a series of three separate messages, one of which I thought was "Men use condoms, or beat it," but I'm not 100 percent sure of it. There is footage of it in *United In Anger*, but I can't recall. And what the women's committee did was, they booked blocks of seats at a game in Shea Stadium, at a particular game. 60 at a time, and if you booked more than 60 seats, you could also get on the board. They would announce your group. So the messages that were written, I know for a fact were something like, "Don't balk at safe sex." There were ball game references.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: "Don't balk at safe sex." "No glove, no love." I thought it was "Men use condoms, or beat it," but I'm not sure. And there was one other that I don't recall. And basically, they ended up having those messages on the board as well.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was amazing. I didn't go, so that's part of the reason I only have a vague recollection.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well, that's sort of great.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So the penis poster was an advertisement for that action.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, I see. And then were things distributed to people coming into the stadium?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, there were fact sheets. I can't remember if maybe *Men Use Condoms, Or Beat It*—I don't think we had done that as a sticker yet.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But maybe that was on the fact sheet. Maybe that's why I'm conflating them. So yeah, they gave handouts, they gave out condoms.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And they were—it was very well received, I understand. I didn't go to the action.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well, it could be. I used to go to games at Shea with a couple of gay male friends, so I know that there are many gay fans, actually.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There are.

CYNTHIA CARR: But not all of them. [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Not all of them. Maxine Wolfe takes delight in recounting when this action was proposed on the floor, how horrified a lot of gay men who didn't feel, wouldn't feel safe in that environment, were at the idea.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it wasn't until some gay men stood up and said, "Actually, I always go to the game, and I don't feel that way about it all," that it suddenly—I think that may have convinced more men to go. Perhaps.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, okay. Also, in that early time, '88, there was the poster called *Art Is Not Enough*. Now that's the one that was commissioned by the Kitchen?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, that's the one we were talking about. Patrick Moore was the—I think what's interesting about this poster, and I spent a chapter in the book I'm working on writing about it, so I've given a fair amount of thought to it. I think that the—in hindsight the main institutional uses for the AIDS historiography have to do with research science, or cultural production. Those are the most useful social ways that we—social explanations we give for the importance of this moment. So a lot of—and the bubble I live in is the art world, and academia, and people who think about these issues. And in the circles I travel in, it's very well understood what the significance of this work was or wasn't. And there's been a tremendous amount of thought over the decades in writing about it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I think it's very easy in hindsight to, once we have established the fact that these images are trotted out to represent dissent in America, and the effective use of art to affect public policy, which is the story of HIV/AIDS if you're looking at it from an institutional perspective—the triumph of a beleaguered community over this terrible, terrible thing, that led to drugs that have greatly reduced the amount of deaths from HIV/AIDS. So that's a very attractive storyline, and very much a part of the way in which institutional structures talk about AIDS. Even ones that are homophobic, or don't want to participate in it, agree on that piece of the story. So it's easy in hindsight to look back at this work as the shining example of what the art—what art can do for the rest of society.

And that is a part of the story, but that's not all there was to the story. And art is not enough as an interesting example of the tensions within the art world, surrounding how one would talk about this stuff. So when Patrick Moore was the—I think he was the director of marketing or—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, he was doing P.R.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He was doing P.R. at the Kitchen. And they told him that he could begin—I don't know if it was his idea or theirs, but I believe it was his idea. He asked if he could ask artists to do the announcement posters and the flyers. They would basically—this poster would be folded up into eight pieces, and have a, you know, an adhesive circle on it to keep it closed, and a stamp would be put on it. And on the other side was the poster.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. The schedule.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. So on one side was the schedule and the mailer, the address.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You won't see it in that image of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Although this side has upcoming events on the bottom.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, actually you're right, it would have, because that was the poster that they then wheatpasted around Manhattan.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it would have had to have that, without the detail. The other side had a paragraph about the artist, and what the piece was about.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, oh, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: As opposed to just an announcement.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, right, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So Patrick had just—I think Patrick had asked Maria Maggenti, who went on to make *The Absolutely True Adventures of Two Girls in Love*, and now is a screenwriter. I think he had asked or—I don't know how he and Maria became introduced, but Maria curated some videos for the Kitchen, and during that period they became close. So Maria introduced him to Gran Fury. And he asked us if we would—Maria was in my affinity group.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, she was in your affinity group, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, yeah. She was one of the many people in my group. There were like 23 people in my affinity group

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: She—So he asked us if we would do a poster. And here again, it was one of—it was very fairly early on, it was one of those first conversations we had about how we were going to interface with the arts community. But it seemed like a public space in that the flip side, the poster side, was going to be wheatpasted it around New York.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we did this work, and we were like, "Well, okay, so we're speaking to the arts community, so it's a public space, but it's a rarified audience, because most people still don't know what the Kitchen was or is, even though it's one of the first performance and alternative art and performance and video and film spaces in New York, and it has been since the '70s. A lot of people don't know—aren't familiar with it. So we thought this would be a rarified audience that would even look at a Kitchen poster, even though it's in a public space. So we should speak to the arts community. And so we came up with this idea, which we thought was very mild, actually. Do you have the—

CYNTHIA CARR: 43, 43. Page 43.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: To—The poster says, in small font, "With 42,000 dead." By small I should say it's like, probably 25 point font, but it's not as big as the rest of the poster. "With 42,000 dead," and

then underneath it in slight larger font, "Art is not enough." And then very large, the thing you would see from across the street, "Take collective direct action to end the AIDS crisis." So what we were trying to say was that we weren't necessarily trying to say that art wasn't enough, but we wanted people to up their level of engagement in the same way that ACT UP was asking everyone in the world to be engaged in this political moment. We were also asking artists, and we were asking in this context and in this way, and just saying "Art's okay, we're not saying you shouldn't be making —" We thought we were saying, and the conversations that went into it to me felt practically tepid, they were so considered.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But in looking back on it, I realize it was actually a fairly hostile thing to say. And we also knew that some of the people who were going to be—who were advertised as performing had done a tremendous amount of performance and work around HIV/AIDS. So, like Karen Finley, and I think Steven Petronio was Michael Clarke's boyfriend, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, I think so at some point, yeah. Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we felt like we weren't really, like, they weren't going to think we were talking about them.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But quite a few people who were involved in this announcement on the other side of this, you know, this two-month set of programs, were not happy at all.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, really?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. And went straight to the Kitchen.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the Kitchen pulled Patrick in, this is according to Patrick, and I spoke to him recently about it. And he—

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Immediately quit.

CYNTHIA CARR: He quit?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He quit right then and there.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And he said that he went to *the Village Voice*, and—I can't find the article that was written about it. I seem to remember vaguely something about it. But it wasn't until looking back at it and thinking about it, and I realized that there were—that within the art world, people have a very set—a very definite set of ideas about who they are in the world, and their levels of participation in social engagement and political questions.

It's a very defined set of parameters that pretty much no one speaks about. But there are artists who are considered very flat-footed and didactic, and there are artists who are, you know, who are

not considered that way. And if you look at the history of art as we are presented it, it does not privilege social engagement. That's more on the fringe, I would say.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I was really surprised to find out that people were furious about this.

CYNTHIA CARR: And he quit because the artists were angry?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He quit because he had been told by—he had been admonished by the—it didn't mean that he—The poster had already been done, so it wasn't in reference to the poster. It was in reference to what he was going to be allowed to do, over which he quit.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, I see, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There's some—I don't know whether that's 100 percent accurate, as to whether he quit, or how it went down. I only know what Patrick told me about it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah. Okay. Boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So this simple poster, which I felt was very soft—had a very, very soft approach to it, created some tension within progressive—a very progressive set of artists, who were performing at the Kitchen. And it wasn't exactly that they disagreed with it. They just objected to being conscripted, is my understanding.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Boy. This was in '88.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I think if you look at that, and if you start to look at the historiography in the aggregate, and you realize that as we discussed—Did we talk about *Kissing Doesn't Kill* being censored?

CYNTHIA CARR: Not yet. That's the next—that's next.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think I alluded to its censorship.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But if you consider having been asked to censor that, our first public commission in the States, having been asked to censor it by AMFAR, the American Foundation for AIDS Research.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because we were mentioning pharmaceutical greed in the project. And there was a maelstrom in the Kitchen about—saying that art is that enough. It paints a counter-narrative that I think is really important to understand.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. We'll get to the *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, but first, around the same time you did this program insert—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right.

CYNTHIA CARR: At the Bessie Awards.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: For the Bessie's, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: It says, "During this program, at least six people with AIDS will die. And we cordially invite you to turn action into grief, arm yourself with facts, demand access to healthcare and experimental drugs, explicit AIDS education, and legal protection for everyone." Now that was at the Bessie Awards, which are given out every year to people in the dance and performance art community.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Correct. Correct.

CYNTHIA CARR: And this was a Gran Fury project?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes. It's actually in the back of the—

CYNTHIA CARR: The program?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The program.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There are normally ads, the pages are split into half, and those ads are sold.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we were given a page by the Bessie committee. And I'm fairly sure that the reason we were given it was, the Bessie's nominated ACT UP as Best for an Award of Best Marching Contingent, at the Pride March with the concentration camp float.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We also got an award from the Heritage of Pride, but I believe that's why we were given this half-page ad.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was in relation to the Bessie's, acknowledging the performative power of the concentration camp float from ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So that's how we came to this. And you know, there again, if you read it and you look through what we're asking, or suggesting, it's actually—it's very didactic, it's very flat-footed. And you could interpret it as there being some finger wagging behind it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But we were trying to push everyone to up their game. And one of the other strategic things that you asked earlier, about practice, and we're about to enter into some other specific conversations. One of our strategies was to steal from other artists, as a way of pushing them to have to consider what they would do in response to it. So when we were given pages in *Artforum*, we wanted to do a page about Jesse Helms. And we could have used any image of Jesse Helms, but we took an Annie Leibowitz photograph, intentionally.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So that it was sort of a shot across the bow, like in the same way that Bill Olander wanted to send a shot across the bow of the art world by inviting ACT UP to do a window installation.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We used that strategy with some frequency.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We stole Barbara Kruger's typeface, for *Read My Lips*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah, yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Tom Kalin was a student of hers, and we knew what font she used, and we took her—we intentionally took it, to signal to her that—you could never say her work wasn't politically engaged, but she had yet to take on AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And Annie was not out yet, Annie Leibowitz was not out, and we're like, it was during this moment of Queer Nation, it was, you know, people—and Michelangelo Signorile's conversations about outing famous people, and Queer Nation was taking on Calvin Klein. Like, what does it mean to have a prominent, one of the most prominent, richest gay men in America, a designer who wasn't out, not doing anything for AIDS? So there was this throw down that was happening, culturally.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And Gran Fury's part of it was—had all of these art world moments.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, right. Yeah, that's the—the *Artforum* project was four pages?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, we were—Ingrid Sischy was the editor-in-chief at the time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And she offered us some pages, and we decided we could treat it—it wasn't exactly a public space, but we could treat it as a public space, a certain kind of public space. Again, my—When it came to these projects, I almost always said I didn't think we should do it. I was dead-set against the Biennale. I was not interested in *Artforum*. I had no interest in participating in the New Museum.

You know, so this was—I was fairly doctrinaire about what—how—the kinds of art world conversations I would want to be involved in. And I think that's possibly why I was puzzled by some of the responses within the art world. Because we were being embraced the art world, but there was also a fair amount of mishegas and tension surrounding us and our work, and how we were seen. And there was something, you know, somewhat bratty, I think, by the level of engagement that Gran Fury had, or the type of engagement. We were engaging in art world conversations. The *When a Government Turns Its Back On Its People, Is It Civil War?* billboard was shot in front of



the Saatchi & Saatchi building. And we chose that building because they have a huge corporate art collection.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Our work is riddled with art world in-jokes and jibes, and snotty rejoinders.

CYNTHIA CARR: There is a way, though, in which, like, the thing in the Bessie program. And even *the Artforum* thing. It does seem a bit like preaching to the converted, you know. Do you think?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Theoretically. Theoretically, but—

CYNTHIA CARR: But it turns out not to be, is that correct?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, as I was explaining from the *Art Is Not Enough*, it is not necessarily true that everyone was on the same team.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There were people who—people had many different responses to the AIDS crisis. And in the same way that ACT UP, within Democratic Party circles in New York, for instance. ACT UP was not well-loved.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: In fact, was somewhat loathed.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes, yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I told you when I went to visit Lou Moletta, and ask him if he would do something about this poster, his whole set line of reasoning was, "What organization are you with, and what's the demonstration, or what are you asking people to do?" It was, you know, we were faced all over the world, even within our own bubbles of the queer community in New York, or the Democratic circles in New York, or the art world, which are theoretically preaching to the converted—there was a tremendous amount—there was a tremendously broad set of responses in those early moments of ACT UP, to what should be done about it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Well, Ed Koch was technically a Democrat. [Laughs.] Right, wasn't he a Democrat? He was one of the biggest targets, and I loathed him, yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I think it's—I think when you look at this work, you have to think of it in those terms. Yes, it's an insider's game.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I had something—Gran Fury had something in the Agitprop show, and Dread Scott was having a conversation with Tania Bruguera during the opening of it, and Tania said something that really kind of gave me pause. And it flies in the face of my dogma about art institutions. She said, "It's our responsibility as artists to do this work, too. It isn't just about how the public thinks about these things. It's also about these institutional, intra-institutional questions." And it was the first—she was the first person to say it in such a way that made me rethink my dogma about it. I'm still not sure I agree with her.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I still have the same relationship to the questions of the art world, which basically is based on Western European aesthetics, which are installed to reify hegemonies. You know, there isn't anything that can be described as art or the description of art, or access to art, or anything that's intra-institutional that isn't tainted by questions of class, gender, and race. So I tend to be very doctrinaire about it. And truthfully, there was some tension within Gran Fury—I was the source of some tension within Gran Fury because of how doctrinaire I was.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I think some of it is generational, but some of it is how I was raised. I was raised—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —by Communists.

[They laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It really is how I see the world. It's not a—it's not a, you know, it's not a pose. It really is how I think, how I see the world.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yes. That's interesting. Well, I was going to talk about *Kissing Doesn't Kill*. I mean, this is some of the same imagery from *Read My Lips*, and there you ran into this—I had no idea that this sort of thing was happening, where these posters were—This happened in Chicago.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: In Chicago, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And, well, first of all, we should say what the posters are. You sort of did it over in that you re-photographed. You didn't use the sailors anymore. You took two men that—contemporary people were photographed.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes.

CYNTHIA CARR: You already the two women from ACT UP.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, no, we didn't—the converse is true. The two women from ACT UP that we photographed, we photographed some months afterwards for *Kissing Doesn't Kill*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay, okay

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And they subsequently became part of the *Read My Lips* project in subsequent projects of postcards and T-shirts. But we didn't make that photograph during *Read My Lips*. We made it for *Kissing Doesn't Kill*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we were approached through Livet Reichard, which Annie Philbin was working there, and Patrick Moore was also doing some work for Livet Reichard, which was basically the gallery that was doing the art stuff for AMFAR.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And there's some discrepancy as to how we were offered this first commission in the States. Deb Levine was working at Creative Time at the time, and she thinks some of it came from Creative Time. We were nominated, but I knew that some of us knew Annie Philbin as well. So I assumed it came through Annie, but I don't know if that's 100 percent accurate, but we were nonetheless asked to participate in this national project called "Art Against AIDS On The Road," that AMFAR was assembling.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And in it were, I think, Kara Walker did something. No, maybe it wasn't Kara Walker. I know Nayland Blake did something. I think General Idea did something. There were quite a few artists. And they were being offered bus sides advertising, and bus shelter advertising. So when we were offered this, we thought, at the time, for people who were not around then, there was a chain of apparel, there was an apparel company that had a chain of stores called The United Colors of Benetton.

It was one of a series of businesses owned by an Italian apparel manufacturer, Benetton. And this was their subline—one of their lines. And these stores were so proliferate, they were like Starbucks are now. Literally, there could be Benetton's within a few blocks of each other. I don't know what business model that comes out of, but that's the way it was. They were probably even more proliferate than Starbucks.

And one of the things that they did, was because the whole point of this line was based on color, it was a very colorful knitwear line, they decided that the advertising strategy should be socially engaged in regards to the question of color. So they—all of their advertising involved people of mixed-race and multiple-race and multiple ethnicities in their advertising. And some of it, they were interfacing with one another in intra-personal ways, like kissing. So they would have—I can't really think of any of the ads, but they—as a consequence, this tableau format of a horizontal bus side ad was very useful, because it almost read like a film strip, and you could have multiple faces, representing people of multiple ethnicities and races, across the side of a bus.

So they practically owned bus advertising in New York. Almost every bus, or with great frequency many buses, had Benetton ads on them, and there were Benetton stores everywhere. And they advertised in every major magazine. So we thought it was a great opportunity to sort of—here was a, in the same way that we were upping the ante with Annie Leibowitz and Barbara Kruger, we were upping the ante with this socially conscious apparel company, who had staked a claim in the question of a utopian world, in which race and gender and religion no longer mattered.

And we thought, well, the AIDS crisis is telling us something else. So what if we used Benetton to reimagine what the world might look like if we ran that company? And we came up with *Kissing Doesn't Kill*, and we purposefully made it look as close to a Benetton ad as we could.

CYNTHIA CARR: And it was always intended as a bus poster?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Correct.

CYNTHIA CARR: Going along the side there.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Correct.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we made it—we wanted it to look as much like a Benetton ad as it possibly could, and I think it was successful. So we came up with this tagline for the poster. So the poster has three couples kissing. One is mixed-gender, and the other two are same-sex couples.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it's a man and a woman kissing, two men kissing and two women kissing. And it's a broad range of ethnicities and races. There are only—out of those, the casting, there are—only two of those six people are white.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it says, "Kissing Doesn't Kill, Greed and Indifference Do," on top. And then underneath is a rejoinder that says, "Corporate Greed, Government Inaction, and Public Indifference make AIDS a Political Crisis." So we finished the project, we were in the final stages of it, when we get called into Livet Reichard for a meeting. At which we're told we can't use the phrase "corporate greed." Because—And I was so startled by that, I actually, I said, "Well, surely—I understand you must have corporate sponsors for this project. But you're AMFAR. Surely they must understand that there is a critique being leveled about the pharmaceutical-industrial complex by ACT UP? Of which we are a part."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And they were, like, "Yes, but you can't use 'corporate greed.' We're seeking corporate money." And I said, "But they must know that we're not talking about pharmaceutical companies here. We're talking about corporate greed in general." "You cannot say this."

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I was so startled by it, I was, like, in my head, I remember lunging across the table. I doubt I did that—

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN:—but I can be somewhat excitable, and blunt. And it was tense.

CYNTHIA CARR: How many people from Gran Fury were there?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was myself and Mark Simpson, were the only two people from Gran Fury. And I think it's because Annie knew Mark. We came from the same circle of friends before ACT UP. So I think that's why we went, as opposed to someone else. And there were probably one, two, three, four, possibly five people from AMFAR and Livet Reichard, and Annie Philbin was one of them.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I wanted to walk away from the project. I literally, you know, I was seeing spots before my eyes, I was so furious about it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then Mark sort of diplomatically suggested, based on my recollection, that we would have to discuss it as a collective. And then we did, and there were people in the

collective who felt like, as I said earlier, images of same-sex couples kissing across America—and this project was slated for San Francisco, Chicago, Washington, DC, and New York—there were many places in the country where they had never seen images of same-sex couples kissing in public spaces, and that it would be a really useful thing, from that perspective. But I felt like the project made no sense without the rejoinder, because basically it's a series of couples kissing, and it says, "Kissing Doesn't Kill, Greed and Indifference Do." And it takes away—it not only talks about the ways in which greed and indifference make AIDS a political crisis, it removes the question of the political crisis, and it will remove the word AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So except for the fact that it had a panel on the side saying, "Art Against AIDS On the Road," there would be no connection within the piece to identify that it was even about AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I wanted to walk. It's good that we didn't, I think.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Although, because the other thing that happens within public spaces is that public spaces are dialogues, and you don't always get to pre-determine, or even with the best intentions of fully anticipating the contingencies of how people might respond to something, you don't really get to choose what responses people will have. And that's the magic of public spaces, but it's also the terror of it.

So over the years, many people have come to tell me that they saw this when they were a kid, you know, a queer kid growing up in, you know, Chicago, and it just changed their world in a way. So of course it had the value that the collective imagined it would have.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But the project was defaced in two spaces. I happened to be in San Francisco for the—when the project was first—it was the first city in which it was released. I was there visiting a friend who had just lost his boyfriend, to help him collect things and close out, you know, their apartment together. He was also in my affinity group. And—I'm sorry, it wasn't that trip. It was a trip when I went to visit one of my oldest friends from New York who had moved to San Francisco to enter the Compound Q trials, and decided to stay. That was when it happened.

And I happened to be on a street corner with a camera that I had bought for that trip, it was my first—I had been to LA on business, but I'd never really taken time in California. So with my boyfriend at the time, we were going to drive from San Francisco down to LA. So I had a camera with me, it was the first camera I ever owned. And I just happened to be on a street corner when this cable car goes by with this poster on it. And the—everyone but the non-lesbian couples had been painted out with white spray paint.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And a friend of mine gave me Jill Posener's book *Spray It Loud*, which was about advertising, and interventions into advertising spaces in the U.K. by women activists. So I immediately assumed, and still assume to this day, that lesbians had removed everyone but the

lesbian couple. So they had marked this—they had reinterpreted this space. Which thrilled me no end. When, and I took that picture of it, which is in the catalog, and again it was the first time that anyone in Gran Fury had seen it. It was when we were assembling the show.

When the project was mounted in Chicago, however, there was a tremendous outcry over the same-sex couples kissing, and it was considered such an outrage that there was a local alderman—is his name in?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes, let's see. "Robert Shaw complained the poster had nothing to do with a cure for AIDS, and it was promoting a particular lifestyle."

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's correct.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And there was, in fact, an op-ed piece in the—I think it was the *Chicago Tribune* that agreed with him, that there's nothing about this work that indicates that it's about AIDS. And in fact it didn't, because AMFAR had removed that, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yes. So they—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They didn't understand it.

CYNTHIA CARR: So that bottom line all disappeared?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It wasn't there until it was remounted in New York, and Creative Time paid for it. And they allowed us to put it in.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That iteration.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes, I remember that Creative Time was part of this project at some point. But only in New York, right?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Only in New York, and it was the third city. So in the first two cities, it went out without this rejoinder.

CYNTHIA CARR: They said the poster was being used for recruitment.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, it was that moment when people felt as though you could make someone gay, by showing them an image that was, you know, of gay people.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it was—it became such a firestorm that they in fact introduced a bill into the Illinois state legislature to make it illegal to depict same-sex couples kissing in public transportation in the state of Illinois. It was the Gran Fury Law. It didn't pass.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, it didn't pass?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, it did not pass. But the posters were defaced, and the critique of it was correct, in fact.

CYNTHIA CARR: That it didn't show the—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It wasn't clear that it was about AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, yeah. Now, I actually brought this [book] in, because 1990 was such a hot year for people in the general public to attack artists. It was—I think it was really the height of the culture war. The culture war started—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was the beginning of the—

CYNTHIA CARR: In '89, the culture war started with the attacks on Serrano and Mapplethorpe.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right.

CYNTHIA CARR: And then in '90, we get the—they go after David Wojnarowicz, and Annie Sprinkle—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And Holly Hughes, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: And then, yes, then the NEA 4 thing begins.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Karen Finley.

CYNTHIA CARR: With Karen Finley, and yeah. So that's the context, also.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Correct.

CYNTHIA CARR: That's a very—that was a very hot year for the culture war.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was the beginning of this—it was the ascendancy of the right wing in America, was, you know, the beginning of the coalitions between the religious right and people—policy-makers inside the Beltway. And a lot of it had to do with Ronald Reagan, and in fact Mary Berry, who at the time was one of the civil rights commissioners under Meese—

CYNTHIA CARR: Edwin Meese?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Attorney General Ed Meese, who was Reagan's appointee to head the—was it the Justice Department?

CYNTHIA CARR: Wasn't he Attorney General or something like that? Ed Meese?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think he was Attorney General. Yeah, so that would be the Justice Department.

CYNTHIA CARR: The Justice Department, yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He was an evangelical Christian. He was the person who covered—there was a statue in the Department of Justice, I don't know if it was, you know, the statue of the woman holding the scales, I don't. But she was bare-breasted, whatever the statue was, and he covered the statue.

CYNTHIA CARR: Meese did that?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. I thought just John Ashcroft.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Oh, I'm sorry, you're right, it was Ashcroft. It wasn't Meese.

CYNTHIA CARR: But Ed Meese had the whole, what, the Porn Commission that he set up.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So he set up a civil rights commission to investigate whether there could be such a thing as a lawsuit claiming discrimination against people with AIDS. And Mary Berry was on the commission. And in the commission, they quoted Leviticus. So she got us a copy. She got a copy to Bill Bahlman from the Lavender Hill Mob, who then gave it to me. So it was a very—it was the beginning of this ascendancy of the radical right, which then articulated itself through the culture wars, amongst other things.

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CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Yeah. And they felt empowered to attack art and artists.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: So, yeah. But, you know, so—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I think here's an example of like the, you know, so you have one set of ideas about this work when you look back at it and think this is really powerful work that articulated the AIDS crisis in a very specific way. But without knowing that there were—there was a tremendous amount of room to move between how people within arts funding institutions, within AIDS funding institutions within the art world thought about these questions. I think it's really important to understand that there was no universality of the agreement about what should be done and how it should be done.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And even within Gran Fury there wasn't.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There was a tremendous amount of tension surrounding the question of how to—I see it as the line between invest—the strategic idea of assent or critique. I—you know; I think that some people refer to the dissolution of the AIDS activist moment as coming out, as surrounding the questions of gender. But I think it really is more about questions of strategic thinking.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because there were men and women on either side within ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah. In my experiences the groups like this always—they kind of always implode, you know, these political action groups, because I've been part of some—it always happens it seems to me. I think ACT UP lasted longer than most actually.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It lasted a good, long time.



CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I think in a way, Cynthia that construction in itself is inaccurate because ACT UP has always met every Monday and still does. It's just the question is how we think about it has—You know, we have been told it imploded but— I don't necessarily know that I would describe it that way.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I sort of—I sort of think of social engagement as a project rather than a product.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You know, I don't—I don't think that having it—I think it's, in terms of institutional uses for the story of dissent in America, the product of it is the most important thing. But if you sit anywhere outside of the walls of institutional power structures, engagement is the—is the key. And engagement shifts in the same way that the right wing shifts. It's the same set of strategies—

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —applied—or different strategies applied to the same battle.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I feel like the—it's a mistake to not think of resistance in the same way.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm, [Affirmative.] yeah. Well my experiences in the women's movement and lesbian feminist movement which have, you know, [laughs] where they—these things tended to happen.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I think in the antiwar movement they certainly did.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And they've—they fell down around the same debates of assent and resistance. Like the, you know, the Weather Underground as opposed to the March on Washington. I mean the Student Mobilization Committee.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There were, you know, there's always this tension of what it means to resist oppression, and I think it still goes on in Black Lives Matter. It goes on with globalization struggles. I mean it—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, that's true.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It goes on with feminist questions.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They are essentially questions of how to engage or resist and when you fold

tent on one thing and move on to another. And I sort of—the reason I resist the idea of a discreet—having a discreet end product is that it doesn't exactly work that way. It's a project in flux. And I consider myself a lifer.

[They laugh.]

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's kind of how I think about it anyway.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well, just to follow up on what happened in Chicago where—when this poster was—this is along the el line, the CTA, the Chicago Transit Authority, the el—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And there's a poster here on the platform which was defaced. Was that ever replaced or —

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No.

CYNTHIA CARR: It was just—it was just a onetime thing. It was defaced and it was—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right.

CYNTHIA CARR: —gone.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that was the end of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I did—I wasn't in Chicago at that point in time. I mean—I mean I only saw one bus side in San Francisco so I don't—I can't give you an on the ground assessment of the extent of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. And then it was in New York, and Creative Time got involved there with—that was with funding it? Or—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They funded it in New York and I'm not sure how that came to be. If they partnered—

CYNTHIA CARR: I wonder if by—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —with AMFAR—

CYNTHIA CARR: Maybe by that point Annie Philbin was running—no, she wasn't ever in Creative Time. Well, it was Cee Scott Brown at that point.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was Cee Brown.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: It was Cee Brown, and he would have—he would have gotten in back of this.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well he did.

CYNTHIA CARR: So, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We basically—when he came to us and we negotiated separately with Cee.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You know, he came to meetings and we talked about it and we said we were unhappy about this and he said, "You don't have to censor it."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: "We're not asking you to."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I don't know how that went down between AMFAR and Creative Time, how it came to be that AMFAR had—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And whether that was always the intention.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That Creative Time would be the funding institution in New York. I don't know.

CYNTHIA CARR: But they can say we didn't do it. AMFAR can say we didn't do this. So [laughs]—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Possibly. And they may have been like up to here by the time Chicago was over.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I don't know.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I don't—I don't know the answer to that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Maybe we should say that Creative Time is a non-profit arts group that—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Correct.

CYNTHIA CARR: —puts things out in the public spaces.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's public spaces, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They fund public projects.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. So this was one of them. And I—because I remember seeing it on buses—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: —in New York.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: This poster. Yeah. Boy, well I think it had impact. Okay, we did—now the Venice Biennale maybe we should say more about because you were a bit opposed. They—it was—I don't know anything how the Venice Biennale works. And I've never been to Venice. And I—but there is a group that's—that does it in Venice and they invited you.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. It was actually Linda Shearer—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —at MoMA—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, I see.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —who had been at MoMA, who nominated us. She was on the committee.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it was the Aperto Section which is, I guess, emerging artists. It's a—it's an off venue.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it's basically structured like an art fair. You know, its temporary booths. It's not a gallery setting. It looks more like a, you know, with temporary walls.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the first question we asked was whether there could be a public project and they said, "No." And that's when I said I don't think we should do it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And everyone insisted that we should.

CYNTHIA CARR: You were the only one who didn't want to.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I was the only one who did not—it was the—of all other projects we did, I relented on every one of them. I did relent on this one too.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think the only—the other projects being *Kissing Doesn't Kill* I did not want to do. And I was—had limited involvement with *Let the Record Show*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: This was the one where I really was adamantly opposed to it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I—history has proved me to be wrong about that. Because, in fact, the controversy surrounding it was such that it was in every major newspaper throughout the entire country.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, uh-huh. [Affirmative.].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Which, one couldn't expect a better—a more public airing of the questions.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it was a very funny thing and I've been trying to—I've been trying to reconstruct the source of this—of my understanding of it. We were told that somebody—there's conflicting reports. I was told that somebody at the United States Information Agency had tipped off the director of the Biennale, Carandente, that we had a—potentially blasphemous image in our display.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.]. Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Other sources say that they—that actually the United States Information Agency helped us navigate it. But I don't know how Carandente would have heard about what the subject was of the piece.

CYNTHIA CARR: Because this started before you even got there or as you arrived or—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, it was held in customs—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —based on this premise, but nobody had seen it but us. So it begs the question of who's—who tipped them off, how they heard it, and what they heard?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it was held in customs and basically we weren't allowed to put it up until the magistrates came and looked at it —

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and decided that it was not blasphemous.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Well you included the *Sexism Rears its Unprotected Head. AIDS Kills Women*, that project was in there.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was a pair of billboards. We decided that since we couldn't—they couldn't give us an exterior space we would make billboards inside.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we did two one that talked about the Pope and the Catholic Church and its role in reproductive rights and in safe sex.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the other that would be specifically about women's issues. So the—do we need to read this in or—

CYNTHIA CARR: Well it's a long piece—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's long. It basically talks about the Catholic Church's relationships to the way—the ways in which people think about their bodies, and in reproductive rights, and then sexual autonomy. And the effect that it was having on the AIDS crisis and the—we were pointing a finger saying they were responsible for an increased death toll as a result of that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well this is the same year as the Stop the Church action in New York, right?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: With the same kind of premise—that people are being told not to use condoms.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, that's right.

CYNTHIA CARR: And so, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I mean there was a tremendous amount of activism within ACT UP surrounding condom use in New York. We were giving out condoms. We pushed it into all of these public health spaces but also schools in New York. And we had a tremendous resistance from the archdiocese. And it was also around the time of Operation Rescue.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we were doing ACT UP. One of the many pieces of the ACT UP story that doesn't get repeated is that ACT UP was involved in clinic defense.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And men—many men, all the men in my affinity group, were involved in clinic defense with the women in ACT UP who were doing it. So you know, I think the idea that there was tension between men's issues and women's issues is—it's an inaccurate way to refer to the way the organization responded to those questions.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we—the other was the sexism—the exact same text from the poster with a much smaller image of the penis but—this time in color.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh [Laughs.] Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we juxtaposed them against each other so the, you know, the color image of the penis was visually meant as a counterpoint to the color image of the Pope.

CYNTHIA CARR: The Pope—they're facing each other these two billboards?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They were actually this way—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay like—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —like L shaped.

CYNTHIA CARR: —L shaped, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So there—it's a dialogue between these two.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see. Right. So once this thing was on display, then what was the reaction?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well there was—it was fairly anti-climactic afterwards. What happened was that we were told that they would not release our billboards from customs.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So during the actual opening we had nothing on the wall. So we wrote on the walls that we had been censored.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That we were in the process of being censored. And other artists who were exhibiting at the Aperto were boycotting as well—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —as a result of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then the magistrates came and said that there's nothing blasphemous about it. And I think they even tried to pass a law in the Italian Parliament against us having access to it. But the magistrates decided it was not blasphemous.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And—but by that point it had already hit the tabloids.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see. Now did they start writing about it before they'd seen the images?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, it was all over the tabloids before anyone had seen the image.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. That's—it's so familiar. I mean when, you know, the show at Artists' Space, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," it was—no one had seen the show and it was already being denounced.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And so, yeah [laughs], that's a very familiar pattern there [laughs].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. They're— it is a familiar disturbing pattern.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes. Boy, but it did eventually get on display after awhile—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes. It was displayed and—

CYNTHIA CARR: After a week or two or after —

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, I think it was literally the next day or—

CYNTHIA CARR: The next day after the—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —maybe the day after.

CYNTHIA CARR: —after the opening. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. It just wasn't—the magistrates hadn't come by the time the opening happened. So I think it was the following day.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Right. You know, there's this other—I, you know, I think very important piece, *The Government Has Blood On Its Hands*.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Now that's from—also from '88.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, this was the one that I was saying was inaccurately listed in the chronology.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That poster was done—and I also I agree with you that it's very—a very important work. But I also—I think there—it's related to the *Welcome to America* billboard in that—it was conceived of out of the same set of conversations about what we want—what issues Gran Fury wanted to address.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Aside from the issues that ACT UP had decided to address. It was the beginning of Gran Fury beginning to think of itself as not a committee within ACT UP, but an independent group of activists working and wanting to find their own voice. And, as I said, —there was a series of straw polls and half of the—there were three or four ideas on the table.

One—there were actually three ideas that made, according to my journals, into the top three voting positions over a period of weeks. One was—that came in third both times, was a safe sex—a safer



sex billboard. And the other two were—one was about medical apartheid. And the other was about—it was—we were having a conversation about the billboard of a boardroom full of people. And it—the very unresolved text that's in my notebook says, "Our experts want you dead." So it was sort of like a—it was a billboard about a conspiracy—against engaged—a formal engagement in the AIDS crisis, which ended up being when a government turns its back on this, is it civil war?

And, in fact, we—rather than using the boardroom image we had a handshake deal in front of the Saatchi & Saatchi Building—as another way to indicate it. But the top of the three issues, the top vote, the one that hit the top voting on two separate polls over subsequent weeks was the question about medical apartheid. But because the billboard we were—we were given an opportunity to do a billboard in Germany—before we got the offer to do the Whitney.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it was the—that—the end of that year Frank Wagner almost immediately after *Let the Record Show*, approached us about doing something for restaging the window for Germany—for his show, "Full Blown AIDS" in 1988.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we began working on it. And in that set of conversations we said is there a chance for a public project. And he said, "Yes," we could do something in the U-Bahn Stations. And we began to think about what that billboard might be. So even though we preferred the idea of medical apartheid, we realized that we wanted to talk about the lack of healthcare in America. And what sense would it be to do that in Germany which has national healthcare.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we opted for what became, *When a Government Turns Its Back On Its People, Is It Civil War?* But those two came out of a related set of conversations. And, in fact the secondary text to this—the final line in *When a Government Turns Its Back On Its People* is "Is this Medical Apartheid?"

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So that's—that poster was made for Germany, but we did an overrun and Mark Simpson, who did the installation in Germany, came back with them. So we decided to mount them in New York ourselves. The tagline is, "When a Government Turns its Back on its People is it Civil War?" And it has white guys in suits shaking hands in front of the Saatchi & Saatchi Building. And underneath it, it says, "The U.S. Government Considers the 42,524 Dead from AIDS Expendable. Aren't the Right People Dying? Is this Medical Apartheid?" I'm reading from the back of a catalog from Ohio State. The original stats in the billboard were "42,000 dead," which was amended in this second printing.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah, I see there's a—so it was posted in Berlin but it's in English.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was—it was bilingual. Some of them—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —were German and some of them were English.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, some were German. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so Mark Simpson brought back two English ones. And we put up one—it was a freezing cold night and—on West Broadway, I think, between Greene and Mercer or — somewhere in that area of Greene and Wooster somewhere in that block on the south side of the street. There was a parking lot and there was an abandoned building next to it. And we wheatpasted there with ladders, all of Gran Fury and I think Maria Maggenti came and helped us as well and maybe someone else from my affinity group. And it was so cold, that the wheat paste froze before it had adhered to the wall.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And in the morning it was all on the ground.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laugh.] Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But we also—we wheatpasted it on the same block that Maria lived on, on 10th Street right off Avenue A. Which is right around the corner where—from where Mark Simpson from Gran Fury lived.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that stayed up through the Tompkins Square riots.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it did—it was wheatpasted in New York.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Okay. And then—but this poster with the—there's a bloody handprint. And it says, "The Government has Blood on its Hands." That came about at that same period of time.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was all in the same period of time. It was this magic spring summer that was the beginning of Gran Fury.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the—that poster, I think, is also very interesting in the following regard. The original poster that that—the—there were three versions of it; one was aimed at Stephen Joseph, one was aimed at Ed Koch, and they were smaller—I think they were eight and a half by 11 or possibly 11 x 17.

Actually it would say in here. And they were—what happened with Stephen Joseph based on a policy paper that—this is what it was reputedly based on. This is what ACT UP believed it was based on. Based on the—a position paper from a rightwing think tank that claimed that the *Kinsey Reports* couldn't possibly be accurate. And there—it wasn't 10 percent of the population who were gay, it was more like 4 percent. That Stephen Joseph re-estimated the number of AIDS figures in New York. Now it was rumored to have been based on that but it was also Joseph said that it was based on cohort studies in San Francisco.

CYNTHIA CARR: And what was his title? Stephen Joseph?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He was the Commissioner of Health in New York—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —under Ed Koch at that time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we went to war for him—with him. I mean what it meant —by cutting the AIDS numbers was, you were cutting funding to AIDS service organizations.

CYNTHIA CARR: He also said at some point, "Gay men are becoming immune to AIDS."

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He said a lot of things.

CYNTHIA CARR: I mean he was—. [Laughs.]—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: It was, I mean, unbelievable that this guy was in charge of health issues for the city.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. But we were at war —we went to war with him.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And some members of my affinity group were involved in the affinity group that took Stephen Joseph on. And during this—one of the sit-ins at Stephen Joseph's office somebody stole—noticed an itinerary on his desk and stole it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we followed him everywhere. We knew every meeting, every dinner, we knew his home address, we went to his house. Someone called him at home. They sent case squad that was—it was people—cops from a case squad that's normally dispatched to investigate killings of police—to his apartment to investigate it. And it became such a controversy in the New York community and in the New York press that people were taking sides in the gossip columns over whether or not it was appropriate to be chasing Stephen Joseph down in this way.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I was involved in the affinity group that was doing—that was at war with Stephen Joseph and in Gran Fury and so was Mark Harrington. So we decided that we wanted to do some work around Stephen Joseph, around the Stephen Joseph debacle, which later became the national *Bloody Hand* image—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —when we were looking for something for the FDA action.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I think it's—the reason why I bring them up in the same breath is that the —again, the question of critique and participation—this was a transitional moment for ACT UP during the FDA demonstration. It was shortly thereafter that ACT UP was invited into NIAID's—

what were the ACTG system. No, not the ACTG —what did they call them? I can't recall but I can look it up.

CYNTHIA CARR: NIAID?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was NIAID but it was—they had community constituency boards that were—that were assembled as a result of the NIH and FDA actions. So it was all around this same moment that we were then being invited in.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] I see. .

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I think that the difference between the two bloody hands, the smaller ones that went after Koch and Joseph, was they were—that they were very much from an outsider's perspective. And the—by the time we had reached the FDA and NIAID, we were already becoming insiders. So I think it's kind of interesting that this—the national *Bloody Hand* poster is the one that everyone knows and recognizes. But the genesis of this—the resistance that gave ACT UP the power and clout for the national actions to be useful started in New York in this very local skirmish, which also happened literally within a week of the beginning of the campaign against Stephen Joseph.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The Tompkins Square riots. The park riots happened.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it was this very radical resistance thing happening in New York—that once it was—by the time it had become translated to inside the beltway on the national stage and AIDS research institutions, the FDA and the AIDS research at NIAID, it had—you already see this transition of, not necessarily between resistance and participation, but you definitely see the system sort of neutralizing dissent by inviting us in.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Uh-huh. [Affirmative.].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I think this suite of posters is really useful—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —to think of it that way.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. I did, you know, a certain amount of research, of course, when I wrote my book on David, and I recall that Stephen Joseph at some point said that, "There is no crisis. There is no AIDS crisis."

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And [laughs], I go, what [laughs]?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think also—you know if you think about the—*Men Use Condoms or Beat It*—that was a full year before *The New York Times* published their article, "Why Make AIDS Worse Than It Is?" And what was that in response to? It was in response to national epidemiology that was pointing to a burgeoning heterosexual crisis.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So—and we're talking about like 1991. You know— we're talking well into it that you had many people within institutional settings resisting the idea that it was something anyone should be concerned about.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: What's the date on that *New York Times* article? We used it in—we used it in—

CYNTHIA CARR: In your—in your *Artforum* piece.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: In the *Artforum* piece, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes. It doesn't say, but—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, we don't have the date on it. But it was a year after that poster, which was in spring—which was made in the spring of '88 so it must have been '89. So if you consider that in 1989 —*the New York Times* was speaking against the possibility of heterosexual transmission.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's sort of—a reality check. It speaks to some of the things you're talking about.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Yeah. Boy, what was I going to say here? I have to look at what else I've got here. Yeah, in that period of time the AIDS crisis and the culture war all happening at once. I think so many people felt embattled in those years and—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: There was a lot happening.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Yes. Oh, I know, I wanted to ask you about—this is something—I'm not sure if it was your affinity group or Gran Fury but you did a project called, *New York Crimes*.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The *New York Crimes* was Gran Fury.

CYNTHIA CARR: It was Gran Fury.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it actually was a project I brought to the collective. I had gone to the New—to the Museum of Modern Art Library show of Fluxus material with my mother. And had seen in one of their lists, one of the many things listed—Fluxus was, you know, big on lists.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They said, "Make a—make a newspaper and hand it out on the street corners."

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I went to Gran Fury and it was—it was right before the second—

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN:—ACT UP demonstration at Wall Street. And we all agreed that there were many things that *The New York Times* was not reporting.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it was March—it was the date of—published the date of the demonstration in '89. March 20? I can't read it because it's so small. March 26th I think—or 28th. And we went to all the various caucuses in ACT UP, people doing around—work around prison, people doing work around IVU, women and AIDS, mass incarceration. I wrote a piece on the pharmaceutical industrial complex. Tom Kalin wrote a piece about AIDS in the media. And we basically made a two, you know, a front and back cover and then the inside spreads which were the editorial pages. And filled it with data and we felt like these were the stories that were not getting reported. And the entire thing was laid out—typeset, and laid out with wax mechanicals.

We—no one used computers in that day, so it was incredibly arduous—this process.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we had this idea that, at the time you could buy *The New York Times* at vending machines in New York City.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it was on the honor system. You would put a quarter into—and you would take out a paper and close the door. So we realized we could send out people with rolls of quarters in the middle of the night. And we did in—logistic checks to find out when the trucks came to replace yesterday's papers with today's. So we were following the trucks around the city in small groups of people armed with quarters. And we would put a quarter in and take all of the issues out. Take off their front pages and put our front pages around them and put them all [Laughs.] back in the box. So we basically stole *The New York Times* for a couple of rolls of quarters—in the middle of the night the day before the demonstration.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Right. And you didn't just wrap around yours you took off their front page.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We took theirs away.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right [Laughs.].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. But we became aware that CISPES, the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, had done a fake *New York Times* just before we decided to do this—and were taken to court by *the Times*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh really?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I knew someone at CISPES so I asked—I asked them about it. And they told us, amongst other things, that the font that *The New York Times* uses is copyrighted.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was one of the things they came after them about.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But we didn't want to—we wanted to put our—we wanted to seize their voice and put our news in place of it. We didn't want to make it about doing battle with *The New York Times* or being taken to the—to court over it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we did a series of obvious gestures to make sure it was a parody like renaming it *The New York Crimes*. And not using their font.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] But it looks very similar to how they design their front page.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It looks pretty similar. We followed it as closely as we could. When the Yes Men did their amazing, "The Iraq War's Over," thing—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —I had such envy over how completely slick it was. But we did this all literally by hand with strips of type.

CYNTHIA CARR: I'm sure. I was aware—I did used to do that work myself.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You used to do it so I know you—

CYNTHIA CARR: Paste up, you know, and—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Paste up.

CYNTHIA CARR: —yes. That's—it's very time consuming. Yeah, can be. Well, so where in the city did you do this, like in the Village or uptown or—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We did it all over Manhattan.

CYNTHIA CARR: Really?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Only in Manhattan. We did it all over Manhattan.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We literally had to—my affinity group, Gran Fury, and a couple of other affinity groups went out in small teams.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I don't know that we covered every single box but we covered every one we could find within a one-night period, which would have been probably between 2:00 in the morning and dawn.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You know, within a couple of hours.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. So the papers at the newsstands were still the same.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, they were still the same.

CYNTHIA CARR: But you got all the boxes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We got all the boxes [laughs], yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, I think it's—

CYNTHIA CARR: So what—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think it's one of the great things that this story tells. Because when you see it, you know, in a vitrine in an exhibition you don't know anything about the dissemination. And the ingenuity involved—I think is instructive—because literally for under \$30 we seized the voice of authority.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. But who paid to get all those papers printed?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well they were nominal. We went to—at the time there was a printer who everyone used on 14th Street, Corky Lee. I can't—he was in the Meat Packing District. And it was literally a couple of hundred bucks.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I don't know who paid for it actually.

CYNTHIA CARR: Or it came out of ACT UP funds or something or Gran Fury or—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's possible it came out—but it was secret, so we wouldn't have gone to ACT UP for it. But it's possible we had—for a short period of time we had an arrangement with ACT UP where we would get a percentage of proceeds from the sale of Gran Fury T-shirts as operating expenses. And it was nominal enough that it may have come from there. And I think the typesetting was all done as favors because they were graphic designers.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So the entire project wouldn't have been more than a couple of hundred dollars.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Boy. What kind of reaction did you get then? Did *the Times* contact you or—?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, *the Times* didn't contact us. And I think that, you know, this is one of those things that it would be impossible to gauge. It's basically rumors and innuendos. We heard that people saw people on the subways reading *the New York Times* with our pages wrapped around them.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Now whether they knew it or thought anything of it one couldn't know. But we know that people did see them. But I think it's one of the—this is—you know there were—there are many types of political engagements. And some of it is about effect and some of it is impossible



to gauge. But it doesn't make it less useful.

CYNTHIA CARR: It's really—I, you know, I'm just thinking about this. It seems important though—that a lot of what happened in that period of activism was just about getting out the facts.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's correct. That was the point of this piece was to publish a newspaper about issues they weren't covering.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Nothing else.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it's like there are a million things that happened that you don't, you know—you know that The Marys and other affinity groups busted into the 6:00 news just before the Day of Desperation. You know about that but you don't know that the Women's Committee brought in bowls of fortune cookies with fortunes about women and AIDS—into a Republican fund raiser. They just snuck them in and placed them on the tables.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laugh.]

It's like—and there's no way to gauge the effect of it. But it—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —I mean the—you know that ACT UP used *Silence = Death* posters and stickers and buttons. But you—I didn't know until I started working on this book that a gay man and a lesbian who were both in—who had security clearances. One of whom worked in the Department of Defense and the other worked at—what is the Poindexter was the head of? The NSA. The other one worked at the NSA.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And they put stickers on Oliver North's door and inside the NSA.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So up until now, I didn't even know that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Stickers that said—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: "Silence = Death " stickers.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So the ways in which we infiltrated the—and created a sense of ubiquity—and information about what was going on was—had a whole series of aspects to it, some of which you may never have heard.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it was all a contributing factor to what we were trying to do was—which

was to raise consciousness around HIV/AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah, the Times—just because I was very involved in covering the culture war at that same period they did a terrible job of covering that as well

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Terrible job. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: It was—so that working for a weekly, I was actually able to break news, even—they should have beaten me [laughs]. Just because they're a lot more powerful and they're a daily paper. But—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Your reporting, I mean, I followed your reporting—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —it was one of the reasons I was so excited when they paired us because I —

you were one of the few people who covered stories that nobody else was covering.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. But they should—I mean it seems like they should have been covering that stuff and they just didn't. You know, I was always shocked by it, by how bad it was.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And I know the AIDS coverage was terrible, you know? So—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was bad.

[They laugh.]

CYNTHIA CARR: It was really—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —it was really bad. I mean they were just—there was no—you know, just as a reality check for people who are listening to this archive in 2075 after we're all dead— the CDC, the Centers for Disease Control, which is responsible for epidemiological surveillance of the AIDS crisis—did not assemble clinical data about manifestations of immunosuppression in women for the first 12 years of the crisis.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They didn't think it was important.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They didn't think it was distinctive enough. There were a million reasons, many of which come out of the Women's Healthcare Movement, for the reasons why scientific research in America didn't think the manifestations of immunosuppression would be different in women than in men or that it mattered.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it wasn't until the four-year campaign by people in ACT UP that they

finally did include women in the definition—in the definition, of AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Which meant women were dying six times faster than men and not being diagnosed.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They were dying of AIDS but not being diagnosed of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's shocking.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Twelve years.

CYNTHIA CARR: And that happened because the scientists there thought it wasn't important? It wasn't because they couldn't get funded from Congress or whatever?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well— there were many reasons but they fall down on the side of research science has a discreet set of parameters and controlled experiments are how research is done. And if you have multiple types of physiologies within one sampling, it makes it harder to make assumptions. Which is why the definition of AIDS being based on cohort studies of gay men was a lot easier to do than one that involved people without healthcare, people of differing genders, people with different racial and ethnic—backgrounds and experiences. That becomes—they refer to clean data in research science.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Clean data is data that's easier to assemble, that's more linear. Where the controls are such where you can make certain assumptions.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that's—that is the actual—that's probably closest to the actual reason.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But they had a thousand reasons why they—

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —they didn't think it mattered or, you know, it was really, you know, well how do you tell women in America, that Chronic Pelvic Inflammatory Disease could be a symptom of AIDS when women very commonly get it. Well, people very commonly got thrush. You know,— people didn't as commonly get Kaposi Sarcoma or PCP; those were things that you had to be wildly immunosuppressed to get.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it was a grey area. But the fact that it was inconvenient or it might startle people— is not really an epidemiologically [laughs] sound reason to not—

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.] Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —discuss the fact that women were at risk for AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Which is what they basically did for 12 years.

CYNTHIA CARR: Boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's shocking.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes, it is. It is. Let's see. We're up to *Wipe Out*. That was a poster in the subway cars.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes. Yeah, we called it "the Gran Fury eye test."

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because it was impossible—we decided—we had a grant to do this project in the subways and we really felt like that was a space we wanted to be in. And we thought it would be great to sort of trick people into thinking it was an ad for a vacation.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we chose an image of a palm tree, this idyllic image of a palm tree and superimposed text, which was impossible to come up with a font and a color that could be read against this very complicated image of a palm tree and a bright blue sky. Which is why we called it "the eye test."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. I see. And that was actually put up in the subways?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. It was. And I happen to love this piece. There were people who felt like it was overly wordy and didactic.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it's about class and race and gender. "The medical fact of AIDS is made more critical by the hatred of drug addicts, gays, and lesbians, women, people of color, and the poor. These—this produce—these prejudices must be wiped out before the AIDS crisis can be solved. Everyone must have equal access to healthcare, education, and housing. AIDS isn't over for anybody until it's over for everybody."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I feel like it's—you know it is flatfooted, but it's a super great message—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —in the subways of New York. It's a very political message in so much plain language.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. And then there was that poster, *Women Don't Get AIDS. They Just Die From It*.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Which is one of my favorites.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that was—that was done during the campaign to pressure the CDC to change the definition of AIDS. And I was —as I said, members of my affinity group started the national organizing around that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And everyone in my affinity group is involved in it as was I. So—

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. And that—so that was your affinity group not Gran Fury.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, that was Gran Fury that did it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But as a result of that—Gran Fury was very concerned about that question but—as a result of my involvement with the—I brought a lot of the data and backgrounders that helped us construct that project.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see. And that was a bus shelter poster.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was a bus shelters in— It was bus shelters, you know, those duratrans.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: A backlit thing like when you're waiting for a bus—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —under a bus shelter.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And they were in the outer boroughs of New York and in—all over LA. And it was sponsored —I think by the Public Art Fund and LA MOCA.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it was purposefully targeted to communities that might need that information about the CDC and how it worked.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Now we're getting to, let's see, oh you did the—a piece with PONY.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, we did a piece. We were invited back to—

CYNTHIA CARR: Prostitutes of New York.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. Which some people in the collective hated and I kind of loved.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, uh-huh. [Affirmative.].

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We did it—we decided—we tried as much as possible to work in coalition with other people doing work around HIV/AIDS—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: — to share the access we were getting to the art world.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we attempted a collaboration with the Guerilla Girls that didn't get off the ground. And PONY, the Prostitutes of New York, was another. And we basically—the area of lower Manhattan where the New Museum was, was originally a mixed class, working class area. It wasn't what it is now.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And there were a lot of sex shops in the area. So we thought we would talk a little bit about gentrification in the process by making an allusion to lower Manhattan—lower Broadway's previous incarnation. And we staged it as a fake sex store.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And had a huge spinning wheel that, you know, had a sort of a sex—sexual game that talked about safe sex. And Tabboo!!, the East Village artist from the Pyramid Club, painted the other windows. And we did it like a peepshow. And underneath the spinning wheel, that window was entirely covered in pink florescent feathers. So Mark Simpson and I sort of loved the Jack Smith kind of fairy-ness aspect of it. But I think there were other people in the collective who felt like it lacked gravitas.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it's also—our collaborations were sometimes painful. And I don't think it was a difficult collaboration but it wasn't a particularly easy one either.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah. How many women participated from PONY? Was it a big group or—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well I think there were probably about seven to eight people from PONY. And I think maybe two of them were men.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Okay. That's a great thing. Let's see. We're getting towards the end of—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The truth is we didn't do tons of work.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And much of it happened within that very concentrated period between 1988 and '89. And it starts to taper off around '91.

CYNTHIA CARR: This last—this is a kind of last project? *The Four Questions*? Or is that—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: *The Four Questions* is, I think, actually one of Gran—the most important Gran Fury works.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well—maybe you should read *the Four Questions* or I can if, you know—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, since you have the page open—why don't you read that?

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. "Do you resent people with AIDS?" "Do you trust HIV negatives?" "Have you given up hope for a cure?" "When was the last time you cried?" Those are the four questions.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So this poster was done in 1993. And it was during the period when there was a tremendous amount of tension within ACT UP. And there was a sense of general despair and the death toll was rising, there were very few drugs in the pipeline.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And people felt—were burnt out and felt very desperate. And, in fact, Gran Fury had begun to dissolve when—before this poster was made. This was the first poster we made when half of the collective decided—we had a series of conversations about our dissolution. We had had a few projects that no one was happy with. We were considering a safe sex comic book but we couldn't make it work. And there were other community-based organizations doing a much better job of it. So we felt like what business did we have doing that? And we had done that *Je Me Souviens* project, which kind of blew up in our face because we used a secessionist slogan without knowing that it had other implications.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it sort of made us feel somewhat cowed about working outside of our own context —

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and you know; it was—it was a moment of some disorienting failures. There's no way around it. And—but some members of the collective wanted to continue working together and others didn't. So we didn't formally dissolve at that point, but half of the collective just stopped coming.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And this was the first project without them. And Mark Simpson who, as I said, I knew before—he came out of my social circle before—the same social circle that Chris Lione from the Silence = Death Project came out of. So I had this long relationship with him. And Mark was getting sicker. And he didn't want the collective to dissolve. And I didn't think we should dissolve. So we decided to take on this issue. Because we felt like the question, the walk away question, about the viral divide as I—as I refer to it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The tension between people who are living with HIV and people who are not which is part of the tension surrounding TAG spinning off of ACT UP, the Treatment Action Group, which came out of the treatment and data committee in ACT UP. And eventually they seceded from ACT UP. It was all happening around the same time. And Gran Fury was unofficially dissolving. And this poster was an attempt to talk very boldly about that in a way that—in a voice that Gran Fury had never used, which was a personal one.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah. Where were these posters put up?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We wheatpasted them around Manhattan. Truthfully, I thought nobody had seen them until Doug Crimp brought them up when he interviewed us for *Artforum* 10 years later. And I— what I did not realize was that Doug had written *Mourning and Militancy* and was thinking about these issues at the same time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Because I personally, as I explained to you, I detached from the art—the cultural production aspect of what we were doing. I felt like in the midst of this crisis where people's lives were on the line, once you create the idea that something is being done about it and cultural production does that, we were—we were already being, as we were making it, extolled as these, you know, this voice of resistance. And, you know, it creates—it—I felt it creates the—helps create a cushion between people who weren't involved in HIV/AIDS and the rest of the world. And they could basically look at what we were doing and saying, "Oh, thank God something's being done." And "Isn't that smart?" And— "That's probably really a good thing," and then just move on. And I didn't want to participate in that. So I actually avoided the art circles. And, as I've explained to you, I had a different perspective on what we were doing frequently within the collective of Gran Fury. So this work sort of rushed headlong into that question of the viral divide. And the first two questions are so provocative, "Do you resent people with AIDS?" is a reference to younger gay men at that time feeling as though they had missed something.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we were saying out loud something that people said privately but no one said out loud. And the "Do you trust HIV negatives?" was about people living with HIV feeling as though activists who were HIV negative were losing interest or they didn't agree—they no longer agreed on the same strategies. So —this viral—this poster is about the viral divide. And that's why I think it's so important. I think in a way it's a Rosetta stone— only it, you know, it talked about the future in a way, rather than the past. It talked about the viral divide which exists and is articulated through debates about Truvada right now in the AIDS community. It still exists, the viral divide. So I feel like —this work was momentary but also prescient.

Which is why I refer to it as, I think, the most important work. It's—when we were assembling this show we—when we were thinking about whether we wanted to mount any public projects, there were only two projects proposed. One was *Welcome to America*, which, except for the fact that South Africa now has national healthcare, is still true about healthcare in America.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I proposed this poster. Because I feel without changing it at all it's still true.



CYNTHIA CARR: Yes. Yes, I agree. So it—and this really was the last Gran Fury piece.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It wasn't. We did two more projects after that. One was—but again, it was only half of the collective. And we—on this poster we signed it Gran Fury, but the typeface is incredibly small.

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So it's a—it's a reference to our collective in flux, in dissolution.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we did two more projects. One was—we were asked by the Coalition of Lesbian and Gay Rights and the Human Rights Campaign Fund to do a work in response to the videotape that was being circulated through Congress called *The AIDS—The Gay Agenda*—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —to do a piece in response to that. And then we did our last piece, "Good—Goodbye and Good Luck." Or "We Miss You, Good Luck." Not "Goodbye and Good Luck."

CYNTHIA CARR: "We Miss You."

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Let's see what that looks like.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That was the—that was the piece when the sub-group who—"Good Luck. Miss You," was the name of it. And in that piece—I wrote the first part of that piece. Mark Simpson—I talk about the current—it's reprinted here, it's too long. It's a text piece but I talk about the rise of the right and what happens when personal responses get refused—confused with political responses. I give an overview in the first section. And then Mark Simpson gives a synopsis of the history of Gran Fury and then Loring McAlpin talks about safe—safer sex going forward. And at that point though we were the only three people in the collective.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh dear.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: John Lindell was in and out. Richard Elovich let us use his apartment, but he wasn't involved in it. And Vincent Gagliostro from the Anonymous Queers Collective worked on the first two, but he didn't work on this one that we're currently talking about. He worked on *The Four Questions* and the *Christian Agenda Revealed*, was our middle project.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. I was thinking that—I think last time we said the names of all the people in Gran Fury.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think we did.

CYNTHIA CARR: But—okay. Richard Elovich got into all the—he was doing needle exchange.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He was doing needle exchange, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: So—and that was—I think that took up all his time.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And this was during that period. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. But—okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think I have to wrap up.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well, this is an end. This is an end for now and—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And if you—if you feel like you want to come back to something—

[END OF finkel16\_2of3\_sd\_track06]

CYNTHIA CARR: —or maybe a test again just to make sure all of this is working? Testing before Interview Number 3 on April—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Testing my mic as well.

Cynthia Carr: Okay. Let's stop.

[END OF finkel\_2of3\_sd\_track07]

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay, let's get started here. Okay, this is Cynthia Carr interviewing Avram Finkelstein at his home and studio in Brooklyn, New York on May 10, 2016 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is still Card Number 2. Okay. Last time when we stopped, we had gotten to *The Four Questions*. That was the last poster done by Gran Fury—in '93, and then in the list of projects, there's nothing again until '95—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: —and I think we skipped over that—with that last thing, but that was a written piece.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That was a text piece. We began to talk about it. I can't remember the name of the New Museum show, but it was a text piece that was written in conjunction with the New Museum show.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And there was one piece in between, which was *The Christian Agenda Revealed*, that we—remember, I told you we were asked by some "inside the Beltway" national gay groups to do a piece in response to the—what was the—*The Gay Agenda* was a videotape that they were circulating throughout Congress, and they wanted something to counter that, so we did that piece. And then this was the last piece.

CYNTHIA CARR: And it was sort of a recounting of the history of Gran Fury.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, it was three things. It was really—we were talking a little bit about the way in which Gran Fury stopped working together. And just before *The Four Questions*, half of the collective decided they didn't want to continue working together as a collective. And then there were only a handful of us who—half of us who wanted to still work together. We went on to do these three projects.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And during that period, Mark Simpson was getting sicker and we weren't getting a lot of projects, and it just—those were the last three things that we did.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. And then the text was called "Good Luck, Miss You."

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. And I—it's three sections. And I wrote the first part, which was actually based on a piece that I wrote for *Triple X Fruit*, which was a queer literary arts quarterly that I was associate art director on with Anne Christine d'Adesky and Marisa Cardinale and Vincent Gagliostro. And in that issue, we had—the issue was structured as a textual exquisite corpse around Judge Ito's instructions to the jury in the O.J. Simpson trial. And we gave each person a sentence to write a piece around without telling them what it was, and we called the issue *Witness*. And I had written a piece that was a sort of a—I think I called it "The Trouble With Angels: A Fantasia on the Meaning of Religious Themes." [Laughs.] Which got Tony Kushner very angry with me because he thought I was specifically talking about him. So my section leads in—my text is the first one, and it talks about the turn of the 20th Century into the 21st Century and the transition away from political responses to HIV/AIDS towards personal responses. And the—you know, little bit what I think Doug Crimp was talking about in *Mourning and Militancy*—but from a different— from a political perspective. So that was the first section. I wrote that piece of it, which is the introduction, and then Mark Simpson wrote the middle section, which is basically a brief history of Gran Fury. And Loring McAlpin wrote the final section, which was—I think it is called "Future Sex Acts." It was about safe sex.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, uh-huh [Affirmative.]. Okay, now, at that point, you were still a member of ACT UP—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: While all of this was going on, and you were still with your affinity group—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

Cynthia Car: What were you doing in ACT UP? Were you doing projects there?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, I was on the CDC committee. And it was a four-year campaign to pressure the Centers for Disease Control to include manifestations of immunosuppression in women.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Uh-huh [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that was a very lengthy project.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I also formed from my affinity group another collective called Anonymous Queers.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we did, I think, about five projects total. We did broadsheets that we handed out every Gay Pride —15,000 to 20,000 of them. And the first one had a separatist screed that was very controversial called—that was called *I Hate Straights*, which created a big firestorm in ACT UP—because we were handing it out as we were marching with ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, I see. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so there was a series of broadsheets and other projects from Anonymous Queers, and we did demonstrations and sit-ins. We were in the footage of the Day of Desperation at the Grand Central Station that's in *United in Anger*, that balloon—that banner that's raised by balloons and says "Money for AIDS, Not for War," that was my affinity group. And we did a similar project on the public transportation in DC So I was very active in ACT UP—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and then I worked with a small group of people in developing an AIDS cure project, which we named the Barbara McClintock Project. And it got as far as being sponsored by Jerrold Nadler in—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —New York as a bill in Congress. So I was working on that for probably a year or two.

CYNTHIA CARR: So it was a bill to get funding for more research?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We were—we were actually proposing a secondary research institute that would not be about—that would be about pathogenesis only, that would only research pathogenesis and a cure, and not—and be separate from NIAID.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And we had gotten pretty far. Martin Delaney had advocated for it. It was—we had a very positive response from *Science*, the journal *Science*—and it was a very extensive—involved a tremendous amount of research. We consulted with Salk's—Jonas Salk's son, the person who invented the polio vaccine.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So we had gotten very granular about it. About how it would be structured, how it could be organized, how it would be funded, what its purview might be. So that took a tremendous amount of time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then I was marshaling. You know, I marshaled at the—when we—I forget what the name of the actual demonstration was, but we shut down all the bridges and tunnels and there was a court injunction against it. I was involved in that mega-demonstration.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I was very active in ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mhm. [Affirmative.]. And how long did that go on? Are you still in ACT UP?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, no. I moved out of New York in probably 1998 or '99—

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —so I think I stopped going to ACT UP around '96 or '97, somewhere in

there.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Okay. Now, —the artwork that you were doing then—or what were you doing as a job at that point? I mean, what was going on in your life, art life or work life?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, it's sort of a funny thing because I was pretty much—I think we talked about this in the first session

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and you were saying that other people have said this to you. Pretty much every waking moment was about ACT UP.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And almost everything I was doing was centered there.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I was also an art director, so I was—you know, I worked a couple days a week and—

CYNTHIA CARR: Were you still at Sassoon?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —I sometimes had to travel. I think by then I was free-lancing,

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and I art directed a Nan Goldin story in *Visionaire*. You know, a Helmut Lang story in *Visionare*. And then I did some—I started doing some art writing. I interviewed—Vincent Gallo had his first film, so I did a couple of—I did an interview with him for a Spanish magazine, and then he requested me to art direct a story for *Dazed and Confused*, a cover with him and Christina Ricci that was shot by Jack Pierson. So I was beginning to do that kind of freelance stuff.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Okay. And the artwork that you've featured like on your web site

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Mhm. [Affirmative.]

CYNTHIA CARR: —is about—more about labor issues or workers or—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's actually a portrait of my father—

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —that suite of work.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, really.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was from my—

CYNTHIA CARR: The one called *Worker's Apartment*?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And *Workers 1 & 5*.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Those were all portraits of my family.

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The head scarf is a portrait of my sister and my mother.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think I—in an earlier conversation, I said to you that when my mother was on her death bed, my sister and I were having a conversation about whether she thought my mother was a Party member—and she said that she thought that my father was the political one and my mother was just along for the ride. And I started sort of poking holes in it and saying, "Well, they met at an International Workers Order summer camp. Why would she have gone there if she wasn't political?"

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That was before she even met him."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And, you know, I started like pointing out all these things, after which she finally said, "Well, actually, now that you mention it, she told me if they come for us, tell them you don't know anything about the copies of *The Daily Worker* in the closet."

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I'd look at my sister and I said, "Well, what did you think she meant by that? Like if there were two issues, she would have thrown them out. There were a lot of them, right?" And she said, "Yeah, there were." I said, "So, weren't they distributing them? Like, why would they have a ton of issues of *The Daily Worker*?"

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I—my mother died just before the show, so I made a head scarf with motifs that related to my mother's career as a biochemist—and the date of *The Daily Worker*. It had a masthead of *The Daily Worker* and it had motifs of—

CYNTHIA CARR: *The Daily Worker* goes all the way around the edge.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's correct. Hey, actually, [Aaron] Lecklider talked about it this last Friday at the conference we were at.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He talked about that piece because he curated that show. Yeah, so—and the other motifs in the *Worker's Apartment*, it's all based on propaganda textiles. Russian propaganda textiles. But, of course, the U.S. did them, the U.K. did them, and Japan did them, as well. And as a person whose work is very much about how images are deployed politically and in

image culture and late stage capitalism in particular, I sort of was experimenting with the idea of imagining a world in which there had actually been a gay revolution.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So a lot of their—a lot of the—there's a dress with motifs on it that's hanging on the wall. There's a chair and there's wallpaper. And the motifs on the dress and the motifs in the wallpaper are taken from a what-do-you-call-it, basically, a pamphlet called *In Praise of Outlaws* that was written right after the Harvey Milk riots.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So all of the images that are in those two parts of that installation are from the Harvey Milk riots. Because I was thinking a lot about—the film *Milk* sort of ends with a candlelight vigil, but it says nothing about the fact that the first—not the first time queer people rioted, but right after Dan White was given a light sentence, there were riots in San Francisco where they burned cop cars.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So there's a lot about queer resistance that you don't get to hear.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So this work was about—what would it be like if we lived in a world where that was so much a part of it that it would be a pattern on your dress—

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —that it would be—your chair would be covered with it? The motifs on the chair are about the pharmaceutical-industrial complex. And its scenes—it's all sort of done as sort of a late-30's social-realist style—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —all three of these patterns. And the chair was factories with, you know, billows of smoke coming out of them and out of the clouds of smoke were raining pills. And there's a hand coming from the sky with pills in it and the family silhouetted, sort of looking at the pills. And it, you know, it had—it had all to do with the question marks that I have around viral suppression as a political—as the sole political agenda of the AIDS activist movement. We had no choice but to get involved in the drug approval process. People's lives were at stake.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But then after protease inhibitors, what does it mean to then be a part of institutional systems that don't necessarily have a political end?

CYNTHIA CARR: Mhm. [Affirmative.]. Yeah. And then those pieces would be shown together as an installation.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: —the dress, the wallpaper, the chair.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And then there's also a little star, like a Communist kind of star? With a little baby picture in it or a young person?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: This star is a baby Lenin pin

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —that my brother gave me when I entered middle school.

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The children who were born after the Revolution were called Decembrists, I think? And the Decembrists were given baby Lenin pins because it symbolized that even as a child, one could be a future revolutionary.

CYNTHIA CARR: [They laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So he gave me a baby Lenin pin when I entered seventh grade, and so that's my portrait of him is a photograph of that baby Lenin pin.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And then also in the show was the poster that—I told you that Steve Raitt had taught me how to silkscreen. It was a reproduction of a May '68 French student poster and that was in the show. And then I did a series of portraits of my father. Just before my father died. He taught photography—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —later in life. And he had a student who took a photograph of someone's hand, and my father thought it was so incredibly trite. He just hated the idea that this person had taken the picture of someone's hand. And I think, to sort of niggle him a little bit, I took a picture of his hand. And then he—within two weeks, we moved him into assisted living because he just became too sick. He was 92—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And he was living by himself and he couldn't take care of himself. And at that point, he was disoriented enough to not even really understand that he probably was not going to go back home.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And literally, in a day or two, he fell and had a massive hematoma— and went into a coma and was dead.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I was so happy that I had taken this picture of my father's hand—

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]



AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —because I remembered when Don was sick and dying, and we're talking about 1983—and I wasn't -

CYNTHIA CARR: Don Yowell, this is.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Don Yowell, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it was a complete secret. I was living this secret. So I hadn't—because he was a musician and didn't want anyone in the music business to know that he was sick.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I remember staring at my hand. I became very interested in palmistry, and I was just—I was trying to figure out which my lifeline was and how long it was. It was like all I had was to see, like okay, am I going to die or not?

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so after my father died, I started thinking about that, and I realized that my lifeline, as it happens, is incredibly long. It wraps all the way around the base of my thumb, but it's—on both hands, it splits in exactly the same place.

And in palmistry, one hand is your intended life and the other hand is your spiritual or intellectual or hidden or creative life—and they're rarely the same. And in both cases, they're identical and they split in the same place, so I became—as I was—after my dad died and I was thinking about Don and looking at my palm, I started to think that that split was AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That was the AIDS crisis, and it's a—there's a fork. So I had—and both lives were—both lines were long— and equally as strong. But they're the two lives that I ended up having. One was the one I was on the way to having, and the other was the life I ended up having. So a large part of the show is very large collages based on photographs of my—drawings I made from the photograph of my father's hand— compared with photographs of my own hand—

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —because then I started to think, "Well, I don't believe in fate, but here my father and I were both extremely political people who lived their entire life thinking about political questions," and I started to think of, not so much in terms of fatalism, but the lines on the hand as also being this indelible map of work.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mmm [Affirmative.] Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I started thinking of it in terms of labor and the labor movement and political resistance, so these two very large collages that were in the show were based on drawings of my father's hand and my hand.

CYNTHIA CARR: And this is the work called *Workers 1 & 5*.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Okay. You know, you've probably thought about this like, what happened? Or, how did I change because of the AIDS crisis?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: What would my life have been if there hadn't been an AIDS crisis?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: All the time. All the time.

CYNTHIA CARR: What do you think about that?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, the funny thing is, and I think you might understand why I'm about to say—what I'm about to say. I was on the track to become a political person. And I was always a political person in a political family—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it wasn't until AIDS that my politics really became my own. They became merged with my identity as a gay man.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And so, in a way, I'm not saying that it was predestined—but I feel like I don't know how I would be the person I am today if it hadn't been—for having gone through that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But then, of course, there's a part of me that—there's a whole host of things I wish I had never seen.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I, you know, as you can tell if you're listening to this from the waver in my voice, I became a crier.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it's—but in a way, it's—you know, here again, as a Jew, the question of witnessing is so integral to my Jewish identity and my political identity—and now my identity as an artist having lived through this moment and done work around it. And I think one of the things that occurred to me, and the reason why it was really useful for me to do this solo show and very therapeutic to do it—I was offered the solo show, and this is the first solo show I actually have ever done—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —because I had abandoned my personal practice for collectivity.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I was heading in that direction because of the Situationist critiques, and my work was—I began destroying my work as an experiment. And the questions of commodification and, you know, in the—by the mid-'70s, I was heading in that direction, and then the AIDS crisis

came along and I thought, "This is the perfect way for me to reintegrate my practice—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —in a way that bypasses institutional structures."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. What year was that solo show of yours?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The solo show was 2011 or '12.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. Your CV will be available. The exact date.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: My CV is—I've written it down in that paper that you've asked me to give you.

CYNTHIA CARR: But there was something—before we discuss the—like the Flash Collectives and the other—the drawings. You did a project involving Leigh Bowery, "Staging Leigh Bowery."

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I did, yes. It was—2013 was my solo show.

CYNTHIA CARR: Your solo show. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah. I did a project for a show in Vienna about Leigh Bowery.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: So it was like a group show with people doing work about Leigh Bowery?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's correct. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I did—I did a piece, a very large wall with vinyl that was based on the images of Leigh Bowery with a safety pin through his lips—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the phrase "Read My Lips" as a sort of way to connect the AIDS agitprop with Leigh Bowery's life because Bowery did not—was not political in a way—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and I sort of thought—I saw him as being incredibly political, and he saw himself as being political but not in any overt way—

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —in this very sort of coded way. And I felt this would be a way to sort of connect some of those codes.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see. Now, he's someone—it seems very far removed from the kind of work you usually do just because he's so much into costume, you know, making those amazing costumes

and artifice.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Artifice. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And but somehow his work really resonated with you.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, because I worked for an English company, I spent a tremendous amount of time in the U.K. Sometimes I lived there for months at a time. So I knew a lot of people who knew Bowery. I did not. And I think that it's very true to the English temperament to be political in a way that's much less didactic than the way I think about politics. That's not to say—I mean, there's the women's encampment—it's not to say that there isn't a tremendous amount of didacticism in English politics but—or in English political grassroots organizing. But I think it's—temperamentally, the U.K. is—people who were raised in the U.K. are very different from people who are raised in America.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mmm. [Affirmative.]. Mmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I think that he is—he was a reflection of that. He was a reflection of that world.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yeah. Very interesting artist. Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Super interesting.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Very challenging.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —and in a way, very indirect, I think.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But I think if you think in terms of the fact that my practice is almost exclusively focused on codes. And I sort of—I was doing a talk recently where I started talking about Simon LeVay in the '90s had this theory that the—he noticed that the hypothalamus of heterosexual men was twice as large as that of homosexual man.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Do you remember that?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes. [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it came to be referred to as the "gay gene," and I started this talk by mentioning Simon LeVay and saying, "I think if there is a gay gene, its irony."

CYNTHIA CARR: [Laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I started talking about the—it was a symposium on the use of the —*Tactical Laughter* was the name of the symposium.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But it was about the strategic political use of humor. And I talk about irony in the AIDS crisis, and it's very much woven into everything in *Gran Fury* and a lot of *ACT UP*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You know that, but I also make this connection between that and Polari, which—this is going to be a huge, pan-historic leap, but do you know about Polari? It's the gay slang—

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —on which most of drag language is based. A lot of things that we commonly use come out of Polari —which came out of the East End of London, which was also the Jewish ghetto. It was the theater community, and it was also the Jewish ghetto.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I sort of see a connection between the self-deprecating humor of the Yiddish theater—and a lot of this sort of queer in-jokes that came out of *ACT UP*.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. [Laughs.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: To me, it feels—there seems to be a personal connection there.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Interesting. You also had some work that was called *The Subway Drawings*, and they're very abstract, those drawings.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, those were all abstract, but they came out of the same—I did those right after this solo show. I was in the subway. They came out of the same gesture of the map of the hand. I was in the subway and I was heading somewhere and I, you know, waiting, you know, endlessly for a train, and suddenly I realized every subway tile around me was cracked or scratched or marked.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I started looking, and all of them are cracked and scratched and marked. And I started taking pictures of them, and I remember that line in Ginsberg's *Howl*, it's the—it's the last part. I forget what they call that section. If I weren't wired, I'd get up and read it to you. It—

CYNTHIA CARR: We can pause.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Okay.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. One of the great poems of all time.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: One of the great poems of all time.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I guess it's called "Footnote to *Howl*."

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes. It's in "The Footnote to Howl." And he says, "Holy the mysterious river of tears under the streets." It's one of my favorite lines—from this poem.

CYNTHIA CARR: Ah. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And I thought—and I started thinking, I'm like taking these pictures and I'm looking at these scratched, marked—

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —tiles, and I'm thinking of the millions of people who have leaned on these tiles, or written on these tiles, or passed by these tiles, or a key in their pocket made a mark on them while they were waiting for a train, and I started to wonder whether that's what Ginsberg was talking about, this mysterious river of tears under the streets. Couldn't it have been the subway?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So in the same way that I was thinking of the individual map of the marks on the hand, I started to think of the tiles in the subway as the fate, the hand, the markings on the hand of New York, and that's what those drawings are based on. They're abstract drawings that are based on the tiles, the photographs of the tiles.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, I see. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But that suite of work and the collages that I refer to in the other show are a mixture of photography that's then photo-manipulated and printed digitally and then reconstructed on canvas. So they're drawings that are then photographed, that are then printed digitally on newsprint, that are then gessoed to canvas and then drawn on top of, and the collages were the same. The newspaper was painted with house paint.

So all of the materials were about mechanical reproduction and the machine age, and they all tie into—I did an interview with the artist Jesse Aaron Green, super-smart artist out of Boston, and the last two suites of work he did were about the turn of the twentieth century, and I said, "Well, what is it about that period that interests you?" and he said, "You know, it's funny you should say that because I'm not aware of it, but I think that I frequently look for clues about the present in the past."

So it started me thinking about that question and I began to think of the turn of the twentieth century as the beginning of the egalitarian political ideals that very much drove my father's life and my own, and they're woven into literature, into art, you know, and part of it is—has to do with the machine age. It has to do with the fact that people could, for the first time, do decoupage, which was a craft, but it was a, you know, collage work. Anyone could take a newspaper and cut it up and make something out of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that's the first time in history when that was true. I mean, it's not the first time that anyone could make a collage, but could make a collage out of assembled data, out of information. So that was the—all of the backgrounds of the hand collages were newspapers that were painted over with house paint.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, it's funny, because, in a way, the images are—I mean, they're lines of subway drawings, so it looks like they're simple, but what you're describing is so labor-intensive, you know?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's incredibly labor-intensive. Yeah, it's gestural—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —so it feels immediate, but I've come to realize through all of my super-smart friends who are in performance, that much of the work that I have never considered performative actually is performative, and the activation of social spaces is what political posters are about. And I've come to think more and more about the, you know, that being the missing element from when you see these posters in the gallery setting. That's the piece that's missing.

You're looking at a poster with no social context. A video has social context in it. You automatically have a feel for the lighting of the time; if it's outdoors, you know what the streets look like; you know how people dress. You don't have that when you see the Silence = Death poster. So, isolated on a gallery wall, it's completely defanged. It's completely devoid of context, and I feel that it was never meant to have meaning in a gallery setting and consequently it doesn't.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I—so that's why I have been writing. That's why I've done this book, is to re-contextualize the work.

CYNTHIA CARR: Do you have a name for your book, a title?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The working title is *Silence Was, Silence Is: Remaking the Meaning of AIDS* and it's a deconstruction of the work that's used to represent AIDS, the work of the Silence = Death collective and of Gran Fury, and it's a sort of a deeper dive into the political questions that drove the work into being, as opposed to just talking about the work itself and how it appeared. Because there's something very funny about, you know, a work taken out of the streets of New York without context and being told that it was significant, but you would have no way to know any of that if you weren't there.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah. That context seems—I mean, I know from—well, and you know from talking to younger people, it seems very foreign.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It is very foreign, and it's foreign even for stakeholders who were not absorbed in the work in the same way that we were, and had different relationships to it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But there's so many missing pieces to explaining why this work had any power at all, like to not know that Reagan—you know, it's the beginning of the deregulation-mad right wing in America and when they were trying to decimate, you know, any regulations at all, which led to the 24-hour news cycle.

And if you don't—if you weren't there as a propagandist, making this work, watching the context very closely to figure out how to use it, you wouldn't necessarily think of that. But imagine a world in which there was—there wasn't a deregulated media on the brink of the 24/7 news cycle. So, they had—here were major media conglomerates having to fill 24 hours of cycle with information. This was the first time this had ever happened and it was at the exact same moment that people

thought you could get AIDS from a mosquito bite or a toilet seat. Remember when Rock Hudson was—died of AIDS, there was this huge uproar in popular media about the time he kissed Linda Evans on *Dynasty*, and was she now infected. Remember?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We're talking about 1983, that kiss, and he died in 1984. So imagine a world in which there is—you have an audience who thinks you can get AIDS from a mosquito bite; you have a deregulated media that's buying up cable networks; then you have 24 hours of news cycle to fill and you're in competition with other people. So you have an audience that wants to—doesn't know anything about AIDS, so you don't have—you're a journalist, you don't have to worry about pitching a story to your producer or your editor and have them say, "Oh, no, no one's interested in that." Everyone was interested in it.

So to talk about *Silence = Death* without those sets of social context makes no sense because it would have functioned completely differently in another social context and I don't think that you—whenever I speak about *Silence = Death*, one of the things I say about it is that it was designed by a six-person collective. Yes, we in fact did design it, but it was created by a community of people who activated the social spaces in which we put it, and without that, the poster could have come and gone in the night. You never would have heard of us.

So I think that they're—you know, I've spent a lot of time thinking about the ways in which we construct the dominant narrative of HIV/AIDS, and we deploy these symbols that sort of spell out or symbolize or represent what this entire moment meant, and there's the *Silence = Death* poster, but you were born 20 years after that poster was in the streets of New York; you would have no way of knowing that the deregulations of Reagan's administration created tax abatements for building in New York City and there was a building boom, and there would not have been construction sites to put posters on, if it hadn't been for deregulation that was going on, and that's the piece of the story that you will never see when you see that poster on a museum wall.

CYNTHIA CARR: Along with the fact that, I mean, even people in our community were reluctant to even say the word "AIDS," I think, for quite a while.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Or talk about it, you know. But, yeah—when did you move back to New York?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I moved actually to Long Island to—when my dad—we put my dad in assisted living. I moved into his house.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that was in—it was about five years ago, possibly six years ago, and then I moved back to Brooklyn about four years ago.

CYNTHIA CARR: I see.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I promised myself I will never leave Brooklyn again.

[They laugh.]

CYNTHIA CARR: You started this thing called the Flash Collective.



AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Now, when did that start? When you came back into Brooklyn or—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, it did. I mean, I—again, I've been thinking so much about these questions, about the meaning of this work, and to have it held up as an example of political efficacy is—robs people of the opportunity to figure out how—what lessons might be learned from it that might apply to themselves going forward.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I feel like the work casts more of a shadow than it opens up opportunities, and the Flash Collective is an attempt to create alternative spaces, to create the next *Silence = Death* poster, to pass on the skills that will enable people to continue to make work, as opposed to feeling like you have to make a *Silence = Death* poster in order for it to be useful or meaningful. Because the truth is, when I was doing that poster—I think we talked about this—I went to several media people in New York, none of whom thought it made any sense at all.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And the people that I mentioned the poster to said, "Well, you want to do what? What does it mean? Why?" And the truth is that we did not know the answer to that question, and I think that there will be no more *Silence = Death* posters if everyone thinks you have to have a movement behind whatever it is you're doing in order to validate it. The fact is there's a huge power in communal responses, but there's also power in the individual voice.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I started to think about what kind of a context I would need in order to pass on some of these skills, and how would you replicate the—how would you create a setting in which you could enable that to happen? And the two things that I thought would be interesting to experiment with is to form a collective but of limited duration so that you're not really committing—you're not actually grassroots organizing. It's an exercise in the collectivity that accompanies grassroots organizing, and then to have the project be that you're going to mount something in a public space at the end of your time together. And the Flash Collectives go anywhere from two hours to a day; some of them have been a day and a half, and it means at the end of that time you're going to have to have arrived at a political thing that you want to say with a group of strangers and mount it in a public space, which in a way is an exercise in social engagement.

It's a hothouse version of it and it's a very intricate, guided workshop that's a series, a counterbalance between permissions and structures where I walk people through brainstorming. I do a 15-minute—first I start with a 15-minute discussion about speaking to multiple audiences and identifying audiences and how public spaces function in image cultures. It's like this fast and furious pedagogy surrounding what you might need to know in order to do this thing by the end of our time together. And then it's half-hour, 45-minute brainstorming sessions mixed with recaps and straw polls, and it's—you know, I'm walking a group of strangers through this process of winnowing down a complicated message into language that anyone can understand to be put in a public space.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Now, you've done six of these, right?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, I've done about—I've done almost 20 of them now.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, really?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. I looked at your website; there were six of them on the website—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I have to update it.

CYNTHIA CARR: —but you've done 20?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I've done about 20. I just completed one at Yale which was unbelievable, I think. I need to put it on the website.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. The six that were on the website all deal with AIDS. Now, is that true of all 20 of them, that they're somehow—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, I've done them on reproductive justice. I've done them on displacement. I've done them on race and privilege. No, they're not all about HIV.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. Now, the—so you're usually invited; someone invites you to do one of these, and then the people who come are—are they artists or activists?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, no.

CYNTHIA CARR: They're not artists?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think that it's super-important to have a mix of people in this kind of exercise, because that's a mistake that people make about ACT UP. They think that everyone in ACT UP was an artist, and there were many artists in ACT UP, but there were—the truth is, you know, one way to look at the Gran Fury body of work is to say we were the propaganda wing of ACT UP, but that really is not true in any way.

I would probably say, it would be more accurate to say, that Gran Fury could never have existed without the research wing of ACT UP, so, in a way, we were wholly dependent on activists, researchers, policy people, journalists, healthcare workers. All of the data that we did our work around came out of collectives that were doing that work. It just happens that it's easier to privilege cultural production and that's part of the reason why Gran Fury's work has entered some sort of a canon.

CYNTHIA CARR: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But the reason why it's easier to privilege it is that its—it makes a productivity fetish out of political resistance, which is actually what we were doing and what was happening. So there are institutional uses for being able to say, "Okay, here is the story, the dominant narrative of HIV/AIDS goes something like this: an embattled community assembled itself, fought power structures, and protease inhibitors were the result of that and the death toll went down radically." That's a very abbreviated story and it's not totally untrue, but it's not—it's a fraction of the story. It doesn't talk about—it completely throws a cloak of invisibility over HIV criminalization cases where there were people in America in jail for 20 years because they've been accused by someone of knowingly exposing them to HIV, even if they haven't been—haven't contracted the virus.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So that narrative, that abbreviated narrative, is a heroic tale that has a resolution. It's the difference between the story of HIV and the storytelling of HIV.

CYNTHIA CARR: I was going to ask about specific Flash Collective pieces—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Sure.

CYNTHIA CARR: —if that's—I only know about the ones that I saw there.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: You only know about the six.

CYNTHIA CARR: I only know about the six, but one of them—I mean, I guess the first one was at Concordia University?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's correct, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And where is that?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's in Montreal.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay. And it was called *Fuck Laws*.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: *Fuck Laws* was the name the collective chose for themselves. It was my first Flash Collective and it was the—they asked me to come up and do a lecture for their—they have an HIV/AIDS lecture series, and then asked me if I would do a workshop afterwards, and I was beginning to think about these questions. Like, how would—in what kind of a hothouse environment could I create collectivity?

And I proposed it to them and they were very gung-ho about, and they have incredible media lab and we worked together; we collaborated together and it was a lot of—there were a lot of activists who were working around criminalization, so we chose that as a topic.

And in eight hours, we had a mini teach-in on PrEP and PEP, the pharmaceutical interventions that, you know, pre-exposure prophylaxis and post-exposure prophylaxis. I did my 15- to 20-minute talk about public spaces, you know, about how collectives can function. I sort of offer up some ideas about collective cultural production, what it is and what it isn't, how we're going to function, and you know, we're sort of making a pact the whole time.

And then we did a mapping exercise which was suggested by a local artist, Jordan Arseneault, that I didn't want to do, but it turned out to be so genius it's become a regular part of my practice, which is to basically ask people to make a written response on a very large sheet of paper. He suggested that we give out different colored magic markers to every participant so we could then—and ask them to make—to write something on that in response to a question, to a prompt. In this case, it was about criminalization. It was about HIV and disclosure, this map, and then basically draw arrows between, you know, all of these different connections that were in—people were writing on this piece of paper. It basically is like a hive source. It's a map of a hive source of the brains in the room.

It's a visual way that's a collective exercise that gets people to work together immediately and to articulate things that would take an hour or two to go around the room and ask people what they thought.

So we started with the—we did the mapping exercise and then I did a series of brainstormings, and then we broke into groups to craft the text, and other groups to craft the image, and then we came back together. During that period, we produced postcards; somebody brought a button machine; we made buttons.

We made a projected billboard, a billboard that was going to be projected on public space in the—around the school on a public street during rush hour, and we did it all in eight hours with a half-hour lunch break, and it was just astonishing to think that—and I've become firmly convinced that one could transport this exercise to a subway car and come up with astonishing results, and I think a lot of what I think about, how ideas are used and how politics is enacted and how social spaces are activated, has to do with what we're told we can do, what we are told to expect of ourselves, and if you give people the opportunity to weigh in on a complicated issue, they will. I think the internet is proof of that, in a way.

CYNTHIA CARR: Well, that's true.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Social media is proof of that.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: But if you can channel it in a way that's constructive and that's collective, that's collaborative, as opposed to the internet which is isolated frequently—it functions as a community, but it's a very different type of community. This is an exercise in social spaces that's visceral, more visceral, I think, than social media.

CYNTHIA CARR: What did that piece look like? I can't remember now.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was—the tagline that we ended up coming up with was "I HAVE HIV, CALL THE COPS!" And it was this kind of ironic, dark—again, the irony chain. It was this ironic, self-deprecating way of saying, you know, "Cuff me." To come out as HIV, you're risking arrest.

And we coupled it with an image of police in riot gear running towards you, a black and white photograph, and it says, "I have HIV, call the cops" in very large letters, and then it has an expository text. I think that the strategies of, you know, image and text and, you know, exposition, more granular ideas, comes out of Silence = Death and Gran Fury. You know, the ways in which you break down complicated things, is to give you exactly what you need to know and nothing more, or something that's provocative enough that would lead you to a website. The other thing we did on that day was create a Tumblr page, which you can do in five minutes. Anyone can do it.

So every Flash Collective—we also create a Tumblr page which becomes a communal space for the participants to modify and explain and offer up other views of the work we've just done on an ongoing basis that are interactive. So every Tumblr page is group-created, and everyone in the collective has access to it.

CYNTHIA CARR: How many people are in these groups like that one? Is it like half a dozen or—?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, that one was, I think, probably close to—between 13 and 16. I've done Flash Collectives with as few as—I've done collectives with as few as three people. I've done Flash Collectives that were maybe around six. I've done them as large as in the low twenties. I have different strategies for working through the size of the collectives, and a lot of it depends on the—again, it's a, you know, a curated exercise. It's not actually like going into a subway and doing it. We have a place where we're going to show this work; we have a budget to produce it, if we need a

budget; we have a subject, so there's a certain framework through which you get to then have other experiences. Part of it is mess-making, and I've had some—some people have hosted Flash Collectives, and I tend to—Nayland Blake, the artist—who's a friend of mine, who comes out of a similar idea about creative spaces that's based in part on mess-making.

I like to let it fall apart to experiment with the parameters of who's in the room, to get a sense of its devolution before I reassemble it. And I've had some people who've asked—invited me to host Flash Collectives become very concerned during that part of it.

[They laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's not for everyone, but I think you will understand. Sarah Schulman, the great Sarah Schulman's, *Gentrification of the Mind*; she talks about New York as having been a space where you could make mistakes. You know, I think this is another thing about context that's really hard to understand. When ACT UP was happening, you could move to New York, even as late as the early '90s, move to the East Village and get an apartment for \$300.

It stopped happening around the early '90s, but up until that point, you could move to New York without a job, without a career, without a plan, without going to school, and just come here and work in a restaurant or a bar and make a mess and experiment. New York will never be like that again. So I feel like the mess-making is very much a part of a way in which we used to think about social spaces as artists that people are no longer able to do, and that's one of the reasons I include mess-making as a prerequisite.

CYNTHIA CARR: No, it's true, there was uncolonized space back at that point.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right.

CYNTHIA CARR: And you could just go in and take it over and do something.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right. You didn't have to negotiate permission. You didn't have to have a plan. You didn't have to have a—it was wild, and a lot of it created a tremendous amount of failures, and a lot of people were subsumed by their failures. It didn't always end well, but New York was an easier space to be untethered creatively than it currently is.

CYNTHIA CARR: For sure. You did this project also at the New Museum—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes.

CYNTHIA CARR: —and the artist who had people—encouraged people to come in and draw on the walls. I think there was paper put up—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right.

CYNTHIA CARR: —and anybody could come in and do anything on the walls.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's what it—that's theoretically what it was meant to be. It was Pawel Althamer's *Draftsmen's Congress*, I think was the name of the project. He had done one in—I think it was Berlin. He had done several of them, and basically he papers the walls over a public space and invites people in to draw on the walls. But that isn't, of course, what's actually happening because it's—everything about it is heavily mediated. It's—you're not actually drawing on the walls of the New Museum, you're drawing on a set of walls, a rotunda, that's constructed inside the walls that

then is papered over.

And then he had a team of interns who would then paint over what you had done, so it wasn't really a public space in the way I think of a public space, which is the streets of New York where you put up a poster and somebody writes on it, and then someone else writes on that, and then somebody—and if someone paints it over, then they have painted it over. You're not curatorially being painted over to make space for more work, so it's much less interactive. It's heavily mediated.

So, I was invited by the Helix Queer Performance Network, by Dan Fishback, and this was a project of—

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Dan's—the Helix Square performance network that—and—one of his partners is the Hemispheric Institute for Performance in Politics, where I'm currently the artist-in-residence, and they're amazing over there. So the New Museum was inviting everyone on the Lower East Side, every arts group, every community organization, to come in and draw on the walls during the *Draftsmen's Congress*.

So, this invitation came across the desk at Hemi, and Dan lunged at it. So my—we only had three hours to do this project. The project we did there was done in three hours.

We assembled the collective and my question to them was "okay, we're able to go into the New Museum and participate in the *Draftsmen's Congress*, but what does that mean? As queer artists, what does it mean to be invited in?" Yes, the New Museum has a great history of queer work, you know, but what does it mean to be in this heavily mediated space, creating work—as queer people? What does it mean to be in this space in this way? And we almost immediately decided that we didn't—and I said, "Of course, the idea of the *Draftsmen's Congress* is that it's hand-drawn; it's this sort of—the human touch is being—the wildness of the city surrounding the New Museum is being invited in to humanize it." And we immediately decided we wanted to do something that was neon colored, involved mechanical production that would be antithetical to that, and did this sticker that said, "This is not a safe space to be queer; there is no safe space," and set up a Tumblr page, and one of the members of the collective who came out of the spoken word collective Dark Matter, who are brilliant, wrote this piece that is the top part of the Tumblr page that talks about colonization. You know, in order for a space to be made safe other people have to be put in danger, and it talks—you know, it's very much about that, and that's what this work was a meditation on.

So we decided we were going to go in with these stickers and put them in pockets on the walls, and also use them to spell out things, these stickers, and invite people to take the stickers and bring them out to the street, which is our version of what we thought the *Draftsmen's Congress* was attempting to replicate, an egalitarian space, and to bring the—rather than having people come into the museum, to bring the museum out. So we did that project and in the process we noticed that they were painting over people's work to make room for the next half-hour of people to come in and pretend that it was an open space that was being freely used.

So we noticed all these things and when we finished the work we all left. One person forgot his bag and he went back to get his bag, and they had taken all of the sleeves with the stickers off of the wall and put them in an area that was soon to be refuse. It was a garbage area. They were in the process of obliterating everything—the critique that we were making. They proved our point about what mediated spaces mean. I think it was such a brilliant project, and, literally, a group of six people who had never worked together before did it in three hours.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow. So you came in with the stickers?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We then—the production of the stickers didn't happen within those three hours. We had them printed. We made a thousand of them and then on the date when we went in to do the walls, we had the stickers with us. Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Boy, I never realized that it was—that everything was painted over, like, probably every day or every few hours.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Every few hours.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, gosh.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Like, literally, they would ship a school bus full of kids to come in and draw on the walls, and then as soon as they would leave someone would—it's not like I came in and painted something on top of something you did. The museum, the people who were participating in this project with the artists and museum, were making room—were neutralizing the space for the next group of people to come in. It was this egalitarian petting zoo where it was meant to replicate the way social spaces function, but that isn't the way social spaces function. When we would put a poster up in New York, it would get torn down or graffitied or covered with another poster. That is the way social spaces function and that's public space as a dialogue. This is not public space as a dialogue. This is the proscenium; this is the Disney version of public space and a personal pet peeve of mine, as you can tell. My voice is raising.

[They laugh.]

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, boy. That's interesting, though, that it happened.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think it's super-interesting.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's the other thing about—I mean, you know, anyone who teaches, knows that teaching is learning and—that's the secret. It's like writing is reading. Anyone who writes knows that you don't know what's going to happen even if you think you do and that you're a reader first. You're the first reader of what you're writing. Teaching is learning and every Flash Collective, I come away full of 20 more ideas that never even occurred to me.

CYNTHIA CARR: Actually, though, what—you know, since I come from writing about performance, this sounds like improv. It's like a group that gets—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's improv!

CYNTHIA CARR: —together for improv—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's correct.

CYNTHIA CARR: —and amazing—sometimes they fail, but sometimes really amazing stuff happens that couldn't have come out of a script

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And that's what collectives—that's what collectivity is about. It's improvisation in a way, isn't it? Because you don't know, even with people you are in a—you're in a

collective with them for years. The collectives change. Collectives are organisms. They are totally dependent not just on who's in the room but how you are in that room that day.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: A collective like Gran Fury where we work together all the time changed all the time and I think that—one thing that you'll find interesting, that I found super-interesting, was the first Flash Collective I did with performance people. I noticed the mapping exercise functioned completely differently than how it functions with people who make visual work. People who make visual work are very—I wouldn't say they're loathe to participate. It takes them a while to warm up to the idea of mark-making in a communal setting quickly, without thinking about it, without being considered, because frequently artists have solitary practices. Most artists don't have collective practices. Performance people—you almost always work collaboratively.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The first time I did one for the Helix Queer—I mean, for the Hemispheric Institute as a part of their *Emerge* series, and it's all performance people, and here I am, this visual artist, and I'm, like, totally uptight compared to, like, performance people, and think very differently about the world than performance people do. They—I gave them their magic markers; they dove at the wall; they were scrambling and all at once writing over each other. None of this, like, one at a time. They were—and the entire scroll, like a three-foot by nine-foot piece of paper, was filled like that, like within 30 seconds. It was completely cluttered with ideas and the ideas on it were things like—I was talking about public spaces and private spaces because I wanted to—the exercise was about the body in public spaces.

So I—the exercise, the prompt had to do with private spaces and public spaces and safe spaces. I'd just come off the heels of this *Draftsmen's Congress* thing, so I was thinking about safe—what is a safe space as a public space? And people were writing things in the area I designated as safe spaces—they were writing things like "the stage," which to me is the most terrifying idea in the world, would be getting on the stage. That was their safe space. It was riveting. I learned so much from the simple fact of doing one with performance people.

CYNTHIA CARR: Was that the one you did with then about the rainbow flag?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, that was a different Helix project that—this was—the one I just described was for the Hemispheric Institute which is part of Helix.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. And what was that project? I don't think it's in the six, but what did you come up with from that?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, that was a very interesting project and I learned a ton from this one. So, I've explained to you that the Anonymous Queers used to use—basically, our collective was built around the Gay Pride march because my theory was—you know, I always—I'm kind of an instigator, so I assembled this collective and I said, "Look, here's the deal. We're talking about a million people on the sidelines of New York; it's like shooting fish in a barrel. There's your audience."

CYNTHIA CARR: Right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: A queer audience of a million people. What do we want to say to them? And every year we would do a different thing. One year we did little—it was a fairy spell, actually. It was based on Radical Faery—a spellcasting where we did little medallions that said, "Believe it; racism,



homophobia, sexism will end," and on the other side was the number for the White House and said, "Call George Bush and demand an end to the AIDS crisis," and we—and I knew that when you're—you know, during a Gay Pride march people love swag, so they were literally knocking down the police barricades to get these necklaces and put them on, and I was like, "Okay, so we're going to have, like"—I think we made 20,000 of them—"20,000 people will be spellcasting for homophobia to end." So I suggested to this Helix Flash Collective that we do a project for Gay Pride and we actually—we had—we made two projects.

The first one was about queer class and it was about the economic factors that have cannibalized the Gay Pride march. But it was so unclear as to what—the message was very coded in a way that was uncomfortable, and I kept saying to the collective, "Are you sure that this is what you want to say, this is what you mean to say?" and everyone was hell-bent on it. And then when we showed it to the Hemispheric, the people at Hemi and the other partners for the Helix Queer Performance Network, they're like, "No, you cannot do that. No." So we—

CYNTHIA CARR: Wait, it was a group—it was Helix and the Hemispheric?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The Helix Queer Performance Network is Dan Fishback's project that he assembled, which is the Hemispheric Institute, La MaMa, and Brooklyn Arts Exchange, BAX. I think that's what BAX stands for.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, okay. Right. Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's a joint project between those three, and when they saw what the collective had come up with, they're like, "We feel"—

[THE CARD STOPPED RECORDING HERE but a discussion of this Flash Collective continued. A later project with the Helix Queer Performance Network (discussed below) was a sticker to hand out at the Gay Pride parade, a sticker that re-imagined the rainbow flag, adding content and context to that familiar image.—CC]

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. Okay, this is—[inaudible] anyway.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: What is happening to us? It just gets worse from here, right?

CYNTHIA CARR: We're—there's too much going on in our brains. That's what I think. Okay, this is Cynthia Carr interviewing Avram Finkelstein at his home and studio in Brooklyn, New York, on May 23, 2016, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is card number three. Now, last time, when I think the card cut off—

[Pounding noise in the hall] [They laugh.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's me banging my head against the wall in case this is—

[They laugh.]

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay. The card filled up, I believe, while we were in the middle of discussing this Flash Collective that had to do with the rainbow flag, and that was with the Helix Queer

Performance Collective.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Correct, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: So maybe what we should just do is talk about what the—and, you know, one thing that I didn't ask last time that sort of interested me was that after the first rainbow flag came around in the '70s—that two colors were removed.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right.

CYNTHIA CARR: Pink and turquoise?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Pink and turquoise, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And they're still removed? They're still gone?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think that there is a current—currently conversations about bringing pink back, but turquoise was meant to be—

CYNTHIA CARR: Magic, I think.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: —magic, which was one of the things we focused on. We sort of—this project is about corporate—you know, the corporatization of queer identity, and this was a way to sort of—each color was meant to represent a specific thing, and we wanted to reimagine those things in the present and talk about current issues, trans issues, and questions of mass incarceration, sort of weave them back into our version of what the rainbow flag could and should be. And one of the first things we did was sort of talked about the pink and the turquoise, and what does it mean that magic is—was removed. It just had no—

CYNTHIA CARR: But it had been removed before you started this?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes—

CYNTHIA CARR: I mean, you didn't—you and your collective didn't remove it?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: No, no, no. This was—it was removed, as you said, in the '70s, and, you know, so we spent a lot of time talking about, like, what are the institutional uses for queer identity. And, like, of course, there's no institutional use for magic, but in terms of queer identity, it's very much ingrained if you—you know, through the women's movement and the amount of queer pagans. There's so much of queer histories tied into stuff like that, and so we thought it was a really—we spent a long time thinking about whether we wanted to reignite those colors, but then we thought, well, most people don't even know the history of the rainbow flag and that would be a separate project just to talk about that aspect of it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. Okay. Anyway, you thought of these—they're all questions that have to do with each color in the flag.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, I think that—we've talked about this a little bit. I sort of feel like interrogatives in public spaces are ways to activate a public space. It goes back to Socratic dialogue. So we decided, rather than being proscriptive, it would be more involving if we would ask these—invert these as questions, so we took each color and we talked about—I'll go through in brief what each one was, but we talked about what it meant and then tried to figure out how we

could recontextualize it.

Red was originally meant to represent life, so we took that as a way to make a fantasia on this question. So the red in the red banner says, "Who thrives? Who dies?" and it talks about, you know, capitalism, racism, misogyny, questions about queer success and assimilation, and the ways in which we currently think about the rainbow flag and the way that it's sort of removed from the actual questions that might be meaningful to the community. The orange was meant to be—to represent healing, so we decided to use that as a way to begin to talk about the body, so it says, "Orange is for healing. Whose body matters?" and it talks about trans people, you know, people who live in rural areas and, you know, not being covered, you know, having universal health insurance, and how all of these things impact queer—the queer body.

Then yellow was originally meant to represent sunlight. We have—in the yellow band it says, "Whose history"—it was meant to be sunlight or illumination, so we—when they originally designed the flag. So we used that as a way to talk about whose history survives, so in the yellow band it says, "Whose history survives?" and it talks about, you know, the Stonewall uprising and the construction of queer historiographies and who's left out of those dominant narratives.

Then green is meant to be for nature, so we took that as a way to begin to talk about who gets policed, so in the green band it says, "Who gets policed?" and it talks about people of color and trans people and the, you know, mass incarceration and the way queers interface with all of those levels of harassment, judgment, ridicule, shunning, and violence. And then blue is meant to represent serenity, so we—on the blue banner—band, it says, "Who is safe?" and we talk about safe spaces and safety as capital and what gentrification means and the ways in which we become Balkanized and carving safe spaces, you know, makes unsafe spaces for other people, so that's what that—in the text online we go into some depth about all of these questions. There's a couple of paragraphs explaining each color.

And then the last one—purple was meant to represent spirit, so on that band we wrote, "Who is missing?" and we talk about AIDS deaths and, you know, the imprisoned are missing and, you know, the, you know, poverty, people who are missing through lack of resources and medical treatments. So we, you know, we end by saying, "We stand with the missing. In every story, who's missing? In every neighborhood, who's missing? In every room, who's missing?" We talk about who's not represented. "In every parade, who is missing? In every rainbow, who is missing?"

CYNTHIA CARR: And then this was—it was done as a sticker, right?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was done as a sticker to pass out and sticker along the parade route. As we were talking about this in our last session, I was saying the Anonymous Queers used that—the Gay Pride march, as a captive audience, and so, based on that theory, you have literally millions of people standing there watching the march. It's a way to speak in a very concentrated—to a very concentrated—specific, but concentrated audience that's multi-class, multi-gender, multi-identity.

CYNTHIA CARR: And then there was —another one of the Flash Collectives that seems important is the HIV Is Not a Crime conference.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Super-important. And, you know, I think it's an area of huge concern for me, HIV criminalization, because it's—I think of it as one of the ideas that we left on the battlefield. Basically, the larger social questions were not things that we prioritized within the activist movement; there were many people doing work around them, but because people were literally sliding through our fingers like sand, there were equally as many people who didn't want to get

involved in larger questions. And criminalization is a spinoff of stigma, which is one of the things that still drives a wedge between HIV-positive and HIV-negative people, and so much of the terrors of having—living with HIV, even in the 21st century, are spinoffs of that, and criminalization is one of them.

One of the things that some of us were very concerned about, but has only recently begun to become of more common concern. is the fact that from the very first indigent who spit at a cop when they were being arrested during the early days of HIV/AIDS when people thought you could catch it like a cold, and that you could contract it through saliva and that—so right at the beginning, as early as, you know, the early to mid-'80s, police officers were arresting people who would spit at them or scratch them and accusing them of assault with a deadly weapon.

And the thing about the criminal justice system is it's based on precedent, so the current caseloads that exist in America have decades of case law behind them. So when Sean Strub—when I found out Sean Strub was assembling this HIV Is Not a Crime conference, I suggested to him that we do a Flash Collective there, and it was a group of activists doing work around criminalization all over the country, none of whom had had any experience with this kind of work before. They were all grassroots activists doing state-by-state initiatives.

CYNTHIA CARR: Do you remember when the conference was, or where?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, it was in Grinnell, Iowa.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was two and a half years ago, I think. They just had their second run this year and it skipped a year, so I guess it was—

CYNTHIA CARR: 2014?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, I guess that would be 2014.

CYNTHIA CARR: In Grinnell? Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it was—I literally had two and a half hours with them. It was a—

CYNTHIA CARR: And did you work with a volunteer group that was—people who had come to attend?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: These were people who had come to attend the conference, and they were—

CYNTHIA CARR: Not necessarily artists?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: None of them were artists.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, right.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it was the first one that I did that was that short, but I thought since these were activists working on this issue, and we had selected the issue of HIV criminalization, there was a lot of steps I wouldn't have to get them—take them through. So we could shortcut some of it, and they also had worked, even though they hadn't necessarily met each other in

person, they had worked together on this issue long-distance for quite a while, so they had a—you know, some sort of a communal bond, an agreement, an affinity.

So I thought those two aspects would enable us to really cut to the chase, and in two and a half hours, we came up with three separate images around HIV criminalization, one of which is still being used. I think it's completely—a completely brilliant project, and it was so inspiring to work with this roomful of people. They were just so spirited and plugged in and incisive and joyful and thankful. It was like everything you'd hope that a collective will be, but when you assemble a roomful of strangers it doesn't always end up that way.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah. So the one that you have on your website—there's a portrait of Kerry, a man named Kerry.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: And then a text about how he's in prison for—he had sex with—I guess unprotected sex—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I can read the—

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: "Kerry is HIV"—it's a photograph of him that was taken in prison, and it says, "Kerry is HIV-positive, but the virus is undetectable." That means, through medication, he is—has undetectable viral loads, so technically there's only a two to eight percent chance that he could even expose someone to HIV. "But the virus is undetectable. He used a condom and didn't transmit HIV to anyone. He will not be out of prison until 2038." And the tagline is "you care about HIV criminalization, you just don't know it yet." And I feel like it's a super-powerful way to sort of get people to think about this thing, this invisible sub-epidemic.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, it's shocking that—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's shocking.

CYNTHIA CARR: That's the one that you—that's still being used?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes.

CYNTHIA CARR: You were talking about the image that's still being used.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's still being used.

CYNTHIA CARR: And he's still in jail?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: He's still in jail.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, boy.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The truth is that the way the law works, exposing—putting someone at risk of—it's the assault with the deadly weapon thing. If you know anything about law, it's not about having killed someone; it's about having put them at risk or having conspired to put them at risk. Law works in a very different way from the way science works and healthcare works and viruses work. So even if you—there are people who are in prison still, and people who were in prison for a

long time for just having—for the person they had sex with perceiving it as having been put—perceiving it as having been put at risk, even though they did not, in fact, contract HIV. But that almost has nothing to do with it.

All you need to do is be accused of putting someone at risk, and people are so—juries are so ignorant of the complexities of HIV treatment, that it's up to 12 people to decide whether they think someone was put at risk or not, or whether this person knowingly put them at risk. It's really about knowing that you could potentially put them at risk. But there are cases of people who, these were their spouses and they knew that they had HIV, and then it went south in the relationship and they were accused of not telling them. How do you prove that you did tell someone?

There are activists in Canada or—we did—criminalization was the topic of the first Flash Collective and it's very—it's gotten very extreme in Canada, and there are apps now where you could literally—you can get someone to sign that you have disclosed to prove it to them. So picture having a sexual encounter with somebody who you don't know very well, and people do that all the time; all kinds of people have sex with people they don't know very well. How do you ever prove that you've disclosed your HIV status? Or how do you prove that you were undetectable at that time? It's like there's—the burden of proof in terms of litigation is so extreme that people have gone to the extreme of downloading apps to serve as proof. Can you imagine, like, showing your phone to someone and saying, "Would you please sign this?"—with a stranger? But you would also be shocked to hear one of the most terrible things about this is at the time we did this conference, Sean Strub, who organized this—who's organized this conference, was telling me that the majority of gay men feel like there should be laws against knowingly exposing someone to HIV. It's sort of shocking to me. So I think this project was just magical and fantastic and incisive and important, you know, and it just proved to me what I've come to think, which is you and I could go into a subway right now and assemble a group of people and form a Flash Collective, and we would be completely startled by how brilliant the result is.

I feel like a lot of, you know, the ways in which ideas work in an image culture and, you know, dominant narratives work and institutional power works is predicated on our remaining Balkanized and not participating. It's the, to use that terrible '50s phrase, it's the barefoot-and-pregnant thing with women. You know, if you keep the middle class preoccupied with two or three jobs, they can't think about things.

If you think—if you tell people there's nothing to be done about HIV, it's too complicated, they don't do anything about it. And I feel like what I'm learning from the Flash Collective, and I've done—you know, I'm getting close to 20 of them so far—is that I'm—each time I'm astonished by the level of incisiveness and clarity and engagement.

I, you know, I really do feel the—it's why I started doing these; I feel like the most—the least useful thing about looking at my body of work is to just look at it. The most useful thing is to be set free in its brains, to understand its context, to hear the back stories, to figure out how that applies to you. That is their use and that's what my current work is about. It's trying to pass on those skills and sort of ignite some of those ideas, and I even had this slightly megalomaniacal idea when I was asked by the UNODC to curate a show for them of doing these on an international scale and setting up Flash Collectives in various places where the epidemic rages, like Eastern Europe, Russia, Kazakhstan, Europe, a few capitals in America, and some places in Canada, and have—and go around and set up a series of collectives and then have those members from those collectives all working on public projects surrounding HIV/AIDS, and then have members of those communities rotate—of those collectives, sorry, rotate. So people from Kazakhstan would go to Russia for one meeting and people from Russia would go to Canada for one meeting so that there's this cross-pollination of

collectives to set up sort of an international network of people working on projects in the public spaces about HIV/AIDS and sharing what their experiences are.

CYNTHIA CARR: Sounds like a great idea. What does UNODC stand for?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The United Nations Office of Drug and Crime.

CYNTHIA CARR: Of Drug and Crime? Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yeah, because a lot of the—the proposal was made by me to Eric Sawyer. I was brought in by Eric Sawyer who's the community liaison for UNAIDS, and the UNODC was interested in having me curate a show because a large part of the burgeoning epidemic in Eastern Europe has to do with IV drug use. So that's how I became involved in this conversation.

CYNTHIA CARR: I keep thinking it'll happen here, all this—the heroin use now in all these rural communities that's become like an epidemic of, you know, heroin overdoses or whatever, but—it'll start to happen there.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's not a good thing to never talk about IV drug use with regard to HIV/AIDS. It's just the things that we don't talk about are the things to pay attention to, and I think that that's where I have become so obsessed with sort of using the dominant narrative to explode the dominant narrative and pave the way for these other counter-narratives which are—if you want to think of it in terms of the HIV as a metaphor, these are the reservoirs in the body politic where HIV stigma has been hidden, and if we're spending all this energy trying to eradicate HIV from the body in an effort to end the AIDS crisis, it could end tomorrow and people would still be in jail, and there would still be decades of case law to keep them there.

We have a fantasy about mediating HIV/AIDS only in terms of viral suppression, but the AIDS crisis was not caused by the virus; it was caused by social circumstances. So there's no eradication of HIV/AIDS without eradicating stigma, criminalization, transphobia, racism, and misogyny. There's just—it's—there's no way to do it. And if you're content to think that a cure or a curative or a functional cure, people in the HIV community argue about the exact meaning of those things and which of those things we should be striving for—even if we had all of that tomorrow, you're talking about 36 million people globally who are living with HIV.

CYNTHIA CARR: Wow.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So how many people is the medication not going to work on, and how many people aren't going to be able to get it? And what about people who can get it and still be accused of exposing their long-term partners to it? Those things don't go away.

CYNTHIA CARR: There was another Flash Collective you did with the—exhibit at the New York Public Library—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I love this one.

CYNTHIA CARR: —called *Why We Fight*. And also that's something—I saw that one. Was Visual AIDS involved with that? Because—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Visual AIDS was involved in that, yeah.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay, because I saw—I got some copies of that at their—the Visual AIDS booth,

—  
AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: That's right, the—

CYNTHIA CARR: —during the IDEAS Festival.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: The lenticular—

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Did you see the lenticular postcard?

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes. Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's astonishing, that project. It's so—

CYNTHIA CARR: But it started with the New York Public Library exhibit?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Yes, so Jason Bauman co-curated—or I think he was the primary curator on a show called *Why We Fight* that drew on archival material from the New York Public Library, but he wanted to take a look at these counter-narratives—I think it was a very smart little show, extremely smart little show. And so he also assembled a lot of public programming, some of which was incredibly insightful like—he did a panel on women and AIDS. Why had no one done a panel on women and AIDS in all this time? So he had a very expansive vision of the show and he asked me if I would do some blogging which was actually the genesis of—some of the chapters of the book are based on these blog posts in which I take this body of work that I had a hand in and talk about the issues that those posters were about and analyze them from a sociopolitical point of view, and also try to contemporize their meaning.

So when I told him about the Flash Collective work, he was very excited about it, and we decided to assemble one, and we did, and Visual AIDS helped us. They put out a general call and they helped us find the people to attend the Flash Collective. But we also went to the public through the New York City, you know, city university and state university programs, graduate schools in public health, journalism, and the sciences, to also include people who are non-artists in these collectives. And we had a—we ended up having a day and a half in time. The Flash Collectives I've assembled have been anywhere from two and a half hours to—a day and a half has been the longest. We needed it to be longer because there were several levels of approval. The project—the sites of the project, the public project, were going to be individual branches in four locations throughout the outer boroughs and one in Manhattan; two in the Bronx, one in Staten Island, and one in Manhattan.

CYNTHIA CARR: You mean library branches?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Library branches, yeah. So we're talking about mixed-race, mixed-class, mixed-gender, mixed-sexuality audiences in a public library, and intergenerational audiences, which is—in a way, replicates the streets of New York, but in another way it doesn't. It's extremely targeted; these are community-shared spaces for different communities, and many of these communities have multiple languages, so this project was—not only did we do this project, we did it in two Chinese dialects, Russian, Spanish, and English—it was translated into. And we decided very quickly on—it was happening at the exact same moment that the New York City Department of Health was doing a campaign in the subways of New York that had to do with undetectability, which means through anti-retrovirals you can achieve a level of virtual undetectability in terms of the amount of HIV in your bloodstream and consequently, it can mediate other people's exposure



to it. But in talking about it, I had an idea that I wanted to deal with this, but I really wanted the collective to decide what the issue would be.

All we knew was that it was going to be in New York Public Library locations and it was going to be an audience that was incredibly diverse. So as we were beginning to sort of—at first I did a mapping exercise and the things that came up had to do with some of the things we had just previously discovered: stigma, criminalization, misogyny, racism. And in thinking about it, at the same moment we were talking about it, I brought up these New York public health campaigns, and basically it was pictures of different depictions of different types of people. One was a trans person; one was a black person; you know, I think there might have been a Latino; and literally, the image was split in half and one of them was depicted as vibrant and colorful and happy, and the other side was depicted as unhappy or in some way bad. And the entire onus of—the gist of the campaign was to get people to enter what's referred to as the treatment cascade, to get tested, to get on drugs—on anti-retroviral drugs that would reduce their viral load, and to stay on them, and they made it seem—it was a little like posters from during the war effort in World War II—

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AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was a little like, "It's your public responsibility as an HIV-positive person for the good of the entire social health of HIV,"—as though HIV-negatives have no power or control over their own sexual conduct. It entirely shifted the responsibility for mediating exposure to HIV/AIDS to people living with HIV. I thought there was something really pernicious and weird about that. We started talking about it, and then we realized that the whole idea of undetectability has this set of myths surrounding it that have to do with access, have to do with money, have to do with race, have to do with gender, and those were the things that had turned up—all of those things had turned up in our mapping exercise. So we decided the project was going to be about what it meant to be undetectable.

It was sort of a counter—it was a shot across the bow of the New York Public Health's campaign. [Laughs.] And I think that the challenge here was to explain what undetectability is. Most people don't even know what it is. They don't know what the word means, so we had to define it; then we had to define it from the medical perspective. We had to explain why it's a problem; maintaining undetectability is not an easy thing to do.

And then we had to talk about what it meant in terms of access, you know, that you could be on medication and still not achieve undetectability. That's if you even had access to it or knew about it. And then what does it mean to emphasize this, and you know, doesn't it, in fact, sort of drive a wedge between people as opposed to helping us understand how to actually deal with this epidemic? And we managed to do all of that. You saw the postcard; it was six by six inches.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And in the libraries we did them—we did two versions of the postcard. One was a lenticular print, which is a—it's like a three-dimensional image, if you aren't familiar with that technical word where, literally, if you move the postcard in your hand, or you walk by the poster, it changes from one image to the other. And we were thinking we were going to do this project since undetectability is this shadow thing that's difficult to achieve and that's mutable, we were thinking of doing—having the visual part of the project be a series of scrim, you know, layers of material that you would look through that would give you the sense that this was something in flux.

But once we looked at the budget for doing it with scrim, we realized we actually, for the same

money, could either do video monitors and do it as a GIF, an animated thing, to show the flux, or we could do, in the same price, within the same budget, could do a lenticular print, which one of the artists in the collective had just seen a poster for one of the *Ring* movies, and they had 3D images, and there was a 3D image of Cate Blanchett as the fairy queen or whatever she is in those movies.

And he was so amused and sort of taken with it, and he was saying, "Couldn't that be another way to have this morphing image?" And once I realized it was in our budget and it would cost the same as buying a monitor, but a monitor, after it was finished, would end up in the archives, you know, in the storage of the New York Public Library and not help anyone, whereas we could print these postcards and people could take them with them. And that's what we did.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. And they have that—a cross on it that's like a red cross, the shape of the red cross.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's the shape of a cross. It's really a plus sign, and in the text in the cross, which is the idea of a positive and a negative sign are made up of verticals and horizontals, so actually both positive and negative are contained within this one iconographic image, and the word "undetected" is ghosted throughout that cross in the middle, and then on the background in red on red, so it's sort of barely visible but it makes reference to the bloodstream, it has a running piece of text which when you turn the postcard in a certain way or look at the poster in a certain way, you just see the text and you don't see the plus and minus sign, and that explains the complexities of it.

I think it's one of the smartest things I've been involved with ever. It's like right up there with *Women Don't Get AIDS, They Just Die from It*. I feel that way about a lot of the stuff that has come out of these Flash Collectives, and I—you know, as the person who's brought in to talk about the past and this work and how powerful it was, and engaging it was, I'm always thanked by people about the impact that it had on their lives, and I'm very grateful to hear that. I also am aware that there are a million brilliant things that have yet to be said, and I'm proving to myself that they can be said.

I so often—when I'm—during a Q&A after a talk I hear people of my generation, sort of a lot of hand-wringing about how disengaged younger people are, and that is not my experience of it. I think we are told that because it's much—it really suits power structures to think that people don't care. I think people care deeply about HIV/AIDS. They're overwhelmed by what to do about it, and if they're given a way in, in my experience, people have a lot to say about it, and really intelligent stuff, and really cool stuff, and really smart stuff to say about it.

So I—you know, the half of me that's very grateful to still talk about this body of work, and I know it's very meaningful to people—my hair's a little on fire about how we—what that—how that positions us to think about HIV/AIDS going forward, throwing up our hands and just saying, "You know, we did these great things and now there are protease inhibitors." Yes, that is all great, but what about those other 36 million people?

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, because those drugs are still expensive.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: They're expensive. Not everyone can get them. Even if you get them, you know—I think that Truvada should be free and given out at public drinking fountains. I'm not—it's not that I'm opposed to it, but it's way more complicated than that, and maintaining undetectability is proving very difficult for a lot of people. Physiology is not a fixed thing.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's not like a bridge that you paint it and then it's painted. Even the Golden Gate Bridge, as soon as they get to one end painting it, they have to start painting the other end again. Physiology is a messy, mutable thing that's in flux. The body is a thing in flux, and the ideas that HIV, you know, positivity and viral undetectability are—and HIV negativity—aren't things in flux is a lie of the HIV-negative mind. It's a lie that we construct to reassure ourselves that everything is going to be okay and it won't affect us, but it's not true.

CYNTHIA CARR: That exhibit, *Why We Fight*, was it about activism in general, or was it specifically about AIDS activism?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It was about AIDS activism.

CYNTHIA CARR: Okay.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And it—you know, again, it sort of—it took a look at IV drug, you know, material that related to IV drug use and women and AIDS. It took a look at the less well-worn tropes about HIV/AIDS.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right, right. The other Flash Collective that you talk about on your website has to do with reproductive justice. So it's really—it's not about AIDS, but I wonder if you could maybe talk about how they might be connected, like, issues about reproductive freedom?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Well, of course they are. I think that—you know, when I was working on my book, I thought I was going to have one chapter about women and AIDS, and I realized I needed two and I'm just scratching the surface. It's the core of the book because, you know, talk about counter-narratives: the entire question about the ways in which we think about the AIDS activist movement completely obliterates the question of the feminist health movement which almost every theoretical underpinning in AIDS activism is based on. So the feminist critiques of healthcare, of access to healthcare, of the body, of the way we think about the body, all of those things are woven into feminist questions, and my ACT UP was a feminist ACT UP.

It was not everyone's experience and there were many women who walked into that room and felt like it was—there were no women there, but there were. So I feel like this is most definitely connected, but I've done a series of Flash Collectives, and I hope to do more, that are not specifically about HIV/AIDS because I think that they, each one reveal something else.

Like, I did one very recently about displacement which, if you think about it—it was loosely based—the collective that I assembled wanted to—chose that topic, and they chose it because of what's happening in Syria.

But displacement also is about safe spaces which we've talked about today and we've talked about in relation to other questions. Gentrification and safe spaces, all of these things relate to displacement, and guess what? So does AIDS.

I think the people living with HIV or who went through that period, who are my cohorts, are just completely, permanently displaced. I think of us as AIDS immigrants; we come from a past that doesn't exist anymore, that's impossible to describe.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah, yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: So I feel like displacement has—I think that if you think about power structures and the way we're trained to think about any storytelling in late-stage American

capitalism, all of these questions of Balkanization, keeping us separate and, you know, keeping us from being engaged are touched on by all of these intersectional questions, so I think they're incredibly meaningful and super, super-interesting for me, and I think relate back to my work about HIV/AIDS.

So to do something on reproductive justice had a very definite connection because all of the questions of access and race are woven into reproductive justice. It's intersectionality on steroids. That is—it's the—if there were ideas left on the battlefield with HIV/AIDS, the questions of reproductive justice were the ideas left on the battlefield by the feminist movement, in the estimation of a lot of super-smart people doing work around it.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. And that project was—you made a sticker that was like a mirror.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Right. It was super-interesting because—so here it was—we only had four hours together for that project. It was a group of NYU students, and I was called in by Dipti Desai, who's the head of [art and education programs—AF]—she does work around pedagogy and social engagement.

And so they had selected this as the thing that we were going to deal with, and in the conversation we started to talk about the body, which, of course, when it comes to reproductive justice as it did with mass incarceration, HIV, like so many other things, it has to do with our public ideas about the body and who owns it and who gets to say what is right for the individual. It's all of identity, healthcare, social spaces. It's all wrapped up in questions of the body and whose body matters.

So we're having this conversation about it and I'm guiding the conversation. It's a room full of super-smart people, but it—I didn't have expectations that this was going to be a radical project. I said, "Well, what are some of the public spaces," you know, "I mean, we're thinking about doing something in the streets and we could do something in the subway, and people have bodies in the streets and in the subways, but what are some of the places in which people expect to be thinking about their bodies?" And somebody just raised their hand and said, "Public bathrooms."

And I was so surprised because it seemed like such a radical gesture and a great opportunity, so we went in that direction. We were originally talking about a clear—an image that would be printed on a clear sticker that could be put on top of a bathroom mirror so that you see yourself in relation to this conversation. But then we began to realize, well, there were two places in the bathroom. There are ways in which you have private relationships with your body that are inside the stall and there are places where you have public relationship to your body and other people participate in it that have to do with looking in the mirror in the bathroom. So we thought, "Well, here is the question of what's public and what's private and who gets to decide, and what are we saying about it, and what's the implication of it?" And we realized there were two places in the bathroom we would want the sticker, so we made two of them, one that said "public," one that said "private," and it was done on mirrorized Mylar with a link to a website that gave the more intricate discussion about it. Because the thing about a public project is, people don't read stuff, but if they're compelled by something visually they might look into it. So that's what we did.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: We did two stickers, one that said "private" and one that said "public," and the idea was, the public one would be mounted at eye level on a mirror in a bathroom, or at eye level in a bathroom, and the one that said "private" would be mounted at crotch level or in the stalls so you could see it when you're sitting on the toilet to talk about your privates that would—so those—

you know, that was another idea that came out of this collective that surprised me, that I thought was super-smart. Just the placement of the sticker could activate a whole series of thoughts about what it meant to have a mirror at crotch height.

CYNTHIA CARR: Right. The picture is of a sticker that's on a urinal in the men's room, so—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Which also really surprised me, because we did talk about whether we wanted to have a conversation about reproductive justice only in women's restrooms, and when people—there are many layers of collectivity. Some of it has to do with the words, some of it has to do with the image, and a lot of it has to do with the idea of dissemination, because that's how you reach your audience.

CYNTHIA CARR: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: And when somebody—we of course said that we felt like reproductive justice was not a women's issue and that it should be in men's bathrooms too, but it would be a different conversation. We had—we broke into some conversations about what the meaning of all of these different locations would be. But when they went out to sticker it together, some guy, one of the men in the collective, decided that was the perfect place for it. I was so startled by it, and amused by it and surprised by how smart and audacious and political and radical it was.

And I really didn't expect—I might be the only one who thinks that the project is radical, but I— it didn't have to be as hardnosed about these questions. It was an NYU class. It wasn't a political collective. These were people from—I don't know enough about them to characterize them, but I know that they were all spending really good money for that—to be in that class. People don't have to be fully engaged in that environment, and they're not always, but frequently they are. I was so excited by that project.

CYNTHIA CARR: Was there anything—it just says "private" on there and then was there another message?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It has the hashtag to the website, to the Tumblr page, and the Tumblr page had very intricate conversations, graphs, and links to what reproductive justice meant. We—the header for the Tumblr page was a close-up from the movie *Gone Girl* of the woman on the pillow, the female protagonist, a close-up of the pillow, and it was right at the moment the movie was released, so it sort of opened up all these questions about what gender meant in a complex way, and then it had some very wonky stuff about access and an explanation of the feminist movement and how reproductive justice—people who think about this sort of the thing came to the idea of reproductive justice.

And it talks a lot about race and the process, of course, because the idea of reproductive justice came out of the Women of Color Caucuses. So it's a very intricate, more granular version, and the grabber—so, like, if you think of the dick poster which we talked about, was meant to be provocative and to grab you and to get you to think about it, the idea that there were mirrors in bathrooms was provocative enough. There's something mythopoeic about it.

In that regard, I guess you could say it's less direct or less didactic than other types of political gestures. But I think there's a huge amount of meaning to poetic gestures.

CYNTHIA CARR: Could you tell if you got a response? Do you have any way of knowing how many people went to that Tumblr page?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I don't, because as a hired hand, I frequently zone in and zone out, and I don't know exactly what the spin-off of this particular project was. The other thing was there were—because it was in a school, there was some concern about whether the school could encourage their students to do something illegal.

Some people felt like it would be safer to put these in NYU bathrooms, which are public spaces, but they're heavily curated ones. But that doesn't render the gesture of having collaborated on this and done it, or even placing it in public bathrooms in that curated—those curated, mediated spaces. It doesn't render it useless, but it's not the same as putting it in a public bathroom that anyone can go into. And, in fact, some members of the collective decided they wanted to do that, and did in fact put them in public bathrooms. Some members of the collective put them in subways. We talked about all of that stuff.

When I'm invited to do a Flash Collection, I have to work within the constraints of what's comfortable for the collective and for the community that's inviting me in, because I think that a part of the Flash Collective experience is also the deciding what we're doing, and the conversations that we have together before the collective even forms. I feel like all of it is a part of this process in the same way that the *Silence = Death* image belonged to every single person who responded to its call. It does not belong to me.

It's belong to the people who activate those spaces, and I think that that's true for the Flash Collective. The people who invite me, the people who, you know, even do the logistics on it are involved in some way in this process. They touch it.

CYNTHIA CARR: I know that we're about coming to a conclusion finally, but you have a lot of other Flash Collectives that I don't know about because they aren't on your website. Maybe just for the purpose of this, because the focus is AIDS activism and art, is there another one that you maybe would want to describe and talk about that had to do with AIDS—

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I'm doing one with this weekend with the Bronx Museum, with Visual AIDS and the Bronx Museum, and the blogger Mark S. King who's an HIV-positive man—person living with HIV who has a blog called *My Fabulous Disease*, and I actually met him at the Grinnell conference.

CYNTHIA CARR: Oh, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Mark has—so we're doing a Flash Collective this weekend about the viral divide, and we've invited six HIV-negative and six HIV-positive gay men of mixed racial demographics that represent the demographics of people living with HIV in New York City, and we're going to do a project about the viral divide that's going to be projected on the façade of the Bronx Museum for the opening of *ArtAIDS America*. I'm super-excited about it.

I've wanted to do this for a while, because I feel like the viral divide is one of those ideas we left on the battlefield and I—in the same way that it makes me incredibly sad to hear the exact same conversations about race that I've heard my entire life within my family, within our culture—and part of me is resigned to the fact that people have to go through this. Politicization as an individual thing. People are always being politicized, no matter how political you are, or apolitical you are. So I feel like it's an essential part of how ideas move through a culture, especially an image culture, is the rehashing, the re-having of certain conversations.

But it makes me incredibly—it sends a shiver down my spine to think that after two decades, going into the third decade of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, that there should still be an imaginary wall between

people who are living with HIV and people who are HIV-negative is shocking and disturbing to me.

So I've been thinking about it a lot and Mark had actually done a blog post where he interviewed people on either side of the divide and asked them to say 10 things that he wanted people across the divide to know about them, and I thought, that's so super-interesting. It's such a great way—and it was very revealing, and really a great piece. I'd been thinking about this, so I approached him and I said, "Do you want to co-curate a Flash Collective with me on this topic?" So it's being sponsored by Equity Fights AIDS and GMHC, and we're partnering with Visual AIDS again. The Hemispheric Institute of Politics and Performance is hosting us and it's going to be—we're doing it in conjunction with the Illuminator which is the collective that did all the projections for Occupy Wall Street.

Mark Reed, who's from the Illuminator—he started the Illuminator project—and I are both artists-in-residence at the Hemispheric Institute this year, so I thought it'd be a great way to mount this project. So they're helping with the dissemination piece of it. So, all day Friday, we're going to hunker down in a room full of people and I'm going to walk them through this process. I was writing it when you came. I'm nervous about it. I mean, it's a complicated question.

CYNTHIA CARR: Do you think it's changed since the days in, say, the '80s when having the virus was pretty much a death sentence?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: It's radically changed in so many ways, and I realize as I'm sitting down to write just how I want to talk about it, I'm sifting through so many layers of the ways in which it's changed. When I consider—

CYNTHIA CARR: But there still is a divide, though, in a sense?

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: Big-time. Big-time. And I think you—all you have to do is, if you pay attention to the debates over Truvada use, a lot of those things are revealed. People's fears, anxieties, prejudices, anger about what it means to protect oneself, or what it means to be living with HIV, or what it means to be a sexual gay men, you know—how to have sex in this world. And the thing that I've become most painfully aware of since I mentor a lot of young artists and activists, queer artists and activists in particular, is that younger queer people are trying to figure out which pieces of this story they're entitled to.

How do you as a person living with HIV who sero-converted when you were 18 and you're 20 now, live in a world where you're not supposed to sero-convert. Like, what does it mean to be in this world that doesn't have a history of activism? In fact, as I was writing my introductory email, Mark said to me, "You shouldn't really"—I made the sweeping generality, the thing that I said to you about the boundary, the wall between HIV-positive and HIV-negative as being a lie of the HIV-negative mind, and he said, "You shouldn't really write that because there are a lot of people who will disagree with you on that." And I realize that everything about who I am and how I speak about this is, informed by this—possible fantasy of mine, a heroic fantasy. Like if the power structures have a heroic fantasy about viral suppression, my heroic fantasy is that I was raised in a world where everyone I knew thought that they had HIV, and we proceeded that way.

That isn't the entire world. It's the world I traveled in. But it was such a radically different way to view the world where there was no dividing line between us because we didn't know what those lines were in those early days. Nobody knew anything about it. And it didn't make everyone rise to the occasion, but in my activist circles it did. I feel terrible to think that there are young people who don't have—who've never experienced that.

And who are grappling with a world that they were born into, they were handed, and they also know very little about. It's a terrible thing to be in that freefall. It's a—I refer to it as AIDS 2.0; it's a second wave of the AIDS crisis.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yeah. Maybe that's a good place to stop.

AVRAM FINKELSTEIN: I think that that sounds like a good sound bite to stop on.

CYNTHIA CARR: Yes.

[They laugh.]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]