

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

We are constantly being told that things are so much better and we have made so much progress. I really think we have an enormous amount of change, but change is not the same thing as progress. The way gay people are contained, made secondary, and diminished is far more sophisticated now than it was twenty years ago... Why are we being told this condition of profound oppression is actually progress? It is not.

An Interview with Sarah Schulman

January 17, 2011

Sarah's home in New York City

Carlos Motta: I was researching your work and found a reading of *The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action*, that you did for a conference on Audre Lorde for the *University of Pennsylvania* and I wonder how this work, even its title, may represent a lot of the work you have done. Would you mind starting by talking about this text and Audre Lorde, or how these words resonate with your work?

Sarah Schulman: Audre Lorde was my professor at Hunter College and I learned many pedagogical tricks from her that have become important for the way I teach at a public university with large classes. I learned the importance of knowing every student's name and teaching from the center of the room. When you have a large class and they sit in rows you lose them, but when you have everyone in a circle with you in the center you are able to teach each student individually, to look them in the eye and say: "Remember when you said last week..." That is what she would do. She would also say things like: "Class, write this down... The message that you can't fight City Hall is a rumor being spread by City Hall!" The necessity to identify the dominant culture and people in power as responsible for the message that nothing changes and people cannot change anything was a very important education for me.

CM: What class was she teaching?

SS: This is hysterical. The class was called *U.S. Literature After World War II*, the most banal class possible. At this time she recently had one breast removed and she did not wear any prosthesis. So she came in the first day, she had one breast and wore all this jewelry, and nobody in the class knew who she was because they were just taking an English requirement and she said: "Class we are changing the name of this course to *The Poet as Outsider*." This was 1982 and she assigned the books *Understanding the New Black Poetry*, *Native American Poetry*, and *Lesbian Poetry*. As students we had to carry this book, *Lesbian Poetry* on the subway and to class. I had never seen a teacher assign a book with a title like that ever in my life.

In class, we would read the poems out loud and we were not allowed to discuss how the poem was written or what the poet was trying to say, we could only say how the poem made us feel.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

What is interesting is that with rich and middle-class students you do not want to do that as they are accustomed to talking about how they feel. Students in public universities however are not used to talking about how they feel, so this dialogue becomes an incredible teaching tool. One day she called on me to read a poem out loud; a black poet from the 1960s, Don L. Lee, wrote it, and the poem had the word nigger in it about 60 times. So I am sitting there reading, “nigger, nigger, nigger, nigger,” and she asks me: “What is the matter Sarah?” and I reply that I feel uncomfortable saying this word and she asks me why, stating: “That word has no power for you, does it?” This is the kind of teacher she was, and now I like to use similar methods.

It is amazing that people mention Audre Lorde almost everyday even though she has been dead for many years. There are very important cultural institutions named after her including the *Audre Lorde Project* and the *Callen-Lorde Center*. Wherever you go in the world people mention her and are inspired by her. I teach her work now and always hand out *The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action*. I tell my students Lorde was my teacher and as we read and discuss, every student relates to this piece regardless of who they are. It is amazing. I have never seen a work that transcends all social categories as effectively.

CM: It is a text that seems to describe your activism, writing and teaching. What is an overview of your political work?

SS: As a writer, I have published sixteen books, including novels and non-fiction books. Each has gay, lesbian, or HIV-positive protagonists and people as its primary subject matter. As a playwright, I have produced plays with queer subject matter and am now writing movies featuring lesbian and queer protagonists. As an activist, I have participated in foundational political movements in this country. I started in the abortion rights movement because abortion only became legal in this country when I was fifteen. I then worked as an AIDS activist for almost thirty years. I founded *The Lesbian Avengers* and have been working for the last five years advocating for gay Irish people to be allowed to march in the St. Patrick’s Day Parade in Manhattan, which still has not happened. I am currently organizing a U.S. tour for leaders of the Palestinian queer movement. I co-founded *MIX* with Jim Hubbard, which is a lesbian and gay experimental film festival now 24 years old. We also founded the *Act Up Oral History Project*, which is now ten years old. I have spent my life community building and insisting on the primacy and authority of marginalized people, putting them at the center of the story.

CM: What was your specific position with *Act Up* and why is the formation and work of *Act Up* such an important civil movement in the history of the United States? If we put this question in conversation with your memory of Audre Lorde, what strategies were being used to resist power during this time?

SS: I was a rank and file person in *Act Up*. I was never part of its leadership, but I had been involved in direct-action politics before AIDS. There were people from a wide range of political experiences united by *Act Up*. People came from the gay liberation movement, the feminist movement, the *Black Panthers*, *Core* (which is an early civil rights movement), the Nicaraguan revolution, and so on. I had come out of the early feminist movement, which involved straight and gay women working together for women’s liberation. That movement ended right before *Act Up*. It was pretty much destroyed because of internal homophobia and because straight men never really supported it.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

In the abortion rights movement, I was involved in direct-action, which was a concept that came from Martin Luther King, Gandhi, and the early labor movement. The idea was to actively take an action that creates the condition you need in order to move forward. You are not involved so much in theory, but much more involved in the application of theory to practice. I have lived my whole life creating the action-element in which politics come to life. For example in 1980, Ronald Reagan was elected president, which was the beginning of the horrible period we are still in now. One of the first things he did was to attempt to make abortion illegal. Abortion had only been legal since 1973, so hearings were held in Washington D.C. to try to pass the "Human Life Statute," which would have made abortion and many forms of birth control illegal. During the hearings they would not allow anyone who supported abortion to testify. I was 24 at the time and created *Women's Liberation Zap Action Brigade* with five other women. We went to the hearing, which was on live television, and when a guy testified that a "fetus is an astronaut in a uterine spaceship," we jumped on our chairs with handmade signs, and chanted, "A woman's life is a human life." It was simple but because it was on live television and we were seen by millions of people.

CM: And the cameras stayed on you?

SS: Totally. It was my first experience of speaking to people through the media. We received unsolicited donations in the mail from 25,000 people. We had an eleven-day jury trial and were found guilty on the charge of disruption of congress, but the judge's daughter was a lesbian and the judge gave us probation so we got away with it. I learned that a very small group of people can have big impact if they get into living rooms and make people part of the conversation.

I got to *Act Up* in 1987. I had been covering AIDS since the early 1980s because I was a reporter for the feminist press and gay press in New York. I would go to City Hall and cover the closing of the bathhouses and the very first hearings on AIDS. All of this journalism is collected in one of my books, *My American History*. I published one of the first pieces on women with AIDS in the *Village Voice* as well as the first piece on homeless people with AIDS. As a journalist I was already working on all of this and I think *the Radical Zappers of Feminist and Gay Liberation* that had used direct action influenced *Act Up*.

CM: Who exactly are the *Radical Zappers of Feminist and Gay Liberation*?

SS: We did these things called "zaps." For example, homosexuality was considered a psychiatric illness, so *Zappers* would go to meetings of *The American Medical Association*, or *The American Psychiatric Association* and completely disrupt the meeting by doing something like sitting in the director's office. This was something America had seen during the Civil Rights movement. A lunch counter would say no black people could be served and black people would sit at the counter, and perform an action that changes the condition through the action. *Act Up* applied this strategic approach consistent with American history. Martin Luther King's piece, *Letter from Birmingham Jail* outlines exactly what the *Act Up* strategy was. Even though we did not study Doctor King, we absorbed that this was the way to go. First, you highly educate yourself so that you completely understand all the issues, then you propose a solution to the powers that be, a solution that is entirely winnable, reasonable and doable. When they oppose you, they are now in a position where they are unreasonable, so you do direct-action to force them, or embarrass them into having to respond to you. That is the strategic sequence and that is how *Act Up* was effective.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

CM: It seems *Act Up* was born out of a radical urgency responding to social and medical conditions surfacing with AIDS. This urgency seems apparent when you equate it to a movement such as the Civil Rights movement. Has this urgency faded as it concerns gay, lesbian and even trans issues in the United States? What is your perspective of the legacy of *Act Up* in the activist field?

SS: Our current problems are not just relative to queer people, they are broad global problems and people in the West are having trouble responding to the political constraints of their governments. As we are speaking right now, there is a revolution in Tunisia, it is very exciting, we do not know what is going to happen, but we are all hoping for the beginning of a wave of democratic movements throughout the Arab world. In the West, however, we have been paralyzed in the last few decades for a lot of reasons. There is very little discussion in the public sphere that is honest about what people's lives are really like or what kinds of solutions are possible. Most honest conversations take place in private, not in public, so the public discourse is very false and paralyzing yet everyone is being bombarded with it constantly making it difficult to decipher; to look at your own real life and see what it is really like as opposed to what you are told it is like.

Thinking about queers, we are constantly being told that things are so much better and we have made so much progress. I really think we have an enormous amount of change, but change is not the same thing as progress. The way gay people are contained, made secondary, and diminished is far more sophisticated now than it was twenty years ago.

Gay people are being told that the only things they need are marriage and military service and that everything else is fine. We are being told we are completely treated fairly in every way and that we are an integrated part of this country. Thirty years ago, to be anti-gay was a normative thing. Most people did not know anything about gay people; they did not know they knew gay people, or what gay people's hopes were. Today everybody in this country knows an openly gay person, sees them on television, in their families, and understands what gay people stand for and or want, so to be anti-gay today is much more dramatically vicious and cruel than it was in the past when you did not know the names and faces of the people you were effecting.

In that context, in the U.S. we have lost every ballot measure, thirty-one out of thirty-one, in the last few years, meaning a huge number of people in this country are viciously anti-gay and willing to vote anti-gay. We also have a president who does not support gay people, so we are in a situation where the opposition has a more negative meaning than it did twenty years ago, yet we are supposed to pretend this means nothing and has no impact on us, the real people, our relatives and neighbors. Why are we being told this condition of profound oppression is actually progress? It is not.

Looking at the fields I work in, there is no lesbian play in the American repertoire, there was not one twenty years ago, and there is not one now, is that progress? Or, lesbian fiction? I am currently on a panel judging the best lesbian novel of the year. I have read every lesbian novel that has been published this year. A mainstream publisher published one, but the tiniest publishers, so small you can only buy the books online, publish the best. Is that progress? No. I see us being further and further marginalized. Anything that is authentic about what our lives are really like is being more repressed now than it was twenty years ago.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

CM: But there has been however work coming from gay and lesbian organizations throughout these twenty years. How would you explain complacency within the queer movement in relation to work done by *Act Up*, which is to my avail the last queer social movement in the U.S?

SS: *Act Up* is the last social movement in the U.S. that effected change regardless of constituency. Maybe to address this question we can think about why *Act Up* fell apart, which is complicated. The rate of death was so profound; the dying of leadership and the psychological consequences on members surrounded by mass death for so many years had enormous impact on people.

The election of Clinton was hugely disruptive to building independent activist movements because people gave him too much power and had too much faith in him, so members began working in the Democratic Party and got lost as they became part of the system. There is also the psychological element of wanting to be accepted that is a human impulse I do not want to criticize. As a gay person, you grow up with a lot of rejection. If you think something is happening where the person in charge is going to accept you, give you a better job, have more of a social role, more respect, and earn more money, you go for it. This fulfilled a personal need but the collective movement suffered as a result.

Also the invention of protease inhibitors and AIDS medications, which became available to people who could afford them and lived in a manner in which they were able to manage taking them, those people abandoned all the other people for whom that was not the case. With these substantial structural changes taking place the consequence was the diminishing of the activist voice and the bureaucracy screwing up in their place. Activists win policy and bureaucrats enact those policies. So, activists won benefits for women with AIDS, which was a four-year campaign by *Act Up*, but bureaucrats hand out these benefits right? Once the activist voice is removed and all you have is the bureaucracy, you cannot make any steps forward, it is impossible. This is the situation we are in now.

In terms of current national groups in the gay movement, they are so conservative because they came out of the Democratic Party. The people who run the *Human Rights Campaign* (HRC) and all these horrific nightmarish groups that accomplish nothing while spending all this money, these are not the same people who were in *Act Up*, they are more identified with the ruling class and structures of power and they like being aligned with all those people. Look at a group like *The Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation* (GLAAD); the representation of queer people in arts and entertainment in the United States is hideous. It kills me to watch people going crazy over *Glee*; it is embarrassing, destructive, and humiliating. *GLAAD* never comments on any of this. All they do is kiss ass to the industry because they want to be within power. This has always been an important psychological factor among queer people, this desperation for the support of people in power. It is like it replaces the rejecting family, the rejecting father.

CM: I have heard the statement that images can be changed through popular culture, but I do not think it is currently a successful strategy in terms of the role people like Ellen DeGeneres really play in effecting social change for people who really need it.

SS: Images can be changed through popular culture, but where is the radical element in popular culture? I know some lesbians who are big agents in Hollywood or producers of crappy television and they do not do anything with this power. They have no apparatus for power, are

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

shortsighted, and only see their own immediate monetary gain. The lust for money is endless. It is not like they get enough and then can do something interesting, they want it forever. There are enough of these people in place already for there to be change but they do not act in unison.

CM: Maybe this is a simplistic comparison, but do you think it has something to do with the fact that during the AIDS crisis there was a literal issue of life and death whereas now people see a social problem they think does not effect people in such a radical way, in the sense that people are not dying?

SS: It is a different kind of death than biological death, absolutely. *Act Up* had the entire spectrum of social positions including people who were disenfranchised and came from no power as well as men who had very elite power and access who were enraged to learn society didn't care about them when they found out they had AIDS. This shock was a lot of their motive, I mean *Act Up* is one of these very rare examples in history where privilege and principle coexisted, there was an enormous amount of access and I have never seen a social movement with as much access as *Act Up* had even though there were many people in *Act Up* who had nothing, who had come out of prison into *Act Up*, so it was an incredibly broad coalition.

CM: Was it democratic in its outreach and participation?

SS: It was democratic in its structure in a profound way. If I wanted to do something you did not want to do, you did not try to stop me; you just did what you wanted to do, so there was simultaneity of action as opposed to the old left style, which was that everyone had to agree. With a critical mass of people all being effective in different realms at the same time, you create counter-culture. This is the basis for social change from the margins and it is how *Act Up* succeeded. But I am also saying many things could be different pretty easily if a very small group of people with access decided to participate differently.

CM: How?

SS: If we go back to popular culture, we can look at the kinds of popular culture being produced. Have you seen this big lesbian movie that is winning all these awards now, *The Kids Are Alright*?

CM: Yes, I saw it this weekend.

SS: It contains a message that lesbian relationships are miserable and emotionally and sexually dead. The movie only shows hot sex with men, the *butch* is mean and makes all the money and the *femme* is a child who cannot finish anything. This is the story of this great new lesbian movie that so many gay people were involved in getting made. It took them many years to get it done so they all feel great about what they have accomplished, which not only says that these are the only popular messages allowed about lesbian sexuality, but also exposes the amount of involvement and work needed just to get these messages produced. Is this progress? What is different between it and early movies from the 1960s like *The Fox*, and *The Killing of Sister George*? There is not much difference across time.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

CM: This seems to reflect how popular culture can reinforce heteronormative images. What is your perception of the cultural sector on a smaller scale, the work being done by artists in theater, literature, and visual arts?

SS: Each of those realms is different. Theatre is so conservative in this country it is shocking, and I am an insider. It is an elite art form, has a very tiny audience and no desire to expand that audience. Theatre is obsessed with telling the one story they think is at the center of the culture, which is the coming of age of the white male. That is the story told repeatedly and it is the only story that is seen as important.

Literature is different because it is a mass art form and publishers want to sell as many books as possible to reach a wide audience so all different kinds of people can publish books, including people of all races and international authors. Still, the dominant apparatus containing this genre remains the white straight male as the emblematic voice of the culture. There are a few exceptions, but they are always decontextualized, like Toni Morrison or someone like that. We went from Hemingway and Fitzgerald to Bellow and Roth, and now we are on to Franzen, so it is always the replaceable straight white male author dominating the culture of publishing,

Cinema is about niche, so there is the *Black Queer Film Festival*, the *Arab-American Film Festival*, and so on. People cannot get seen in the mainstream so they produce work at a very low budget. I have been involved now in two lesbian features that were made for \$20,000 each. The work is only shown in queer environments and you can't get the money to move the work forward so it remains a satellite around this impenetrable dominant culture that never sees any of this as part of the world, people who spend their whole lives looking in the mirror and thinking it is a window with no idea what is going on outside.

In terms of gallery and studio art, as far as I can see it at this moment, it has no relationship to most people's lives. I do not think people are going to museums, even when you have a super show like Marina Abramovic at the *MoMA*, my students do not even know, they are not connected in any way. Museums are desperate to try to get younger people to come in. Brooklyn Museum did this show of rock photography trying to get people to come in, but there is a lack of habit and experience of looking at art and expecting to find something that can enrich you. People are so alienated from languages of artists that they do not understand.

CM: I guess it also has to do with reaching an audience. It seems to me that in the last two or three years, New York has had a reemergence of a gender bending scene. There is a lot of interesting performance work being done, but it is still work that is produced and consumed and appreciated by the downtown scene and subculture. What is your relationship to these subcultures and how do you think they could mobilize?

SS: I have always approached things by creating my own institutions. When Jim Hubbard and I founded the *MIX Festival* 25 years ago, it was because mainstream gay festivals were not showing formally inventive work and the experimental community was not interested in queer work. Now there are people showing in that festival who were not alive when we started it. What we learned is how creating venue, creates artists. When people see they can go somewhere and see work that is about them, they become motivated to make work, but if their story is not ever represented they become alienated from the entire process, so we have done this alternative institution building. Some of the people from *MIX* have gone on to great things.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

Two of the curators who we supported are now running *MoMA* and *Sundance* and bringing a queer eye to these spaces and larger institutions. For some people it has been a stepping-stone but I also went to *MIX* this year and it was packed with hundreds of young artists who were there to show and see work rather than network, make professional connections, money, and deals. This is incredible, as someone who created the institution, to see hundreds of young people participating in seeing and making experimental work.

CM: Is this similar to what you were saying in terms of a larger scope of popular culture? For these institutions and propositions to be created by people with access?

SS: Sure, of course.

CM: So what is stopping this type of progress? Is there still a backdrop or notion of morality permeating everything?

SS: No, there is an incredible fear and I see it in every field. This is a time of incredible conformity and everyone, including teachers and writers, whatever their role, are terrified about making power structures over them uncomfortable. They fear losing access, money, and respect. Everything is run by fear so people are afraid of alienating the powers that be and trying interesting new things because they are afraid someone is going to look down on them and they will not longer be invited to the party. In the trans scene they are creating their own party, which is really the only way to do it because it is very hard to change institutions. That is why we build alternative institutions.

CM: You talk about the notion of fear in relation to homophobia in your book *Ties That Bind*. It seems fear is so intertwined and conditioned by family structures and the impact of religion as upon the fabrics of this society. Can you speak about where this fear comes from?

SS: Sure, familial homophobia is reflected by larger societal structures. In a family, one child is being victimized by the parents for being gay, whereas the other children have a choice. The heterosexual children can risk being alienated from their parents by standing up for their sibling or they can be complicit with the victimization and earn the approval of their parents; that is how familial homophobia works. This is the emblematic model of the whole culture. For example, where I teach, when we hired one black person, some of the white people were okay with that, but when we wanted to hire three, it was too many. When you start pushing the envelope and trying to diversify faculty by identifying qualified people who bring what is needed to the department, white people panic. They are afraid they are going to lose their access and privileges. That is the same structure as familial homophobia. You have people with enormous amounts of money, so much money they will never be poor no matter what they do but they are afraid of doing anything independent with any teeth because they do not want the disapproval of the people in power.

I am afraid too. I am frightened all the time, but I do not let the fears determine my behavior. How I act and whether or not I am afraid are two separate things in my process. I think questions such as, is this doable, reasonable, and morally sound? What are the consequences going to be when I do this? I know I will make some people mad but can I actually achieve something positive? If I think I can be effective, I allow myself to feel afraid. The problem is when people act because they are afraid. These two things need to be separated. It is okay to

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

feel uncomfortable. If you are going to create anything worthy, you are going to feel uncomfortable and other people are going to make you feel uncomfortable, and that has to be accepted as part of life. If you want to feel safe all the time, you will never be able to do anything.

CM: Do you think the existence of fear within the family has to do with the primacy of the nuclear family as a structure and its relationship to religious ethics or morality?

SS: I do not think it is so theoretical, I think it is just really your reality.

CM: How can we change it?

SS: In my book I argue for a third party intervention. Right now we privilege the family. If your gay friend tells you his family has done this terrible thing to him, you say: "Oh I am so sorry let's go out for a drink." You should instead call the family and say: "I love your son, I have been his friend for thirty years and you do not know anything about his life and I am here with twenty other people who would like to come to your house and explain to you why it is not acceptable to us that you treat him this way."

CM: That is confronting fear from both ends right?

SS: Yes, but it is mainly telling them we no longer privilege the family as the ultimate authority. For example, the Catholic Church had gotten on the public school boards in New York City to pass rules against distributing condoms in public schools, though their children primarily attended catholic schools. *Act Up* realized people would die because of what the Catholic Church was doing and that we had a moral right to go into their church and interrupt their mass. We went to St. Patrick's Cathedral and stopped the church in one of *Act Up's* famous direct actions. Today, you can get condoms in public schools and people's lives have been saved because we took that action. At this time people asked how we could go into a church to disrupt mass and we believed gay people's lives equaled the church, that the church was not more important than gay people's lives, and that is the attitude we need to take with families and not just with the families of our friends. As a teacher, I tell my students in Staten Island who live with terrible homophobia to bring in their parents for me to meet with. I can wear my suit, be the professor, they come sit in my office, and I can explain to them why they are wrong. The voice of authority has to intervene.

That is what arts and entertainment could be doing but they are not. What they tell us is that everyone loves and tolerates gay people, the gay person is the best friend of the important straight person who gets to have a romance and that gay people are only nervous or upset because they have internalized fear. That is what movies are telling us all the time.

CM: Maybe except for Anderson Cooper who does not seem to be publicly out, but he does confront homophobes quite strongly in his program.

SS: I do not watch him. But what does it mean if you are in the closet and you do that? It is strange.

CM: It is strange but he is still sending a message I would say.

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

SS: But the message is to stay in the closet, or that only closeted, straight people can get on television. Look at Susan Sontag; she wrote the book about *AIDS and Its Metaphors* while she was in the closet. How can you write anything meaningful about AIDS if you are in the closet? What is gained by staying in the closet? Money and fame?

CM: It is very discouraging.

SS: I am optimistic because I have learned to set my own agenda and create my own institutions. We started the *Act Up Oral History Project* to create a space for telling this history. No one will be able to say they cannot find this history anymore and we are making a feature film and moving the material forward, and we are just two people. Two people can do a great deal. Also, working to bring leaders of the Queer Palestinian movement to the U.S., I did this on my own with just my phone.

CM: Can you speak more about this new project?

SS: I was invited to give a lecture in Israel during the *Lesbian and Gays Studies Conference at Tel Aviv University*. I was made aware of an academic boycott in which people were being asked not to go to state sponsored institutions in Israel. I talked to a number of Jewish academics in Israel who asked me not to speak at the conference but to decline and support the boycott, coming instead for a solidarity visit. I declined and instead went to Tel Aviv and spoke at an anarchist vegan café. Sixty people attended and we had a good conversation that included many people who would have been at the conference.

CM: What did you talk about?

SS: I talked about why I declined and I talked about homophobia in the family, which everyone can relate to. Then I spoke at the *Haifa Women's Center* and with a Palestinian lesbian organization and an Israeli Jewish women's peace group. I went to the West Bank, met an LGBT group and spoke to the people organizing the boycott. I told them my concerns about them not being supportive enough of gay people. From this meeting the queers I met and I decided I would organize a trip for them to come to America and speak to the LGBT community here because people don't know there is a Palestinian queer movement, or don't understand there is a secular, pro-gay, feminist, sector of Palestinians who are supporting economic sanctions as a non-violent strategy for change. We should be supporting these people so I wanted to introduce them to the gay community here. Since last April, it is now February; I have organized six cities to host them with different public events.

CM: It is a form of direct action in a way.

SS: Totally, completely.

CM: Can you speak more about the *Act Up Oral History Project*, as you seem to be constructing a story that has been neglected or has not been written? Can you speak about this project, the intention behind it, and the process making it?

SS: In 2001, it was the 20th anniversary of AIDS so we are in the 30th year of AIDS today. I was in Los Angeles driving around in my rental car listening to *NPR* and the woman said America

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

initially had trouble with people with AIDS but eventually came around. I felt this was inaccurate, thinking about all these people who were dead and had fought to their last breath to force this country to change against its will. The dead were being falsely historicized as though this country was so benevolent, that it had naturally evolved, false progress yet again and I thought, I could not let this happen.

I called Jim because we had collaborated in *Act Up*, we had created *MIX* and we decided to start interviewing surviving members of *Act Up* and make a record. We got a lot of financial support from people who had been activists with us 20 years before who now worked in philanthropy and we both had enormous personal credibility from our earlier experiences with people who knew we were hard-working and would follow-through so we were given money by the *Act Up* community. I have interviewed people with whom I was a political enemy in *Act Up*, but the interviews go very well because we are working together for the common goal to have honest history of how this country came to change. Part of the message is also that regular people can make change, that regular people who worked in furniture stores, and were bookkeepers drove *Act Up*.

Now, over ten years, we have done 128 long form interviews. I conducted almost all the interviews and Jim and our friend, James Wentzy, do the camera work, like a little mom and pop business. We put transcripts up on the website to download because our whole thing is about providing this information free. We have always wanted to make things available and accessible. Eighty thousand people have downloaded transcripts so we tried to find out where they were from and a lot of them are from Eastern Europe, and Asia so we think we are reaching people with AIDS in countries that have no AIDS activist movement and are trying to get information.

In the process of doing this, Jim collected 2000 hours of archival footage, the camcorder was invented in the middle of the *Act Up* movement, so you have super 8 film cameras and 16 mm film cameras some of which are black and white. There was no way to record off a television set so the aimed the camera at the television to capture TV footage. Then you move to early video, beta, High 8, all these different formats. We took all of it and digitized it so when you look at it, it looks like a dream. It is incredible and of course it made video activism possible, which is a good lesson to activists about using new technologies, but not being consumed by them. I used *Facebook* and *Skype* to do this Palestinian thing, but I do not feel like it controlled me, I feel like I was able to use it to reach my political goals. Now we are doing a feature film called *United in Anger: A History of Act Up* where we are combining the interview footage with the archival footage so you see somebody today talking about an action they did and see the footage of them doing it. It is wonderful, very exciting.

CM: When you conduct interviews with people, what angle do you take? Is it personal stories or is it the way they remember their involvement in the organization?

SS: They take different levels of responsibility to prepare for the interviews, some people really take it seriously and review all their materials and decide what they want to make record. Others are very cavalier, have not thought about it for five minutes, just sit down, and can't remember anything, but that is who they are, this is their one opportunity to make record and some people just can not do it. Still, I try to get as much out of them as I can. We ask about who they were before they came to *Act Up* and that has been really fascinating because people have

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY

INTERVIEWS

almost nothing in common and come from entirely different value systems, different ranges of experiences with politics or no experience with AIDS. There are straight people who did not know a single person with AIDS who joined *Act Up* and became amazing activists, so it took us a really long time to figure out what these people may have in common. After eight years we figured out this is a certain type of person who cannot sit there and watch a gross injustice take place in front of them without doing something about it. For this reason, all these diverse people at one moment in their lives did the right thing and that is what they have in common. It seems many of them have never done anything of value since *Act Up*, for some people it began a lifelong service, and others they were already on that track and it was just another thing they did to be a responsible citizen so it is very diverse in that regard.