

# A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film

Edited by

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# Digital AIDS Documentary

## *Webs, Rooms, Viruses, and Quilts*

Alexandra Juhasz

### Introduction

In this chapter, try as I will, I just won't quite be able to spin these pages into a web; I will fail to stitch my words and images into a quilt. The page is flat. The chapter is linear. A quilt has texture. This weighty anthology is long and done. If I was with you in a room or even on the Internet, talking live and inhabiting space together, I might better spin and stitch as methods to both describe and enact digital documentary tactics, as well as to remember and perhaps also initiate a contemporary AIDS activism. Ah well: you (we) are (t)here.

My self-reflexive, self-critical introduction devoted to form and method initiates and enacts one of the concerns of the chapter (as multi-mediated stitching and spinning might have done as well): how the changing shapes of documentary and memorials contribute to or form our shifting knowledge of HIV/AIDS and the actions such ideas engender. I will focus upon four tangled lines of thinking and one meta concern:

- 1 How documentaries change as they move from the linear forms of video used by myself and others when the AIDS crisis began in the 1980s to today's online digital documentary forms.
- 2 How memory, memorials, and documentaries are dependent upon their forms and materials.
- 3 How documentary and other memorials have and might continue to serve AIDS activism, as HIV/AIDS itself changes in space, across time, and in relation to its histories of activism and transmission.

- 4 How using documentary (and discussions about it) to build temporary memorials, in rooms or on pages, might also serve HIV/AIDS activism and its memory.
- 5 How representational technologies – from the metaphor to the quilt to the body to digital manifestations of these earlier forms – clarify and tangle lines of thinking and feeling through practices of cutting, linking, displacing, and flowing.

This chapter was first a live talk in a room making use of PowerPoint, websites, digital video clips, and even a 16 mm film, not to mention the feelings that I attempted to orchestrate with some care if not as much control.<sup>1</sup> As was true there, here I will make interweaving claims in a variety of formats. However, unlike in that room, for this book-bound communicative endeavor I cannot rely upon all of new media's easily available technologies and their discrete and mixable potential for montage or transmission; nor can I engage with screens, walls, quilts (or even tables; more on this soon), even as the work I consider most definitively does. (My writerly play with feelings is open for your self-aware critique. The role of feeling in documentary, memorials, and their related activism is now our under-the-table concern.) Sadly, this particular endeavor's lost affordances of certain new (media) spaces and technologies must be left for other AIDS activists: those who move online or meet together in rooms.

But, given our shared limits here, we might together consider the expressive, political, and communicative potentials for this scholarly encounter with AIDS documentary's current webs, especially works such as this one (and the works it considers) that understand ourselves to be in the "committed" and "personal" vein. For this reason, I have included a few tokens of the stimulating and giving editorial commentary that I received – first via track changes in Word over email – as evidence of the still vibrant activities of "paper" or at least word-bound transmissions of knowledge within communities of political intellectual practice. Furthermore, given that I am one editor, with Alisa Lebow, of this entire Blackwell collection, this reflexive gesture towards my own editorial interlocutors and experience as writer serves to mark this usually unseen (and under-appreciated) practice of intellectual linking, building, and sharing that underwrites (book and essay) writing.

### Video Remains

Documentaries typically begin as actions in the world and end as images in rooms thanks to mediating technologies. While the lived experience that launches them can occur in many places – on a beach, in a conference room – they have been historically received in a smaller selection of places that have been best suited to hold and use them. My 2005 experimental documentary, *Video Remains*, evokes and mourns my long-dead friend Jim, in a dialogue that I forced – with video – across time and between worldly places and people.



**Figure 15.1** Jim in *Video Remains* (Alexandra Juhasz, 2005) at the Silver Lake Film Festival, 2006. Photo by Alexandra Juhasz.

In the video, I edit together one lengthy long-take of Jim on the beach in Miami in 1993, a few months before he died of AIDS, with select clips of gay kids of color in an AIDS support group at AIDS Project Los Angeles so many years later in 2004 (itself now many years ago), and two lengthy scenes at a barber shop in Silver Lake also in 2004, where I tape my stylist and I talking about AIDS and loss through the mirror. Shot where I was at various times, these scenes are seen in the order of my preference and on one screen. First enjoyed in the glittery showplaces of gay and lesbian film festivals around the world, *Video Remains* continues to have a minor home viewership on smaller systems and to private audiences through the videos and DVDs that I self-distribute. *Video Remains* is my only recent documentary *not* to be available (for free) online, thereby most ready for a mobile- and micro-viewing public, for reasons associated to both its economic marginality (no distributor has bet that its sales will justify the costs of online distribution), and its author's formal intractability (my belief that because it is a "duration piece," and a formally experimental one at that, its arguments are best served by a stable and even sizable screen).

As we see right here and now (Figure 15.1), dead people and their documentaries materialize on flat planes that hold and display them. So I begin by asking: how might we recognize documentary that locates itself and its reception in unfamiliar, unconstrained places?

### Unconstrained Webs

In participant materials provided for an MIT workshop (2000) on Tim Berners-Lee's book *Weaving the Web* (1999) – which is and still available online at

[www.doc88.com/p-314620000066.html](http://www.doc88.com/p-314620000066.html) – a PowerPoint page called "Summary of Design Considerations" reads:

Tim has described the evolution of the Web and noted key design that influenced its essence. The Web:

- Allows for connections between different pieces of information.
- Is unconstraining.
- Hides computers and networking.
- Is a place where you can put absolutely any information.
- Is completely minimalist.
- Allows for universality.
- Is a project management tool that allows us to work together by sharing information freely and readily.

Today, documentaries too can happen in, on, and through webs.

### The Creative Treatment of Actuality

In the 1940s, John Grierson defined the documentaries of his time with prescience. For even today, documentaries are manufactured, at least in part, as creative treatments of some actualities that might have first occurred in once-lived spaces like hair salons or beaches. However the spaces they themselves now occupy for reception, or perhaps activation, are not so much like the documentaries of Grierson's time but rather more akin to the world that documentaries document: neither linear nor flat, neither necessarily in a room nor on a screen. Soon, I'll show you a documentary on a *table*. Users tilt it to access the AIDS documents that are stored within and then are virtually or metaphorically stitched onto its surface as a "quilt."

Today, montage practices – ever the documentary artists' expressive purview – have become the users' as well. Reception, sometimes understood as the seat of documentary (Eitzen, 1995), becomes just another bit of source material.

### The Page and the Room

How might I show on a page that contemporary digital representations of HIV/AIDS, happening in something akin to three-dimensional space and non-linear time, might be a new manner of AIDS documentary – one deeply connected to older documentaries to be sure? And why this wish to show rather than to tell? To enact rather than didact?

The orchestration of feelings, my friends: the creative treatment of actuality ... Facts when treated just right beget feelings. Feelings are stored, unconstrained, in bodies. Feelings and facts that are shared between people can instigate collective action: I've seen it. Digital AIDS documentaries enable new kinds of representations, receptions,

memories, memorials, and actions, much like those that can happen in a room and less like what I can do on this page. Rooms (and webs) and pages are *different*:

- Rooms and pages allow for connections between pieces of information and people.
- Both are constraining and unconstraining. Rooms have walls and also doors. Pages are turnable but not inhabitable, except metaphorically, which connects them, metaphorically, to certain kinds of webs.
- Rooms hide, refuse, and/or hold computers and networking, depending upon architectural norms and resources, wires, routers, and rules. Pages can only (poorly) represent these technologies.
- Neither a room nor a page is a place that holds absolutely any information.
- Rooms are minimalist, or not, depending upon décor, taste, resources, norms, and uses. Academic pages tend to be uber-minimal.
- Rooms allow for universality, but only in principle. Most rooms are inaccessible to most people. Academic pages are uber-inaccessible (unless they are put online).
- Rooms and pages are project management tools that allow us to work together by sharing information freely and readily.

We are together on a page where I am trying (with uber-technological constraints) to spin a documentary AIDS web that holds history, memory, anger, love, and theory. Here, you have limited possibilities to perform, which just might enable more opportunity to contemplate or feel. But this, I'll never know.

### The Material

Digital documentaries can be composed from a variety of materials, albeit all trans-coded into 0s and 1s. On computers that sit in rooms, we watch historical traces made into digital reflections of other rooms once real. These materials are then stitched with traces of grief, since by definition, the rooms, images, and words of HIV/AIDS are signs of loss. But on the page, things work differently (Ryan, 1999):

<i>Electronic</i>	<i>Print</i>
Ephemeral	Durable
Spatial	Linear
Decentered	Centered
Rhizome Structure	Tree Structure
Diversity	Unity
Chaos	Order
Dialogism	Monologism
Parallelism	Sequentiality
Fluidity	Stolidity
Dynamic	Static

### Visual Aids

Imagine a webpage, if you will. Since most past and present HIV/AIDS representation have migrated to the web, I'll randomly choose one digital page to begin, [www.visualaids.org](http://www.visualaids.org); many more will follow on these pages. This one represents the holdings, exhibitions, events, projects, and "home" of Visual AIDS. Its mission reads: "Visual AIDS utilizes art to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV+ artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over." Not yet done, HIV/AIDS changes in its many discrete and particular places (urban and rural, global north and south), across the years that it has been experienced by individuals and communities (as death sentence or as manageable, chronic condition), and in response to our cultural and activist productions that create and transform AIDS knowledge and experience. Some of our responses to HIV/AIDS are static, discrete, complete objects bound to their place and time; others are flows of material; and others still turn still mementoes into moving ones, what with all our current capacity to cut, paste, and transmit.

If I could show Visual AIDS to you now (as I once did in Montreal in a room with an audience of HIV/AIDS scholars and activists), I would skim along its surfaces, landing on and then almost randomly linking images of once discrete objects from an art show I found there called "Making Do":

- a black rat ["Untitled (Rat)," Mark Morrisroe, 1986]
- a minimalist sculpture of fabric, safety pins, and metal loops, hanging on a string ["Feeling Helpless like the Elephant Man," Chuck Nanney, 1998]
- a yellow boa hanging from a room's corner ["Ravin," Curtis Carman, 2002]

My fluid travels might make you feel melancholy or too rushed or utterly bemused: why is she moving so fast? Why these three objects? Even so, we would share a seriousness because this is AIDS after all, and the images are by definition of loss, pain, and disease. However our noble feelings would be as unique as our humble histories, and for this reason, if we were each to visit the website on our own, our tempos of activation would be diverse, as would our interests and associations and therefore our "digital documentaries." (Yes, I am arguing that a digital documentary is the stringing together, creatively, of digital documents). If you encountered the site yourself (feel free to do so right now on a nearby screen), you would edit its documents into your own digital documentary with a method somewhat similar to the labors of the authors of the very website, and even (sort of) the artists of the documents the site holds, who are all creatively reckoning, like you and me, with time, space, loss, memorials, and AIDS, albeit through different materials (the selected AIDS artists crafted with stuff; the web designers coded these things; the digital documentarian travels, searches, and links).

Now, if we were together in a room, and one of us was stitching up the website while the other watched on a screen – one of us authoring an ephemeral digital documentary in real and dynamic time, the other witnessing – the montage of feelings

about AIDS and the digital that would be animating the room might itself aid us in understanding our unique situations regarding AIDS, that is, if we were (able) to talk together about our feelings and ideas about loss, archives, images, documents, and HIV/AIDS. I imagine with just the right documents, in just the right room, and just the right sort of linking and conversation, we could be moved to action. I've seen it. I've even documented it. But as we also know, documents of others' activation or even activism do not necessarily instigate new actions (Gaines, 1999).

## Online AIDS Documentary

With a nod to Grierson, I'll suggest that an "online AIDS documentary" is a new kind of mass of archived, networked traces of evidence of AIDS actualities and activisms, curated creatively or even biologically, in obstructed and/or connected, feverish and/or tame ways, that occur via screens and inside of bodies, so as to infect other arteries that may go on to move history, activism, and feelings. You might be thinking, at this point, that we don't usually engage with this new sort of documentary in rooms together. Thus, while documentary authoring slides and mushrooms invitingly within the digital, a collective, concerted reception or response seems to recede. This is a matter of real concern if our interest is the relation between documentary and activism (Lopez, 1990). Thus, thinking about radical reception practices becomes a necessary facet for our activist digital documentaries (Burton, 1986).

## *We Care*

I used to be in rooms like that: sharing feelings and ideas about HIV/AIDS with people and then sharing that sharing via video to others in different rooms, where the main agenda for the audience was to talk about our ideas and feelings about the video. I made the AIDS documentary video *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS* (The Women's AIDS Video Enterprise, 1990) as part of an activist community in New York City in the 1980s. We made inexpensive camcorder documentary for ourselves, to rile us up, to educate each other, to prove that we were alive and angry: inhabiting rooms, apartments, and history even as dominant culture attempted to erase, ridicule, or condemn us. Our videos were meant to play in rooms of activists and PWAs. Some played in museums, others in community centers. *We Care*, made as my doctoral research and produced by a collective of urban women of color, was made for care providers of people affected by AIDS. Once completed, we got a NYSCA grant to distribute it, for free, to 50 community sites across NYC. Our action was community reception. When the participants from the group took it somewhere and showed it, the grant paid them \$50 for their time and expertise. We knew that the best safer sex education came from community members addressing their own communities in familiar places like living rooms, church basements, and local non-profits.

We were living through the first iteration of this crisis, where a politics and practice of caring was all we could do. By connecting to each other, then linking to our communities, and always to the larger social and political issues that framed our communal encounter with the virus, we found efficacy at a moment where our friends died even so. According to Bishnupriya Ghosh (personal email, 2012), in her readings of this essay, our labors also changed the course of the flow of the disease:

It is not that "care" was not a critical concern in the earlier decades of HIV/AIDS activism, but the fight for research took center stage – often. Part of this changed circumstance has to do with an increased popular understanding of the virus – its behaviors, its ecology, its vectors of transmission, as indeed, its intelligence (a bioinformatic form).<sup>2</sup> "We Care," then, is not just a biomedical turn but a change in knowledge. We have learned from the resilience of the virus, its ability to use ungovernable human sociality (exchanges of blood and fluids) and global exchanges (goods and people) for its ends; we, too, develop resilient networks, not death-dealing or surreptitious, but vital like an "artery," that *also* use human sociality (our ability for contact, love, care, information exchange) and global communication infrastructures to live with this tough enemy.

Made for self-education and politicized sociality – like so many of our movement's activist tapes – *We Care* is now also a memorial: a record of the activism and legacy of Marie (and several others) who died within a year of the video's production. If I played it for you now, you would see Marie caught on scratchy VHS camcorder tape (itself duplicated onto some digital format no doubt: why bother with that clunky plastic box and its outdated play-back mechanisms!). You would understand that she is long-dead, and you would account for that as you will: a fact associated to your feelings, politics, and/or thoughts about HIV/AIDS, media forms, and death. Her haunting would have this weight and no more. It might be enough.

If I showed you, both of us together in a room, a clip of Marie giving a tour of her apartment from the section of the video called "Being at Home with HIV," as I have so often done when I screen the tape in public because Marie is charming and eloquent and also funny in this clip, even as and because she so well embodies her race (African-American) and class (working poor) and gender (female) and age (late-middle) and HIV-status (positive) and place (her apartment in Queens) and politics (HIV + people are the same as they ever were, which itself was exceedingly radical in its moment – the very idea of it but particularly that it was articulated and embodied by a black grandmotherly figure, so few of whom had come out with AIDS at this moment due to paralyzing stigma and associated violence, which you might not know about unless I told you so), you might not approve that I only screened a few minutes of Marie, in a rush as I might be to get on to the next section below – Video in the Archive – ever mindful of time. You might think I was not honoring the dead by turning them into the digital (I'd already skimmed over the art objects and Jim, remember?).

What do our unique digital documentary viewing practices and their associated feelings, enabled so readily by digital memorials, tell us about AIDS, mourning, videotape, activism, and authoring? Could we talk together about this in a room?

### Video in the Archive

Today, many of our early AIDS documentaries, like my own *We Care*, have migrated to new media's archives and webs. AIDS activists of today can easily connect to our past productions of knowledge, community, and caring. You can find this description of *We Care* online in one of its digital homes – at the New York Public Library's Royal S. Marks Collection, care of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS – and thanks to the committed labor of Jim Hubbard who painstakingly took it there:

Title: We care: a video for care providers of people affected by AIDS [videorecording] / The Women's AIDS Video Enterprise (WAVE).

Imprint: New York: W.A.V.E. / Media Network, 1990.

Description: 1 videocassette (30 min.): sd., col.; 1/2 in.

Credits: Producer, director, editor, WAVE: Marcia Edwards, Alexandra Juhasz, Aida Matta, Juanita Mohammed, Sharon Penceal, Glenda Smith, Carmen Velasquez; project director, Alexandra Juhasz.

Summary: This tape by members of the WAVE collective is designed to assist care providers for people with AIDS. Marie, a woman who has tested positive for the HIV virus, conducts a tour of her home, outlining the precautions she takes to protect her and her family's health. Marie's advice is reinforced by a physician who also stresses supportiveness for the AIDS patient and the importance of the caregiver to watch for any personal changes. Caregivers offer advice for helping persons with AIDS and caution against the desire to be superhuman; revitalizing breaks are essential for the wellbeing of both caregivers and clients. One volunteer addresses the issues of grief and loss, the need to get affairs in order, and the benefits derived from contacting religious organizations and funeral directors. Coping with AIDS is alleviated by tapping into the AIDS network of support groups and becoming informed about entitlements, counseling and legal services, and experimental drug programs. To dispel misinformation regarding AIDS, the tape is punctuated by Books of AIDS Myths/Facts.

We build new digital homes for our old video memories.

### Camera Memories

We build digital documentary memorials against loss. These are our archives of activism. For example, the ACT UP Oral History Project holds 100, and counting, recent interviews of its New York members. According to its About Section, its purpose:

is to present comprehensive, complex, human, collective, and individual pictures of the people who have made up ACT UP/New York. These men and women of all races and classes have transformed entrenched cultural ideas about homosexuality, sexuality, illness, health care, civil rights, art, media, and the rights of patients. They have achieved concrete changes in medical and scientific research, insurance, law, health care delivery, graphic design, and introduced new and effective methods for political organizing. These interviews reveal what has motivated them to action and how they have organized complex endeavors. We hope that this information will de-mystify the process of making social change, remind us that change can be made, and help us understand how to do it. (ACT UP continues to fight to end the AIDS epidemic. For more information on ACT UP's current activities, see their website [www.actupny.org](http://www.actupny.org).)

The ACT UP Oral History Project brings lengthy and completed video testimonials about the 1980s and 1990s into our ever-moving present with its new and different needs and feelings (built as they might be on our needs and feelings of the past).

In the 1980s and 90s, Jean Carlomusto was perhaps the pre-eminent mover of AIDS video activism at both ACT UP and GMHC (where I made several AIDS documentaries with and/or for her, including *Living with AIDS: Women and AIDS*, 1987). On the ACT UP Oral History website she is interviewed in 2002 about making AIDS documentary video in the 1980s (the transcript is also included online as a PDF). You can watch her testimony as you will (right now, in your time, on another screen). There she says, in medium close-up talking head:

I surprised myself: I found myself at one point using the camera as a weapon and pushing people, mostly cops, out of the way to get to the people in the streets and to shoot this. It was such an amazing thing. I had gone through so many different events. It was the same modality: performer/audience. Here all the boundaries were erased. It was sidewalk/street and people inhabiting either of these places were moving around. It was exciting. And powerful.

Carlomusto's most recent documentary video, *Sex in an Epidemic* (2010) also documents lost moments, amazing actions, and our past videos. And yet, with all of this video activity, we worry nonetheless that the precision and power of our actions will be forgotten: that our tapes are too few, their archives too marginal, our stories outdated, the force of the now too complete. And so we build ever more digital homes for our camera memories, as much to remind people of cameras' and their documented peoples' power for us now, in the present, as to remember our video feelings of the past. We want to spread the word and feeling and power of activism. Just so, in her 2012 personal email conversation about this essay, Ghosh builds upon and with its metaphors, images, and ideas. She performs the doing of AIDS writing within activist intellectual community:

Given that the AIDS crisis is now a pandemic, the memories of activism are part of the *antidote* and documentary technologies a part of the "network" that will fight an expanding viral network. Hence, the kind of non-linear, spreading connections, the

archiving and disseminating you perform is not only relevant to our U.S. context. (I speak from experience in the Indian context, where HIV activists find the resplendent artwork of the 1980s activism useful as prophylactic media). If Wojnarowicz and Galas once screamed “unclean,” to sonically transmit living with AIDS beyond the East Village, today we actually have the technologies to spread vital arterial memories, facts, doings.

We do the best we can with the technologies at our disposal. Rooms, arteries, bodies, and webs – unlike traditional documentary video – are physical spaces that can both contain and spread live agents like viruses and actions. Broderick Fox (personal email, 2012) wants to trouble this metaphoric scaffolding, used by so many authors to represent and think about HIV/AIDS activism, mourning, and loss:

an artery carries away replenished material to a larger organism. It is not a vein (bringing the depleted back to an energy source for replenishment), and it is the channel for transmission, not the vessel ... is video the artery or the vessel?

### AIDS Artery

On the AIDS Artery, the “message from its editor,” Robert Atkins, explains some of the websites’ metaphoric and literal commitments to the spaces of AIDS:

Since the last World AIDS DAY, we’ve entered the Third Millennium and are on the brink of the third decade of the AIDS epidemic. The irony is that it’s clearer than ever that there are numerous AIDS epidemics, not just one. For many people with HIV/AIDS in the developed world, the situation has improved. But not so for the burgeoning populations with HIV/AIDS in sub-Saharan Africa, India, China, and the former Soviet Union. The time-honored axiom that every community has its own AIDS epidemic remains entirely apt.

AIDS has changed over time and across space and media. In its earliest stages, many of which I document here (and documented then), activists fought for governmental and scientific attention to the crisis which did, slowly and eventually bring about medical, policy, and pharmaceutical regimes that allowed AIDS to be experienced under an altered clock: from the death knell of death-sentence to the expanded time of a “managed microbial form that can be restrained” (Ghosh, personal email, 2012). Needless to say, the timelines of AIDS are specific to its many lived places. Digital documentary can hold and connect multiple strands of time, and even place, even as every webpage itself is dated. So, the AIDS Artery, another initiative of the Estates Project for Artists with AIDS, holds an “arts timeline,” “centerpieces” on AIDS activism – including work by Sarah Schulman, Jim Hubbard’s *Fever in the Archive*, AIDS activist video, and a photographic exercise on *Political Activism and Personal Pleasure* by Jeff Weinstein – and so much more that I can’t

take up the space and time listing it here on paper because that is so much more efficiently done online, through repositories and links. If you scroll down the AIDS-Arts timeline it lists events, actions, artwork, and deaths of artists from 1981 to 1999, ending with the publication of *The Hours* (1998) by Michael Cunningham. The site feels eerily locked or clocked into a different temporality. It takes the intrepid reader to deduce that the “About” section (and everything else there) was (last) written in 2001. Fox remarks: “Seems that the site the Artery as it stands online should in fact be called a vein or a blocked artery. :o” (personal email, 2012).

### We Were Here, Online

Documentaries, rooms, and bodies – unlike arteries – can both contain and spread feelings. *We Were Here: The AIDS Years in San Francisco* (David Weissman and Bill Weber, 2011) is a traditional documentary that, according to its website’s About the Film page:

documents the coming of what was called the “Gay Plague” in the early 1980s. It illuminates the profound personal and community issues raised by the AIDS epidemic as well as the broad political and social upheavals it unleashed. It offers a cathartic validation for the generation that suffered through, and responded to, the onset of AIDS. It opens a window of understanding to those who have only the vaguest notions of what transpired in those years. It provides insight into what society could, and should, offer its citizens in the way of medical care, social services, and community support.

The website for the documentary includes interviews with the director, a Facebook Wall, press/reviews, and a trailer, also held on YouTube. As is always true for the melodramatic mode (Williams, 2003), the camera’s lingering attention to crying, and the swelling sentimental music that feeds those feelings, allows *We Were Here* to deliver its promised (and anticipated) catharsis through tears. When you watch the feature documentary in a room at a gay and lesbian film festival, the room and audience come alive through sentiment and onto tissue.

While the ACT UP Oral History Project is an archive of activism, and the Artery a place for revisiting lost times and actions, *We Were Here* is all about feeling now. Believe me: there’s no right or wrong way to remember, to memorialize. The open question for activist digital documentary remains what we might want our users to *do* with these histories, feelings, and memories. Is it possible to move from loss to action, and can digital documentary help to facilitate?

### Ira Sachs’s Online Last Address

Documentaries can contain and spread history: like a virus that is not lethal, a virus with emotion and intention. *Last Address* (2010), an experimental documentary that



gently and lengthily gazes upon the facades of the last homes of NYC artists who died of AIDS, has played in gay and lesbian film festivals around the world and is also a website that allows for more interaction and information by including biographies of the artists it names. Its purpose is to mourn and remember and respect. Its stately flow is the very opposite of virality, at least the digital kind: that fast, ready spread without the time to care for place or context. Our contemporary digital imaginary lauds large numbers and ready flow; AIDS artists and activists understand that “cursory, interrupted, disarticulated” (Fox, personal email, 2012) expressions are not always best suited for our mourning or militancy.

### The AIDS Web

Digital AIDS documentary grows to carefully encompass a technological network, web, or perhaps, dare I say a “quilt” of feeling, intention, history, respect, and loss.

### The AIDS Quilt Touch Project

The AIDS Quilt Touch Project Table, according to its successful (2011) NEH Digital Start-Up Grant application, “is an interactive device that enables collaborative browsing of a database of images of panels of The AIDS Memorial Quilt that have been ‘virtually stitched together.’ ... The size and form of the device encourages collaborative browsing in public venues.”

After receiving funding, the Table was created in 2012 for presentation at the Quilt 2012 Events in Washington, DC that commemorated the thirtieth year of the AIDS pandemic and the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the AIDS Memorial Quilt.

An early “design fiction” for the project that takes the form of an online video posted originally in 2001 (The “Quilty” Table, n.d.) shows an early prototype of the AIDS Quilt Touch Table (at that time called the “Quilty”). The prototype was created by the design-researchers at Onomy Labs (a design-fabrication firm in California that builds cultural technologies) to demonstrate the culture use of (what was then in 2001) an emergent technology – the interactive table. Watch if you will. Children laugh and play as they tip the table and images of the quilt scroll by indefinitely, ad infinitum, taking up more metaphorical space than seems imaginable, even as this actually fits and flies by on a tabletop. The narrator explains:

The Onomy Tilty Table consists of a table with an image projected on to its surface. A viewer navigates the image simply by tilting the tabletop. Because the Tilty Table is ideal for viewing large spacialized images, we developed an example of how the Tilty Table could be used for viewing panels of the AIDS memorial quilt. We call this version of the table Quilty. It allows for a viewer to move through an expansive image of the quilt panels that are digitally stitched together just as the real quilt panels are laid out

one next to each other in a large area when on display ... We are also developing a search function that will allow a viewer to locate an individual panel. We believe this is an evocative experience for viewers of the AIDS memorial quilt who cannot view the actual quilt in its entirety.<sup>3</sup>

### A Connection Crisis

“AIDS is a crisis of connections,” according to curator John Chaich (2011) for his online AIDS art show, *Mixing Messages, Making Connections*. Let me show you a panel of three pieces of AIDS art first connected linearly across a computer screen (Figure 15.2). I found them already so stitched on the webpage for the online AIDS art show we are currently considering, and then transposed them here so you could see them with me.<sup>4</sup>

### The Cut/The Link/The Room: Elegy and Action

There is disturbance but also relevance when things from one place and time are connected, linked, or perhaps displaced via technology. With transmission comes the loss of what an artifact of an actuality meant when it was lived in its first space and time. Then again, in the digital era we can lose what a document meant when it was first creatively treated within a linear documentary. Users make digital AIDS documentaries by disturbing discrete objects that were often meant to be watched alone, or in a particular order, and in memoriam: as careful, full, complete, contemplative homages to dead people and lost times. Cutting and pasting (parts of) (video) (quilt) people/panels is as disturbing as it is evocative.

Jim Hubbard, an experimental filmmaker, as well as the curator of the Royal S. Marks Collection of AIDS activist video at the New York Public Library and one of



**Figure 15.2** This collage was made to promote Visual AIDS’ 2011 exhibition, *Mixed Messages*, curated by John Chaich at La MaMa Galleria, New York. It was made from images supplied by the artists: John Giorno, *Life Is a Killer*, 2009, oil on canvas, 12 × 12 inches, courtesy of Max Wigram Gallery and the artist; Nightsweats & T-cells, *Annoy Them ... Survive*, 2011, silkscreen on paper, 17 × 11 inches, courtesy of the artists; General Idea, *AIDS*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 72 × 72 inches, courtesy of the artists. Digital collage created by Visual AIDS. Courtesy of Visual AIDS.



the organizers of the ACT UP Oral History Project, made *Elegy in the Streets* in 1989, way before all of this digital activism was possible. His silent, 16 mm color film cuts together images of AIDS activism just so:

- Marches. The 1980s men walk by his camera. We know most of them are long-dead. They are carrying signs and also balloons which they release into the air, the camera following them from street to sky which they pepper like birds cut to
- Rollerina spins on her skates in her signature fairy costume, and glittery glasses into
- a camera-burst cut to personal memories caught in black and white reversal of two men in the woods becomes
- a visit to the AIDS quilt, the cinematography so dark the panels flit into our awareness as squares of light in a black sea, only the horizon breaking the patchwork flow.

Given its necessarily linear structure – it was made as a *film* after all – Hubbard rubs action against mourning through montage, creating a clash, or perhaps an intellectual or emotional link. An experimental documentarian, Hubbard creatively treats actuality to force a careful, respectful, gentle, and complex ride between militancy and mourning, memorial and memory, anger and love.

### Mixing Reality

While some contemporary historiography of AIDS activism understands we 1980s AIDS activists as people defiantly opposed to the quilt, our documentary evidence establishes something less linear or total: there are competing, coexisting, and multiple responses to this past actuality. As Deborah Gould (2009: 226) explains, “Direct-action AIDS activists’ criticisms of grieving rituals like vigils and quilt showings were often scathing and laid the ground work for ACT UP’s different approach to grief.”

In the 1980s and 1990s, the AIDS Quilt – a memorial that was contemplated, touched, and encountered by many of us via material in very large public spaces – was sometimes chosen as one bad cultural object from which AIDS activists learned to better name what we needed from representation at that time. In 1992, AIDS activist Bob Rafsky (quoted in Gould, 2009: 228) proclaimed: “I’d like to find a few people who have sewn Names Project Quilt panels but now see such a gesture as inadequate. Then, the next time the Quilt is unrolled – with their permission, for all our dead and dead yet to come – I’d piss on it.”

In 1989, a different time and place, Douglas Crimp (2002: 131–132) wrote: “Public mourning rituals may of course have their own political force, but they nevertheless often seem, from an activist perspective, indulgent, sentimental, defeatist.” In 2010, a different time and place, an NEH Digital Start-Up Grant application for the Quilty Table claimed:

This project explores the use of a mixed-reality interactive experience for the purposes of encouraging cultural remembrance of an epidemic that is as much a part of the present as it is a memory of the past. The design of the technology matches its cultural purpose: to allow for collaborative browsing, discussion, and social remembering based on evocative historical images.

Later still in 2012, some of the project was realized after being successfully funded and became “a suite of digital experiences that were explicitly designed to augment and revitalize awareness of the significance of the AIDS Memorial Quilt,” featured on the National Mall as part of the twenty-fifth anniversary commemoration of the AIDS Memorial Quilt. Balsamo reflects upon the actual digital object and experiences, now called the AIDS Quilt Touch Table, Timeline, and app:

Arguably, beyond the evident concern for preservation, the primary benefit of the creation of these digital experiences is that they offer opportunities for increased accessibility and visibility of the AIDS Quilt as a living memorial. Given the sheer size of the Quilt and the logistical difficulties associated with displaying it, the AIDS Quilt is difficult to keep in the “public eye.” Online, global, multi-platform access can help keep the Quilt visible. (Balsamo and Literat, 2013)

According to Marty Fink (2013), Robert McRuer projects our metaphoric thinking forward beyond visibility.

McRuer also points to the digital archiving of the NAMES quilt as a means to read the quilt as an emblem of disability history. In tracing the parallel histories of the quilt’s construction and the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, McRuer (2005, 56) argues that “because the function of the quilt continues to shift, however, it is even more likely that uses of it in the future will connect it to disability issues, concerns, and histories.”

### Accessibility Crisis

In a room, but not so well in a book, I can stitch together multiple, competing, and connecting interpretations, representations, and technologies of the AIDS quilt. This is where I’ve been going all along: a paper-bound linear tactic that allows discrete moments and their memories to infect each other. If “AIDS is a crisis of connections,” digital media serves to link, defying forces of nature that might otherwise keep ideas, bodies, memories, or images untouched, disconnected, or maybe uninfected.

Vinicius Navarro (2011) read these words at a talk that I attended in a hotel conference room in New Orleans:

The question I ask of digital media is ... what that record allows for or enables. I am, in other words, less interested in inscription than circulation ... [the] burden of referentiality [is] not so much on individual subjects but on what connects them, the relations made possible by the processes through which we create, use, or share new media.

Following Navarro, I find that I am less interested in digital circulation than in its behavior.

### Emotional Behavior

AIDS activist Gregg Bordowitz recently wrote: “AIDS is a mindless repetition, an automatic self-reproduction. Emotionless, without conscience or consciousness, inhuman. A force of nature” (2010: 11). Much of the digital documentary work of contemporary AIDS activists and memorialists has been committed to defying the logic of the virus: repopulating feeling, repurposing memory, recirculating activism.

### Mourning Identification

Oddly enough, to be an activist – part of a collective seeking change in real time and real places – demands a kind of orthodoxy that helps keep your sites straight, your path clear, and your goals focused. Very linear: like a documentary video or a scholarly article. To attend carefully and purely to one set of goals means a blinkered and controlled vision that disallows the noise, and yes even the possible connections, that might otherwise infect you.

Recently, AIDS activists from my generation have been revisiting AIDS art from the 1980s, and repopulating our feelings, memories, and contemporary analyses alongside and into these aging materials. For instance, David Roman (2006) has revisited the film *Longtime Companion* (Norman Renee, 1990), also much criticized in its time for its depiction of a 1980s AIDS devoid of activism and resplendent with feeling: “What were we unable to see, given the near uniformity of the initial critique, which essentially wished for a different film? Is there an alternative activist position that might now be possible in our contemporary readings?”

To be a once-activist in the present invites a return to the materials we couldn’t see or use then; a reconnecting, and mourning, through digital media. Just as some of us revisit the quilt or *Longtime Companion*, Bordowitz has looked back on Group Materials’ image campaign, Imagevirus. Bordowitz continues: “Viral diseases are testaments to a vast cosmological indifference. They prove that nature doesn’t hold individual life too dear. Beings are born, and they die” (2010: 11).

I add: forces of nature circulate blindly. Users of digital media circulate glibly. Activators of digital documentary replicate and connect with intention, feeling, and towards action.

Matthew Kirschenbaum muses, “A digital environment is an abstract projection supported and sustained by its capacity to propagate the illusion (or call it a working model) of *material* behavior: identification without ambiguity, transmission without loss, repetition without originality” (2008: 11).

Bordowitz goes on to say: “The idea of the virus can be deployed as a tactic” (2010: 12).

Gregory Ulmer continues: “An Electronic Rushmore, however, produces a mourning identification that is flexible and diverse rather than one that is carved in stone. An electronic monument is one in which there is a mapping between the individual and the collective” (2006: 14).

The Quilty grant application of 2010 moves on: “The point is to enable the circulation of an important historical memorial to a broad audience in public venues. This project illuminates key considerations for the design and construction of the technologies that support collective cultural ‘remembering.’” But Balsamo worries even so:

A crucial aspect of the textile Quilt, which is lost in the digital images, is the tangibility and unique texture of the material. Given the impressive stitching and unique materials and memorabilia that adorn many of the panels, the experience of the AIDS Quilt is significantly enhanced by the visitor’s tangible interaction with its surface. The metaphor of the quilt – which represents, as previously mentioned, an essential feature in the aesthetic and cultural symbolism of the AIDS Quilt – is somewhat eroded in the absence of texture. (Balsamo and Literat, 2013)

I use this forward momentum to conclude: Can a quilt be an electronic monument? What are the features of its digital materials?

### Stitching AIDS Online

Sarah Brophy writes in *Witnessing AIDS* (2004: 49): “Quilts’ most distinctive characteristics may be: their inclusion and recontextualization of found objects; their production of decorative, symbolic surfaces; their tactile qualities; and their purpose in warming, protecting, and comforting the human body.” What is true for the monumental features of quilts is also definitive of the digital documentary. It can be ripped, broken, misused, just as it can be used to mend.

Search for “Southern AIDS Living Quilt” on YouTube and you will find a channel with that name. It houses the testimony of 111 women:

- “I think women need to know how to protect themselves.” Click.
- “I’m 24 and I work here in Washington DC. I work with the young women of color research council. HIV AIDS can’t touch a lot of young people ...” Rip.
- “My name is Vonda Lee and I’m 65 I was diagnosed in 1995. My 50th birthday. Living with HIV is not hard, the same you do with diabetes.” Cut.

### Conclusion: A Stitched Reality Experience

Digital documentaries allow links and movement across boundaries of time, space, and material. While they at one and the same time both save and also move the past and its lost feelings, dead people, and knowledge, their most critical intervention

occurs in the present, in living bodies and activist communities that share principles and sometimes rooms. In any place, and dependent upon the user's hand, digital technology can activate actuality fragments into webs of ideas and feelings. The question for digital documentary is perennial for any activist documentary: how do you move feeling to action?

I suggest that we muster and master new media technologies to stitch the extraordinary memorial capacities of the digital with the grief, anger, knowledge, and possibilities of mobility that are only available to bodies in the present. On this page, I hope to stitch these ideas with the extraordinary needs and potentialities of real people, like you, who might experience documentary media together (just not here). Objects that are carefully orchestrated (like analog videos or mall-sized quilts or their hand-held apps) can allow users to encounter together carefully crafted experiences in real time and shared space, together participating in what Castiglia and Reed (2011: 201) describe as "transforming memories into an ideally compassionate subculture."

Only a little later, in their own book-bound encounter with AIDS memorial narratives, monuments, and artwork, including my own *Video Remains*, and thereby later still engaging with me (and also Jim, whom they, too, knew when we were young), Castiglia and Reed (2011: 185) pen words that express our shared longing for "memorials that are iconic and intangible, inspiring both an experience of loss and a determination to survive and to change the historical conditions that made loss possible." They remind us that Simon Watney anticipated something similar in his 1994 *Imagine Hope*: "a highly creative, constantly changing collective memorial."

We best remember together and in conversation. Therefore, as we media mourners of the digital become the new documentarians, our AIDS memorials will best serve us if they can also provide structures for shared navigation, interaction, and community. For, actuality fragments are most useful for activism when reactivated in a room of real people who experience digital media and memory together.

## Notes

- 1 I gave a talk on October 13, 2001, "Remembering AIDS Online," as part of Concordia University's 19th Community Lecture Series on HIV/AIDS.
- 2 The US Defense Department Advanced Research Program (DARPA) models "how to think like a virus"!
- 3 In 2012, the principal designers, Anne Balsamo and Dale MacDonald (former co-founders of Onomy Labs) had the opportunity to create an updated version of the interactive table-top AIDS Quilt browser, using a different interactive device, the Samsung SUR40 with Microsoft's PixelSense. This public interactive was one of three AIDS Quilt Touch Interactive experiences installed on the National Mall in Washington, DC during the Quilt 2012 events. For a description of the AIDS Quilt Touch Digital experiences see Anne Balsamo's blog, <http://www.designingculture.net/blog/?p=1009>, accessed July 30, 2014.
- 4 In the late stages of preparation of this essay for publication in this anthology, I was asked to get permission to use this Jpeg that I had ripped from the Internet. The webpage it had

been on was no longer accessible, and I had no idea where the images had come from, who owned them, or who had rights to them. The process of learning this information, initiated because of copyright laws out of touch with the everyday digital practices that are the concern of this article (the moving of things willy-nilly, their unmooring from context, history, and yes ownership), both proved much of what I theorize in the article proper, while also providing me a valuable context that was unavailable to me as I ripped away. The following background was supplied to me by my friend, and colleague, Ted Kerr, Program Manager at Visual AIDS. He found out both where the images had gone and where they had come from, and also remastered the JPEG. His correspondence is included as another example of the connections we can and do make as part of digital AIDS activism.

"The exhibition, according to language developed at the time by Visual AIDS and the curator, presented 'over forty text-based works by visual artists and designers whose reactions to, and connections through, HIV/AIDS reflect the contemporary moment's tenor on the pandemic.' For the International AIDS Conference the following year in Washington, *Mixed Messages* was remounted by Chaich and Visual AIDS, with help from Transformer, at Fathom Gallery. This collage appeared on Visual AIDS' previous blog that we no longer have access to. For the last six months, I have been working to figure out how to get it back, or at least grab the content from the back end. But a series of issues with passwords, forgotten accounts, etc. have made it difficult. That blog contained unique content that is lost to us now. What is interesting, and something I had not considered is that through people doing screen shots and screen grabs, and through copy/paste, there may be a fractured archive of the blog across various laptops and drives around the world" (email correspondence with Ted Kerr, May 13, 2014).

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