

Downtown Film and TV Culture 1975-2001

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Chapter 18

Downtown's Queer Asides

Lucas Hilderbrand, Alexandra Juhasz, Debra Levine,
and Ricardo Montez

Introduction: Alexandra Juhasz

The golden age of Downtown film is in black and white. Punk kids pose on rooftops with graffiti they just painted as backdrop, the city spilling out across the horizon. Everyone's high and poor and an artist. The films do not record a way of living as much as manifest it. Arriving to the Lower East Side as I did in 1986, these films, and the performances, paintings, and bars that they conjured, were still happening – although I felt uninvited and unwanted and largely disconnected from this scene – and so, like so many others before me, I worked with others to make another Downtown. Ours is in pixelated, colour camcorder video and features gay men and women in meetings, marches, and mourning: a different golden age, the same Downtown streets. One city, many maps. My Downtown houses graduate school at New York University (NYU), HIV rife across newly intersecting communities, and political/theoretical art and living practices that become AIDS activist video and the new queer cinema. One neighbourhood, many genealogies. My Downtown is feminist and queer and organized by theories and practices of collective affect and action. So here, yet again, I manifest my Downtown media scene, but this time not with images but by sharing the page with others, just as we once shared cameras and beers in the making of queer community that struggled for change and was caught on video.

Introduction: Lucas Hilderbrand

The four of us are all at least one generation removed from the golden age of downtown New York: post- or in my case, post-post punk. For us, the intersections of art, performance, street culture, and film that allowed for the vaunted Cinema of Transgression also seem unquestioningly straight. Furthermore, this work has already been anthologized and archived (most notably in the Downtown Collection at NYU's Fales Library). That Downtown cultural production that so resisted institutionalization is institutionalized. But there is also the other downtown, the city of gay sex, gay community, and gay politics, which became queer in the age of AIDS. I am also post-protease inhibitors, post-ACT UP street activism, post-queer theory, though these have retained an energizing power for me. I am also now, like Alex, post-New York, having moved to Los Angeles for an academic job some years ago. Whereas New York is part of our pasts, part of our youths, for Debra and Ricardo, it remains their present. We've written short accounts of each of our relationships to Downtown as a culture,

a history, and an identity, and each refracts a slightly different generational vantage point and a different perspective on the contours of Downtown film – which include alternative cinemas and film festivals, but also, arguably, video documentation, performance, even nightclubs. Our diverse ages, genders, sexual orientations, times of residence in NYC, educations at NYU, and ongoing scholarly projects about queer media, create a generational map of Downtown as queer as are the practices we study.

Introduction: Ricardo Montez

My perceptions and articulations of Downtown, much like those of my fellow contributors, have been mediated by an institution that seems to devour and destroy the mythic landscape under discussion. As a product of NYU – an institution that gave me access to video technologies and critical frameworks for exploring mediated realities – I have struggled to keep Downtown alive as an affective resource for inspiration. The conversation presented here in many ways reflects the kind of animating exchanges that continue to shape and inform my research. Downtown emerges as a necessarily fragmented and fractured geography to which each of us attaches feelings of desire, hope, and failure. To explore Downtown through its mediation in film and video is for me to insist on the liveness of film – that performative capacity to conjure disappearance while pointing to future potentials. The Downtown mapped in this conversation is one actively produced and recreated according to our individual stakes and experiences. Yet, these individual constructions of Downtown reflect not just singular fantasy but an ever-changing psychic geography that is all about contact and exchange.

Introduction: Debra Levine

I came to graduate school at NYU late in the game, and therefore feel like I cannot claim to be ‘post’ anything. Although I am chronologically the oldest of us all, I am new to the academy and had the odd experience of having been schooled in a set of discourses that were built by others to frame my very lived past. Some of the discourse was shaped during my years in ACT UP, but some I only learnt through being exposed to other’s investments in it. Ricardo’s struggle to ‘keep Downtown alive as an affective resource for inspiration’ is startling from my subjective viewpoint. Having lived in New York City then, and now currently writing about the ACT UP’s role in fighting the AIDS epidemic in New York City from 1987–1996, the past has not yet passed for me. I am still here, implicated in an affective network composed of the dead – those who Bob Huff, ACT UP video producer and AIDS treatment activist, calls ‘the ones who could not stay’ – in lively conversation with those who are categorized by a Facebook group, to which Alex too belongs, as ‘alumni’ of that time. Even though Lucas pronounces himself ‘post-queer theory’, what I appreciate most are the queer temporal configurations of this telling of Downtown, for Lucas and Ricardo’s

investigations offer my past back to me differently. These new perspectives acknowledge and separate out so much of which is overdetermined by death. Still saturated with the effects of the AIDS epidemic on my generation, I appreciate their labour as a kind of relief. This writing as 'sharing' does what affinity did in ACT UP – it provides a framework to reconfigure how we think of culture as what restores us, as it is grounded in intellectual and political configurations of collectivity. That makes me happy.

Downtown Aside (from AIDS): Alexandra Juhasz

Those of us who are lucky enough to have been there at all, we each have our own Downtown. Micro-generational, block-specific, movement-dependent, our private (yet so public) little Villages were built from the ground up by habituating our favourite bars and restaurants, by frequenting mercurial of-the-moment clubs, galleries, and art houses, by dropping by oft-visited parks, community centres, and streets, and by residing in our very small, private, but often wide-open apartments.

But there is no Lower East Side for me aside from AIDS. No East Village that does not lead to death – and community, and video. No party, club, or drag show that does not anticipate, spit in the face of, or carelessly look past the virus, the crisis. As squeaky clean as those mean streets may now be – home to carousing tycoons whistling against the winds of Depression – I see buildings that house apartments (once so hard to get the rent-controlled lease to) where meetings were held and videos were shot, and where friends got sick and died. And it is at this gruesome downtown detail where our private little cities, and their idiosyncratic media practices, must eventually converge.



Figure 18.1: TV slide show, 'East Village West'. Photo courtesy of author.

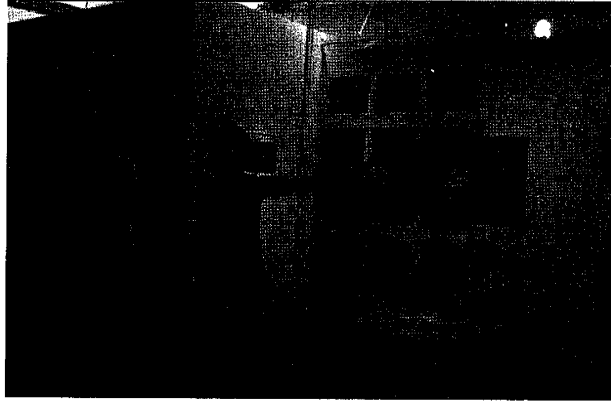


Figure 18.2: Kenny Scharf and Ann Magnuson at 'East Village West'.
Photo courtesy of author.

I heard about the central place of AIDS for every Downtowner when I was privy to a intimate, generous, and generative view of the East Village of Ann Magnuson and Kenr Scharf (not a whiff like my own, nary a scene the same, even if it was all set on the same dirt grid and only a few years previously).

I saw *their* Downtown when I attended a walk-through of 'East Village West' (EVW), th art show they curiously and contradictorily co-curated for Los Angeles' celebration of itsel 'Pacific Standard Time'.

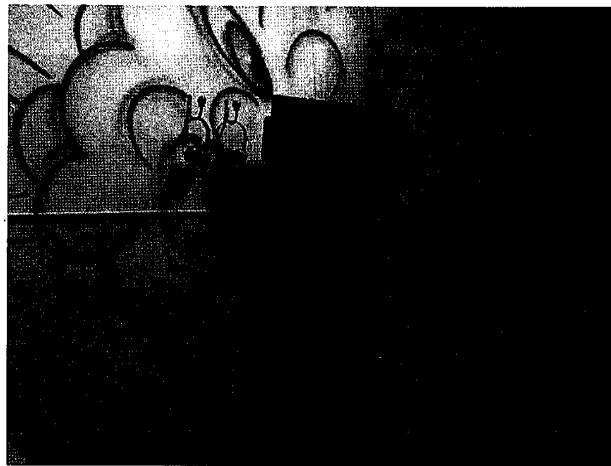
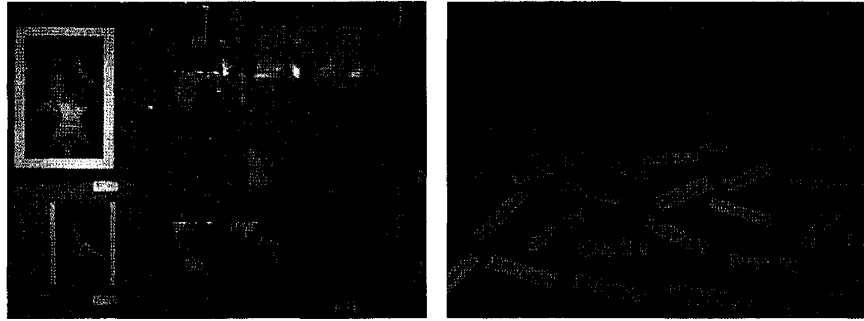


Figure 18.3: Old video screened inside of new Kenny Sharf at 'East Village West'. Photo courtesy of author.

Downtown's Queer Asides



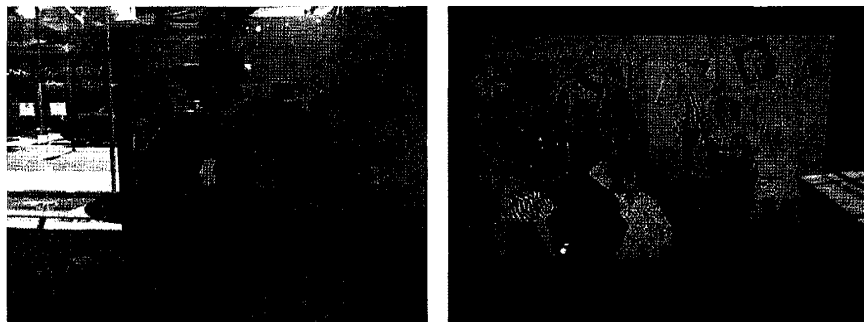
Figures 18.4–18.5: Memorial behind glass at 'East Village West'. Photo courtesy of author.

Habituating clubs I just might have heard of, but never attended, making films and videos I did not see because I came a few years too late, their East Village began in the 1970s and ended just as mine began in the mid-1980s. In the walk-through, Magnuson explained how she and her entourage founded Club 57 in the early 1980s as a decadent, desperate, and 'fun' slap in the face to the 1950s values they had been raised in, and the Reagan America they inhabited. Their frantic, campy, nihilistic death dance was a response to the flimsy and quickly waning threat of nuclear annihilation and cold war.

Magnuson explained that their party did, in fact, end tragically – not with the particular force they had anticipated – but instead with the 'mysterious deaths' of their friends and fellow artists. The show's second room holds a makeshift memorial to these many dead.

Their sorrowful shrine sits across the show's backroom from a quirky salute to the 'Women's Auxiliary'. There mannequins are dressed in over-the-top hostess fripperies, a camp sensibility worn it seems, by men and women alike.

Magnuson explained that after the fun, all the death led to activism, mourning, and finally the commodification of her art as well as the work of her now long-dead friends. That



Figures 18.6–18.7: Salute to the 'Women's Auxiliary' at 'East Village West'. Photo courtesy of author.



Figure 18.8: She-Manners at 'East Village West'. Photo courtesy of author.

is clear in the show's celebration of so many vibrant Scharfs, Nomis, Harings, Basquiets, and Magnunsons that adorn the first room's walls. That Downtown, just a few years ahead but on the same rooftops, produced a distinct and mostly disconnected film culture reflecting a different East Village and another view of AIDS than would be true for my own. For I began my inhabitation of those same streets right smack on top of the *mysterious death* part.

A little over a year after my 1986 arrival to New York to attend graduate school, I joined ACT UP. Our activism and media-making was no longer linked to kitschy popular culture, punk, new wave, pop, or fun. Instead, AIDS drove us to postmodern 'critical' or 'postmodern' 'theory' – academic and political languages well-suited to deconstruct hateful and dangerous mainstream media images. Meanwhile, the quickly morphing academic and political languages of (post) identity politics provided us much needed, just, and collective methods, histories, and practices from outside the art world, and from a different bohemia entirely.



Figures 18.9–18.10: Their friends, their city, their video at 'East Village West'. Photo courtesy of author.

We were quick learners because, in fact, many of us were students and even professors or professionals. And this is because we were, let's admit it, also the next wave of gentrifiers, inhabiting apartments that were first homesteaded by the even more marginal East Villagers who had come before us. It is true: we inherited some keys to this village via *mysterious death*.

My nascent 'video art', produced within *my* Downtown intellectual, artistic, and political milieu of AIDS activist video, was mapped by NYU (and GMHC) to the North, the Whitney Independent Studio Program to the South, the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community Center on West 13th Street (and ACT UP) to the West, and my social and personal life littered across the Lower East Side. Our Downtown scene grew from an activist response to AIDS: first as a principled and even pedantic relationship to feminism and civil rights, and then through a budding set of discourses that would quickly engender queer activism (and cinema). Our artistic and activist response to AIDS brought feminists, lesbians, people of colour, and gay men together downtown in new intimate and artistic relations that begged other media practices and nomenclatures. While the women artists of the East Village from just before my time were fag-hags in a style I certainly inherited, and perhaps only slightly modified, they never felt like *feminists* to me, given the prominence of white (gay) men in their scene, and the superficial gloss of 'fun', rather than 'politics' or 'theory' that coloured their work. That, and the absence of death and dying.

Thus, it is not my AIDS videos *We Care: A Video for Care Providers of People Affected by AIDS* (1990) or even *Women and AIDS* (1988) that best mark the culmination of *my* Downtown AIDS sensibility, but rather *The Watermelon Woman* (the first black lesbian feature film, and one of the earliest works by women within 'the new queer cinema' that I produced in 1995). Overtly intellectual and political, it gives feminist form to depictions of women that are not beholden to, nor even conversant with popular, white, straight, or male culture, but are instead grounded in a supportive queer film scene that emerged from and in response to friendships made, ideologies formed, and practices developed in the east Village and in response to death.

After Hours: Lucas Hilderbrand

The East Village seems to exist in the recent past tense, despite being a space of possibility, creativity, and vitality. It seems that it is a place where you always just missed the party, moved to the city too late for when it was really amazing, where the events start later than scheduled and that operates after hours. I have spent incalculable time in the 2nd Avenue subway station, waiting for the F train and crashing from a night on the town and dreaming of just going to bed. It is a place that instantly mythologizes itself, perhaps for fear that the scene will finally end, that AIDS and gentrification will, finally, render it over. But despite the social and material effects of both, the East Village continues to renew itself – and I suspect will continue to do so – because it will continue to attract new

people attracted by the scenes they just missed in the hopes of inventing themselves and something new.

I never actually lived in the East Village, but when I think of New York, I think of it as my cultural home. Like the queer concept of chosen family, this was the place, the culture, the heritage with which I chose to identify. By the time I moved to New York for grad school in 2000, the East Village was both self-conscious of its own Downtown cultural legacy and continued to be a place where queer performance and nightlife seemed to thrive. The performers were smart and edgy yet far too funny to be pretentious. The streets, especially at night, had an energizing energy, as I walked quickly and endlessly to pulsating music on my headphones. I still love walking in New York more than anything else: *flânerie* at brisk speeds. The East Village, importantly, is also where the bars where I chose to go were clustered; in the city, it's less about having a single watering hole than a particular neighbourhood. I cannot even necessarily say that it is where I spent a majority of my time, but it was where my time felt the most intensely *New York*. Walking there now feels like an attempt to recapture an earlier moment, an earlier age – both for the city and for myself. Then again, it would not be New York if so much of its culture was not ephemeral.

My introduction to East Village culture came immediately through my association with MIX: The New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film/Video Festival (later revised as the Queer Experimental Media Festival), based at the Anthology Film Archives, and the festival's myriad parties – typically two a night that first year – in nearly every bar in the area. For MIX, at least at that moment, the parties superseded the screenings, such that nightlife itself was the art form; MIX had learned from Warhol and other queer art forebears. Though Anthology was the festival's venue, its offices were, improbably, in the Other downtown (the financial district), and many of our programming meetings were either in the Meat Packing District to the west or on the other extreme of the Village, Avenue D.

While I lived in New York, the post-punk Downtown art/music/performance scenes were commemorated by exhibitions at both the New Museum and the Grey Art Gallery. I attended both exhibits, but if I am totally honest, I did not appreciate most of the work. There was a disconnect between my sense that I should respond to it and the fact that I did not. The primary feeling I got was that the work was about its energy, its moment, and its context. I had missed all of these, and the exhibits reinforced this feeling: I was not there. Then, as more recently and even now, the substance of this work – from content to execution – was less interesting or important than the social worlds, senses of the moment, and structures of feeling it helped produce. In contrast, in 2000, AIDS activist video was also literally entering the archives, as tapes were being remastered and collected by Jim Hubbard and James Wentzy and being housed by the New York Public Library; Jim and Sarah Schulman were also starting the 'ACT UP Oral History Project'. This work, I felt a stronger and more immediate connection to, and working through these feelings prompted my first collaboration with Alex. More was at stake in this activism and media, yet it was also perhaps more at risk of being lost to commemoration.

One of my favourite associations with Downtown alternative cinema came when I taught a class on experimental documentary for NYU during the graduate student labour strike in 2006 (adjuncts were unionized and not allowed to sympathy strike). The UAW found an alternate venue so that neither my students nor I would have to cross a picket-line: a sex club on 4th Street near 2nd Avenue, which had video projection capabilities and theatrical seating for its nightly porn screenings. Public sex, alternative media, and protest intersected in a way that only life, not fiction, could script.

In 1987, mourning the 'death of Downtown' nightlife and culture, Michael Musto wrote, 'Downtown is more than real estate. It's also a state of mind so entrenched that property developers can't eliminate it; they can only shift its borders' (Musto 1987). For more than a decade, the East Village has extended along the L train line to Williamsburg and beyond. Downtown film venues such as Anthology Film Archive and Millennium Film Workshop have somehow continued, but upstart venues such as the now-defunct Ocularis microcinema offered a more vital and eclectic alternative. Since that time, the 'Downtown' film scene has penetrated elsewhere into Brooklyn with the likes of Union Docs and Light Industry. Meanwhile, Dirty Looks has emerged as a roving queer film program in lower Manhattan.

I moved away from New York five years ago, and the scene has changed. Some of the same institutions – both people and places – remain, but looking around, it's amazing how relatively few faces and facades I recognize. The cost of living has long been a primary culprit in making the city a struggle, but it's also a place that is in a constant state of redevelopment and continues to attract young people. And let it be said that NYU, arguably the most insidious force of real estate development in the area, is also a principle pipeline of imaginative youth.

When I moved there under Giuliani, people complained that we could not dance in bars anymore because of the cabaret laws and that the back rooms were being closed; under Bloomberg the moneyed oppression seems much worse by comparison. I don't know how people live downtown – in an economic sense – anymore. I write this the morning after the city evicted the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) encampment. The movement had an amazing energy and inspired protests around the world. I do not want to be defeatist or paint a golden age history of another time. That OWS lasted at all and created such a cultural force is galvanizing, even if the original moment has been lost. History is always being invented.

Been There, Survived That: Digital Traces of Collectivity: Debra Levine

In the summer of 2011, ACT UP member Scott Wald wrote on the ACT UP Alumni Facebook page that the Ai WeiWei exhibit at the New York City's Asia Society that summer was 'a must see'. Great photos of City Hall demo. Wave 3 and Maria M. are featured. Ends August 14th. The photograph Scott identified of ACT UP member Maria Maggenti was titled *AIDS Protest, 1989* and had been uploaded to the Asia Society's website. It showed Maria lifted three feet off the ground in front of the New York City Municipal Building,

body almost parallel with the street, trapped in the curve of a New York City police officer's arm. Outfitted in the requisite ACT UP uniform – black motorcycle jacket, Dr. Martens, and cuffed loose jeans, which revealed the bare skin between her mid-calf and ankle – her long hair, one of Maria's many distinctive qualities, fell perpendicular to her diminutive body. Her mouth was twisted in a grimace. A cop in full riot gear loomed in the foreground of the photograph.

The image is mesmerizing for its depiction of Maria unbowed by the capture of her rigid body. The brute patriarchal force of the New York City police is undeniable and Maria's isolation renders the scene highly sexualized. Even twenty-two years later, when I see these traces of our actions, I am still in awe of what we did then, for the image acts as a metaphor for what we accomplished. In its rigidity and lightness Maria's pose seems to defy gravity, and every public health and political institution that acted negligently towards people with AIDS (PWAs), as Gregg Bordowitz wrote in his essay 'Picture a Coalition', 'to no other end but containment, towards no other end but repression, with no other end but our deaths' (1988: 195).

But when together in 2011 we looked at this digitized image, Maria did not remember being carried in that manner. On the alumni Facebook page, Scott testified to the veracity of the photos but noted the other had been incorrectly captioned 'Doctors being arrested'. Scott (not a doctor) identified himself among the others carted off as the ACT UP affinity group Wave 3. Wave 3 members wore lab coats because they were impersonating non-existent clinicians from a non-existent institute, the 'Center for New Drugs and Biologics', which at the national ACT UP 1988 Food and Drug Administration (FDA) demonstration issued a (real) edict to re-engineer the organizational structure of the FDA in order to force that institution to quickly test and distribute treatments that could benefit PWAs.

Without my or Scott's contextualization, the lab-coated figures now cannot be read as a demonstrative masquerade. Obviously Ai Weiwei did not attend the one-time performance of *Rockville Is Burning*, a satirical theatrical re-enactment of Wave 3's bravura performance at the FDA staged by ACT UP member Bob Huff in 1989, at LaMama, Etc., the Off-Off Broadway theatre on East 4th Street. For then he would have understood what he photographed. Performed by members of Wave 3 and others in ACT UP, *Rockville Is Burning* showed 'real' activists as actors performing an interpretive re-enactment of the conditions that led to their arrest and offering, in all seriousness, the activist's carefully researched suggestions for the reform of the FDA.

Scott's missive on the 'alumni' message board intimates the necessity of the interpretive intimacy that now virtually binds ACT UP members through the digitized structure of the 'having been there then and survived that' that alumni relationships offer. For as much as Ai's photograph of Maria still thrills me, I, as an ACT UP alumni, can immediately see that what we staged was never completely recognizable to him. In the archive of the ten thousand photographs of New York that Ai took from 1983–1993 while living on East 3rd Street (200 of which were on display at the Asia Society in 2011), the ACT UP protestors were interchangeable with his other subjects, including the squatters occupying Tompkins Square Park in 1988, who were facing violent evictions by the New York City police.

Contrary to Ai's framing of Maria, photographers associated with ACT UP did not isolate lone activists acting in resistance to power. Our own demonstration photos show scenes of us next to one another, photographing and videotaping one another, and following one another to the police bus. Looking at Ai's photo, it seems that he was making 'art' of us to reinforce his own interest in state oppression against resistant and autonomous individuals. But by framing us in that manner, he missed the enactments of love and support that were staged in our enactments of collectivity.

Other photographs of us twenty or more years younger, appear on the same Facebook alumni site. ACT UP members have begun to pull prints and other ephemera from personal archives, producing digital scans of us from that time which are then uploaded to the web. But these photos differ from Ai's, for they do reflect our formations of collectivity. The scenes that now evoke the sharpest pains of nostalgia and sentiment, judging by the quantity of comments, are the ones that show us relaxing with one another in momentary breaks between actions or during the social events we threw for ourselves. On Facebook, this now unremarkable method of 'sharing' becomes the twenty-first century standard of producing and reiterating fast affective bonds. In the case of the ACT UP alumni site, belonging is reaffirmed by not only recognizing faces – like Maria's and Scott's, or asking about familiar faces whose names and physical survival are now uncertain – but by recognizing and narrating the photos according to the history and practices we developed to transform ourselves into activists and from which we showed, mostly to one another, how we understood our collective attachments.

But in 1989 (as I hardly need to remind anyone) there was no Facebook. The East Village served as the platform to produce, broadcast, sustain, and interpret structures that forged affective bonds. The weekly ACT UP Monday night meetings, held at (what was then called) the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community Center on West 13th Street in the West Village was our church and synagogue and town hall. The East Village however, provided the spaces to reflect and consolidate how we could fashion ourselves into activists. We looked to the theatre as our inspiration to compose events that not only communicated our politics, but also rehearsed methods that would best enact our collectivity. Wave 3 did not merely demonstrate once together. *Rockville is Burning* announced and consolidated their identity, transforming them from a heterogeneous group of individuals into AIDS experts.

I had seen this happen before, this use of performance to alchemically transform a disparate group of people into a supportive and functional collective. In 1984, when I began attending their performances, Good Medicine and Co. did not refer to underground retrovirals, but instead to Jeff Weiss and Carlos Ricardo Martinez' tiny storefront theatre on East 10th Street between First and Second Avenues. The space housed Jeff's ever growing episodic play, *That's How The Rent Gets Paid*, which is about 'a man who is genuinely confused about his identity – in life, in the theatre and as an object manhandled by designing men and women' (Gussow 1984). This epic began in the 1970s; in Part I, Jeff played all the characters himself. The show continued through the years. Part III was performed by some of the now Downtown legends: Nicky Paraiso, Mary Schultz, Dorothy Cantwell, John Bernd, Stugis

Warner among others in Jeff and Carlos' little space on East 10th Street. Legend has it that as soon as they gathered enough paying audience members, Carlos would run to the local bodega to buy fruit and wine to sustain the audience members for Jeff's miniature episodic plays of great magnitude.

Audiences would watch Jeff play out his fantastical and campy semi-autographical story of wrestler Conrad 'Connie' Gerhart (Jeff played Gerhart) who also may or may not have been a homicidal killer named Bjorn Zoltan (Jeff also played Zoltan), both of whom are pursued by Detective Persky who also likes to wrestle his sons down in his suburban basement. The show had hundreds of characters, but the mainstays included Connie's lesbian wife Izzy (with whom he had a baby to collect welfare), Persky's wife Nona (who sometimes fucks Izzy), members of the Mishima Society (on their way to Disneyworld), and Pinocchio (who still struggles to become a real boy). There were rumours that Jeff cruised the East Village late in the evening as his character Bjorn, clothed in a wife beater tee and speaking in a Finnish accent. There was little to distinguish between the real and the false with Jeff. That was the way we lived our life during the AIDS crisis. Life in the East Village was always heightened and theatricalized – and those of us who attended these shows felt like community, much like we did at those weekly ACT UP meetings.

I don't remember whether Jeff and Carlos had the money to pay the Con Ed bill or if their storefront was not wired for electricity, but for all subsequent performances, we had to participate. Audience members brought flashlights to illuminate the performers. We shut them off when Jeff yelled 'blackout' to end a scene. We sang along with Jeff, who manically conducted us in a rousing rendition of 'Where or When' by Rogers and Hart at the beginning of each performance. At the close of each show, bleary but exhilarated, Jeff circulated as the audience and performers joined him in singing Hermits Hermits' 'There's A Kind of Hush (All Over the World)'. Repeating the verse, he orchestrated us all into a whispered rendition; the shhhh of 'hush' vibrated among us like an incantation. Then he broke the spell and belted out the last round. Spent and exhausted, what had transpired between all of us in that space was ecstatic, even as I was the first to recognize the hoary plots and slapdash sets. I was addicted to the actors' hyper-invested performance, and was attracted to and slightly frightened by Jeff's magnetic intensity.

Most theatre has been theorized as a communal experience, but this was radically different. I experienced the most heterogeneous and queer formation of how we could support one another over a long duration while enduring shit, physical deterioration, fear, homicidal urges, multiple attractions, and love. On the stage, and outside its margins, all of us in the theatre were sustained by improvised relationships that challenged every sexual, racial, gendered and geographic boundary. Jeff demonstrated that if we assented to open ourselves up to these encounters, we too could experience how to act ethically, with a group of complete strangers, and engage performance to enact relations of support, just as we did on a daily basis in ACT UP.

Jeff nailed it once again when in 1991 he began a new weekly serialized show *Hot Keys*, first mounted at the Naked Angels Theatre for the duration of its 1991 season. This show

had all the classic Jeff Weiss elements: veiled autobiography, a gay serial killer father and his heterosexual serial killer son on the loose in the East Village among an outrageous set of other characters during a mysterious epidemic killing gay men called 'the taint' for which a cure had been discovered by a mysterious scientist at Rockefeller University but was lost when he was killed with it in his possession. Each episode was performed for only two nights, on Friday and Saturdays either at 11pm or midnight, and actors from Naked Angels acted in the show alongside Jeff's Downtown regular performers. The show was never advertised and it was always sold out; I never missed a weekend and I often took friends from ACT UP, and saw many others there.

Hot Keys, unlike *Angels in America* (Tony Kushner, 1993) or *Rent* (Jonathan Larson, 1996) or any other 'AIDS' play, showed our lives to ourselves – the real hallucinations we lived with. This work was restorative and acted as our support. It confirmed our experience as activists and artists living through this nightmare (have you ever locked arms with someone at a demonstration only to find out that the goddamn 26-year-old man is dead only weeks later?) and depicted the range of our feelings. For me, attending *Hot Keys* was not optional; it was the precaution I took, like practicing safer sex or putting on gloves when coming into contact with HIV-infected blood. Being in the theatre each week supported me, and taught me how to extend that support to others. Sarah Schulman, playwright and ACT UP member, quotes Jeff, who understood how to use collective performance to survive the hallucinatory and hellish:

However sad and sorrowful our losses, the fact of daily life (read performance) should go on. We have a moral and ethical obligation to persist in the living of the real (as opposed to reel) time. That is the power of theatre. We're all in this together, at the *same* time. We're totally engaged in being human together, sharing the identical instants as our time advances.

(1998: 61)

A Distorted Downtown: Nelson Sullivan's Archive: Ricardo Montez

During my recent stint in the wilds of New Jersey, boxes sent from Atlanta arrived full of New York City. While thrilled with the promise of these video care packages, I was also terrified by them, knowing that hours upon hours would be spent reeling through a past landscape – a fetishized field of queer performance – with which I am hopelessly in love. The video artist Nelson Sullivan has taken me on many journeys over the past three years. His Southern charm is intoxicating and his Downtown New York is legendary.

Sullivan, who moved from South Carolina to New York City in the 1970s, documented downtown nightlife throughout the 1980s. At the end of the decade – and his life – he began recording a series of walking tours across lower Manhattan. Sullivan had developed incredible skills with his camera. Arm extended, he turned the camera towards himself and

used his reflection in the fish eye lens to frame his shot. Through this technique, Sullivan became the primary figure around which all things fabulous unfolded. The walking tours he filmed were meant to act as narrative structures for the public access show he was hoping to produce. Having amassed hours of nightlife footage between 1982 and 1989, Sullivan imagined a TV show where he would take his audiences on a journey through New York City, pausing at geographical landmarks and utilizing his art and performance archive as flashback footage. Unfortunately, he passed away before this could happen.

Grounding nightlife and performance events in the physical landscapes of downtown Manhattan, Sullivan's walking introductions can be understood as performative adventures that produce and continually reimagine the mythic potentials of a queer downtown. In one particular tour, Sullivan begins in the Meatpacking District just off the piers where he lived and moves east towards Sheridan Square, the location of the Stonewall Inn. Along the way, he passes Bleecker Street, noting it as a direct path to CBGB's. Sullivan's line of travel puts in conversation multiple sites of queer world making – the public sex culture of the West Side Piers, the ultimate landmark for the gay rights movement, and the mecca of punk rock. These sites represent fragmented and competing legacies for queer New York, and they are crucial to understanding the aesthetic practices and communal formations occurring in the nightlife venues Nelson documents. Sullivan, in his videos, actively fashions a queer imaginary that makes multiple legacies coterminous.

The introduction for what was to be his first show ends with a dedication to his friend Christina who, according to Sullivan, is 'bound to the archive forever'. 'I wish I could sit down and have something to eat with Christina right now', Sullivan states after letting his audience know that Christina was recently found dead in her room at the Chelsea Hotel. He then invites the audience to visit Christina with him, opening a space for what would have been footage of one of their final encounters. The sense of loss here is profound as I think through the hours I have spent with these two friends. Nelson's archive includes early morning dinners with Christina at Florent, dressing room banter at the Pyramid Club, and conversations about art in her tiny apartment. These hilarious, often nonsensical, exchanges with the blonde transvestite, who affected something of a German accent, evoke and produce an ephemeral intimacy. Nelson's documents animate the present with this lost past.

The absence of Christina as an entry point to Nelson's video collection seduces me in its capacity to couple the loss of a vibrant Downtown scene with the loss of an intimate friend. Documenting a geography that seems forever lost to gentrification and AIDS, Nelson's videos do stir a familiar longing for that time before I arrived in New York. One might argue that I have dedicated most of my research to a fetishistic excavation of artists from this historical geography. Nelson's project, however, invites me to look at this past in a different way. These are not the videos of ACT UP with their overwhelming affect of rage in the face of unbearable loss. Nor do they work to monumentalize in the way that so many other documents tend to do. Rather, Nelson's videos insist on an everyday to the fabulous and an intimate banality to life downtown. Perhaps the fact that Nelson was never able to complete a show for television allows the footage to surface free from a totalizing narrative. Watching

RuPaul's first New York appearance at the Pyramid Club from the view point of the audience is exciting because I know the eventual success this performer will achieve, but the footage also excites in its ability to access that yet to be polished. It does not make me bemoan the loss of what the Pyramid or RuPaul once were so much as enable me to see what might still be happening for those who are able to access it.

Many of us invested in thinking through the legacy of a queer downtown have adopted a historical perspective that prevents us from understanding this legacy outside of AIDS and the loss of a vibrant Downtown art scene. While resisting short-sighted mainstream moralism around excess and inevitable ends, critical approaches to the history and legacy of Downtown still suffer from an attachment to an overdetermined script. Sullivan's videos conjure experiential fragments, brief journeys into the past, that refocus my attention so that I can appreciate queer art production and the excitement of performance in a way that seems to delay the entrance of the familiar historical narrative. While I understand there is no outside of AIDS, no queer Downtown practice in the 1980s that is not conditioned by the historical violence of the disease, Sullivan's videos have this amazing capacity to pull me into an intensely present past that puts this larger conversation on hold.

Discussing the aesthetics of his video project, Sullivan insists that the fish eye lens coupled with the portability of his camera allows for what might be a new orientation to life downtown. He appreciates the lens's ability to capture more information and offer a wider field of vision in cramped spaces, such as tiny apartments, taxicabs, and dressing rooms. He acknowledges that the lens offers a distorted vision of reality while also recognizing that this very distortion underscores a great potential in his art. Sullivan believes that his audience will know how to read the information and understand how to orient themselves to the experience of reality he delivers. The bending of reality by the lens echoes the way that Sullivan himself wants to be seen as shaping reality. He resists passivity in his documentation and produces a reality in which he is able to affect things even as they happen to him. In his discussion of the fish eye lens' possibility, Sullivan articulates something of the way he imagines his archive functioning. Viewers actively produce their experience, extracting knowledge and information in their orientation to distortion. Sullivan's performance of self and his visible hand refuse a closed portrait of experience and instead animate the viewer in her present.

Discussing his project in Christina's room at the Chelsea, Sullivan admits, 'It's still coming to me what I'm doing. I've always known I'm doing something really strange. It's something so obvious that it's been overlooked'. I am curious to think about the overlooked in Sullivan's videos. Moving beyond what I imagine he is seeing as the obviousness of his technique, I enter the scene of documentation with an eye towards the overlooked. Or more nearly, I see Sullivan's video tours as an opportunity to engage a past of familiar geographies and artists – a collection of spaces and individuals that have come to occupy a pre-existing historical circumstance – and think through Downtown anew. What might it mean to truly be animated by Sullivan's archive? What present and future can I imagine and script in my return to a downtown that was never really mine but has been always been so personal?

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