

WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW ABOUT AIDS COULD FILL A MUSEUM

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fresty
passion
glory
chore
2010

Abiding Relations Through Recovery, Restoration and Curation

A Conversation Between Jean Carlomusto, Alexandra Juhasz, and Hugh Ryan

EVERYDAY Curatorial Statement

"AIDS is an everyday experience. By this, we mean it is both common and ongoing: quotidian and unending. Yet its history—like all history—is being written in Boldfaced Names and Significant Dates, especially those from the near past. Like the moon that eclipses the sun because it is closer to our frame of reference, the enormity of that moment of the AIDS crisis threatens to blind us to both the sprawling present and the unknowable future. Moreover, the significance of this artist or that day is always less than the significance of the cumulative reality of life in the time of AIDS.

In *EVERYDAY*, we bring together work that engages with the "now" of AIDS, both historically and currently. Some of the work uses the materials of AIDS, from pills to pamphlets, while other pieces chronicle daily responses, from protest to prayer. Much of the work speaks in the vernacular of its own moment, whether that be wheatpaste, VHS, or an app. Some of it is made by professional artists whose gift is to speak of and to the world around them, while other pieces were made by intuitive creators who were driven to respond to the crisis as one mode of survival—the same spirit that drove us to make this exhibition. Someday we will have a cure, and the infrastructure and political will to get it to everyone who needs it.

But until then, AIDS is *EVERYDAY*."

Hugh Ryan: My background in curation comes mostly from my experience with The Pop-Up Museum of Queer History, an organization I founded in 2011 as a response to the censorship of the *Hide/Seek* exhibit at The Smithsonian. While I was incensed that they would remove David Wojnarowicz's film *A Fire In My Belly*, I also felt that it was somewhat ridiculous to protest the removal of a single piece of queer art from a museum in DC, when on a daily basis there was no museum in New York I could visit to see queer art (at least, not if I wanted it to be recognized as coming from a queer perspective). The Pop-Up Museum was my response: a community-based, collaborative intervention that created locally sourced art exhibitions based in queer history all around the country. I came to see curation as a deeply collaborative project. So, when Visual AIDS first reached out to me in the Fall of 2015 about co-curating a show for Fall 2016, I knew three things right away. First, that I wanted to work with someone older than I was who had direct experience of the first wave of the crisis. Second, because the show was going to be up at the same time as *Art AIDS America (AAA)*—which argued, in part, that the importance of AIDS in American history could be inferred through the way it changed modern art—I wanted to locate the importance of AIDS in American history in another way: through the way it compelled people from all walks of life to make art in response, whether or not they were trained or publicly recognized as artists. And finally, because I knew (from discussions with curator Jonathan Katz that) *AAA* would not be including video art, I wanted to work with someone who was familiar with filmic responses to the crisis.

Earlier that year, Jean Carlomusto and I had both been at a conference about queer history at Syracuse University, and I'd had the chance to see her incredible interactive video installation to AIDS activists, *Offerings*. I'd also recently re-read sections of Alexandra Juhasz's book about video responses to the crisis, *AIDS TV* (1995). Both seemed like exactly the sort of people I wanted to work with on this project; it wasn't until the three of us sat down together for the first time that I discovered they had worked together in GMHC's video department in the mid-1980s. Together, we decided to focus our exhibition on the idea of the "everyday": the daily acts of survival, resistance, caring, art-making, fighting, forgetting, hoping, despairing, and simply *being* that make up life in the time of AIDS.

Jean Carlomusto: Now that I think of it, the conference at Syracuse where I met Hugh was specifically on Queer Archives. I was moved by the community-based and collaborative nature of his Pop-Up Museum. It was an intervention akin to what Douglas Crimp termed "cultural activism" back in the 1980s to describe both the ever-present video cameras at demonstrations and the sophisticated use of graphic design by AIDS activists. By nature, these interventions were community-based and collaborative.

I came to curation by collaborating on a large body of AIDS-related works dating back to 1986, when I started the Audio/Visual Unit at GMHC. The mission of trying to get a message out in a deeply repressive and fear-laden environment, with very few resources, required a strong collaborative effort. In making the *Living With AIDS* cable show and projects such as the *Safer Sex Shorts*, Gregg Bordowitz and I collaborated with many artists to try and set forth nuanced messages. Often times, episodes of LWA were comprised of curated works from other videomakers, such as Stuart Marshall,



Kaz Senju, Installation View of *Everyday*, 2016. Courtesy of the artist and Visual AIDS.

Isaac Julien, and John Greyson. In 1987, with the start of ACT UP, there was a creative explosion of AIDS activist art and video. I collaborated with numerous other activist documentarians through the affinity group DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activists) and the Testing the Limits Collective. The sheer volume of original material and source tapes over the years has necessitated my keeping an archive. Those of us who try to keep a personal archive have to find the most stable form of archival acquisition which often necessitates massive digitization—an effort that is not always easy. As an artist, the idea of spending my days digitizing and cataloguing source tapes is burdensome. I prefer to do my archival grazing and digitization in the service of current projects and concerns. My two recent projects *Larry Kramer in Love & Anger* (2015) and *Sex in an Epidemic* (2009) draw heavily on my archive as well as those of many other activists and organizations.

Alexandra Juhasz: As Jean describes, our collective curatorial practice for the *EVERYDAY* show was also committed to finding, sharing, and amplifying little-known archives (including those of the Visual AIDS Artists Registry and some amazing media makers) by placing an emphasis on the everyday art practice of regular people, artists all, whose quotidian existence had been transformed by both their art-making and AIDS. Beginning with these as our search criteria, we found and agreed upon an array of art made by an exceedingly diverse set of makers (across time, genre, and training, as well as gender, race, sexuality, and age). Ours was not another presentation of the usual suspects, like those presented in AAA also in 2016. Instead, we hoped to highlight the work of gay white men and the many others who live and make art everyday about AIDS; we hoped to celebrate work made by already heralded art-world participants and that by artists who never worked within or about that world, or would never be understood as in conversation with that one art history, economy, or set of formal traditions.

To do that, we had to become the thing we wanted to create. Curating *EVERYDAY* with Hugh and Jean, and then also compiling and editing *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE*, our video for Day With(out) Art highlighting work by nine artists obsessed with HIV and video, was an everyday sort of collective curatorial practice. For over a year, we met often on Skype, and a few times in person (when I was in NY). We were slowly getting to know each other by building a shared framework for judgment through a sweet, respectful, growing dialogue that put a premium on how art—its making, viewing, and communal consideration—adds richness, purpose, and pride to a daily existence that can otherwise feel confusing, isolating, painful, or meaningless, especially when saturated by HIV. Our professional friendship—across well-focused differences—became ever more deeply rooted as we developed a shared language of values and a mutual sense of how to speak these ideas. Our everyday curatorial practice was built together across many days of talk and hours of shared looking.

As we learned about each other, we also shared past and current knowledge and experience. I have been working on and about AIDS video since 1987, when I met Jean at GMHC as a recent college grad hoping to volunteer. We ended up making *Living with AIDS: Women and AIDS* together for GMHC's weekly cable access show. It was one of the first videotapes about this issue. We covered the organizing, education, and activism around women's health, lesbian empowerment, and feminist analysis that was happening in New York City alongside the birth of ACT UP and other community-based responses to AIDS. Over the decades, I went on to make many more tapes, I wrote my doctoral dissertation and many more essays on this important, small, devoted field in which I was also a member (for instance, my first book, *AIDS TV*, that

Hugh refers to), and I continued to write about and make AIDS activist video, including two very recent books both in contract review, one with Theodore Kerr, *AIDS Crisis Revisitation*, and the other a scholarly anthology co-edited with Jih-Fei Cheng and Nishant Shahani, *AIDS and the Distribution of Crises*. Over these many years, I had found myself in and out of community, in and out of public expression, and in and out of altering AIDS time and place: past, present, public, private.

Thus, our way of being and working together felt rare and valuable; I looked forward to it; it made me feel honored, seen, and respected by people I grew to esteem more and more. How we saw each other—with love, admiration, attention to the others' unique contributions, and joy in our shared convictions—is just what I hope is expressed in our curation, too: abiding relations to art and people who share a purpose. This is itself an example of collective processes for activism and art-making that Jean and I honed during our participation in queer/feminist AIDS activism in the 1980s. Hugh knew or intuited these ways: respectful, honorable, political comradeship that begins with care for others in our community, often attending with compassion and interest to those least seen and heard. This is what we did together while also being what we were looking for in the work we hoped to celebrate and share through our efforts. We first worked to build and then got to bathe in this curative manner of curatorial practice: different from either the more contemporary understanding of curation as “networking,” or as the more dated (but still ongoing!) patriarchal, stuffy, and stiff work of curation as an effort towards maintaining hierarchies, cementing status, and manufacturing History.

JC: In writing about our collaborative process, I am most drawn to stories of recovery and restoration—curated works that had to be found, salvaged and cared for. In fact, we practiced an aspect of curation that harkens back to its archaic meaning: to heal or cure. As someone who maintains an historic archive, I am keenly aware of the work of the caretaker-curator. Thus, for me the *pièce de résistance* of the *EVERYDAY* exhibition and the *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE* video was the often unspoken efforts of friends, lovers, researchers, and AIDS/queer archivists who had salvaged and preserved the works of deceased artists which we went on to curate into our show. For example, we saw Gin Louie's elegant book sculptures in the Artists Registry at Visual AIDS and wanted to include them. Through the Artists Registry, we were able to track down a sculpture owned by Gin's friend, Eve Sinaiko, who had kept it safely boxed on her closet shelf for years. Eve welcomed the opportunity to display Gin's work once again. Similarly, such herculean efforts were on view when it came to including Edward Hochschild's *The Vial Cross*. Hugh had written about Hochschild's large wooden cross—pierced with test tubes containing pills, blood, hair, and little toys—as part of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art collection.

The folks at Leslie-Lohman told Hugh they had Hochschild's work “because some time in the early '90s his friends showed up at the gallery and said that Hochschild had died of AIDS and his landlord was throwing his art out on the street.” LGBT archives are filled with works like this salvaged from the curb.

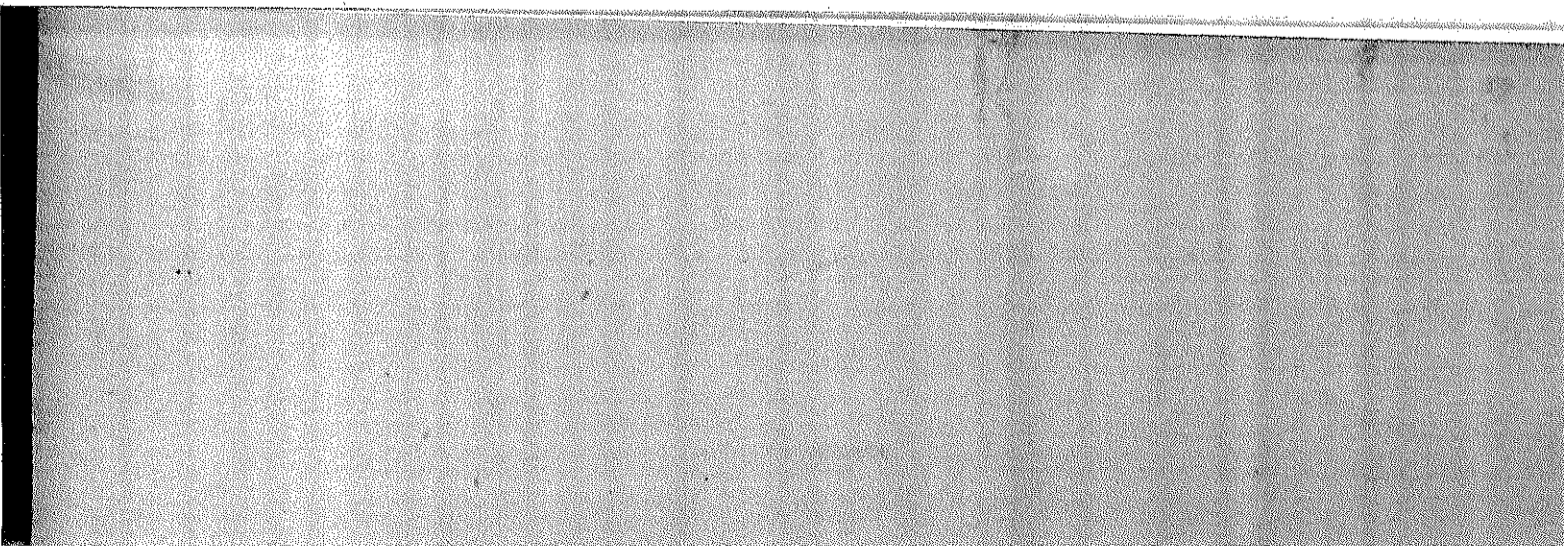
HR: One of the most incredible parts of preparing the show, for me, was getting to work with the conservators at Leslie-Lohman to repair and stabilize *The Vial Cross*. First, we mapped the entire cross so that we knew where every tube was and what each one contained. Then we carefully cleaned each one. For the broken ones, we stoppered the sharp glass edges with rubber. In a way, it felt like recapitulating the

theme of the entire show: the dailiness of cleaning, being used to preserve this incredible work of art, made as a direct response to the crisis.

JC: And let's not forget the work we did on *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE*. In aspiring towards curating a diverse set of voices, one tape in particular came to mind—*HOMOSEXUALITY: ONE CHILD'S POINT OF VIEW* (1993)—a collaborative work that Juanita Mohammed created with her eight-year-old daughter, Jahanara (Jazzy). It's a creative and passionate defense of love in all its forms. Alex and I share a deep admiration for Juanita's work, but Juanita no longer owned any accessible copies of her videos. Alex found an original 34-inch copy in her collection, and I undertook the task of digitizing it. Just to get this warped tape to play in an archival deck required hours of painstaking concentration and advanced technical skill. Ultimately, it was gratifying to be able to include clips from this tape and much more of Juanita's work in *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE*—the video we produced to accompany the show, which was screened around the country on World AIDS Day—and to return a digitized file for her to keep.

HR: Over and over again, *EVERYDAY* became an experience of collaboration: between Alex, Jean, and I; between the three of us and Visual AIDS; between myself and the conservators at Leslie-Lohman; between Jean, Alex, and Juanita; we even worked with our artists to create new collaborations between them. Perhaps the moment that best encapsulates *EVERYDAY*, for me, was playing *Dizzyland*, the videogame that Frederick Weston created in collaboration with the indie game collective, *BABYCASTLES*. In our phone-obsessed culture, videogames are becoming one of the most everyday forms of art and storytelling, and we wanted our exhibition to speak not only to the present and past of AIDS, but also to its digitally mediated future. Weston joked with us that his first art show featured the Polaroids he put up in the coat checkroom at The 10th Floor, the nightclub where he worked when he first moved to New York in the Seventies. In his game for the show, you create a character who navigates social interactions in a barroom setting; depending on the choices you make, you have the option to share or withhold information (including your HIV status) with the computer-generated characters that inhabit *Dizzyland*. Putting Weston's first-person experience of the dawn of the crisis in direct dialogue with the young videogame makers at *BABYCASTLES* (none of whom had ever known a world without AIDS) produced a beautiful collaboration that continues to exist long after *EVERYDAY* itself is closed—much like the community we sought to foster among our artists and with each other. *Dizzyland* is a physical and digital representation of that finding-of-commonality-across-difference that proved to be the animating spirit of *EVERYDAY*.

AJ: The night of the opening, I remember Fred speaking about his practice with a participating artist, LJ Roberts, and then later with my children, Simone and Gabriel, amazing artists all. The room vibrated with a stimulating if uncommon admixture of pride, humbleness, and shared recognition, and a sense that we mattered, if briefly, to the world and each other just as some parts of the world fell into free fall. And that was one really great thing about the opening, a good many of our featured artists stepped out to the show and were visibly honored to meet each other and also moved by the power of seeing their work on the stately white walls of La Mama La Galleria, a New York gallery. Peggy Frank came from Canada to see her immense cocktail glass banner installed. Joyce McDonald travelled from uptown in an Uber and delighted in seeing her many sculptures grouped on a table after spending so much time in boxes under her bed. Randy Freedom Clay took the bus from DC to join us. That night, we delighted in seeing our featured artists meet and learn from each other.



JC: It's important to remember that *EVERYDAY* opened in December 2016. Donald Trump had just been elected President. Everyone was a bit stunned. In many ways, it was a perfect time for a show that navigates the terrain between deeply personal expression and socio-political commentary, even if we felt unprepared to confront this reality.

AJ: Yes, in fact, we made a pretty huge curatorial change right before the show opened because of this unexpected shift in lived reality. We had already decided to include fierce pussy's devastating "to do list" (1994). But given Trump's recent election, and the ominous, unrelenting sense of paralysis, confusion, dread, sadness, and disorientation that accompanied it, we also wanted to demonstrate how earlier AIDS art could provide templates for everyday action today. Last minute we decided to hang a usable, store-bought, to-do list next to fierce pussy's earlier piece, hoping to suggest that there were things we could all do everyday today: personal, political, artistic, contemplative, up to you. On the day before we opened, while Jean and Hugh helped to hang the show, I raced to a nearby Staples and bought 5-10 to-do list pads. Our curatorial choice to emphasize engagement, action, and contemplation for participating members of our community was another facet of our shared project.

We added this Addendum to our curatorial statement on November 15, 2016: "The everyday of AIDS changed on November 8, 2016. We invite you to engage with the powerful work displayed in an *EVERYDAY* conceived during the presidential election of 2016. We ask you to leave with a TO DO list in hand of what you will do, everyday, given its results."

Our communal-community focused curatorial practice was never merely a matter of feelings, ideology, or even care. Our specific, unusual, shared compass opened up sight-lines that would otherwise not be available, creating unexpected and critically important reverberations of theme, style, and form as well as community and daily action. For instance, in *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE*, the use of humor by Carol Leigh, Ray Navarro, and Mark King stood in stark comparison to the powerful pull of pathos in the YouTube vlogs of Justin B. Terry-Smith and the VHS videos of Juanita Mohammed, or that of anger espoused so freely by James Wentzy. The hunger for voice was the same whether those caught on tape were religious black women with HIV in the South for the Southern AIDS Living Quilt or stars from the NYC ball scene, also people with HIV, documented and archived on YouTube by Luna Luis Ortiz.

These similarities across so many more obvious differences (race, gender, technology, time period) were striking to us, allowing us to understand that different curatorial commitments lead to new knowings of both HIV/AIDS and each other.

JC: I remember feeling anxious and slightly nauseous traveling to the storage unit containing my video archive with Alex, Hugh, and Kyle Croft, to shoot the opening and wraparound segments for *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE*. Lately, it's become increasingly daunting for me to go through the accumulation of videotapes, packed in white boxes, with my scrawled notes on the side. I used to know what was in every box. Over the years, tapes have gotten added or filed in another box. Or, maybe I'm forgetting, and it's starting to become somewhat chaotic in there. In retrospect, I'm not surprised that, in a totally unscripted moment of desperation documented in *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE*, I discovered I had lost the key for my unit, and a porter had to be called to saw the lock off. As we waited for the porter to arrive, Kyle ran the camera as Hugh, Alex, and I had a chance to talk about how we came to cultural practice around HIV/AIDS. I found this shared moment of reflection very fortifying: in a subtle shift of mission, we weren't

just unpacking my archive, we were creating a space where we could explore an archive that, in this instance, happened to be mine. I felt the restorative endeavor of our collaborative team.

I consider the work of curation to be an act of supreme collaboration, not just among the curatorial unit but within various groups who have kept the works safe and accessible. It is so rewarding to know friends, families, compassionate strangers, and art institutions alike whose own painstaking work makes it possible to curate the work of artists featured in *EVERYDAY* and *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE*.

AJ: The three New York City public screenings that Visual AIDS helped us to organize for *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE* manifested beautifully, in their people and places, our commitments to collaboration within communities. Held at the Brooklyn Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the New Museum, each one of our living compulsive video artists came to one or more screenings and spoke together after the screening in delightfully idiosyncratic groupings that were equal parts riveting, emotional, bonding, and inspirational. And, as is true of Visual AIDS yearly Day With(out) Art programming each year, our tape also showed all over the world, in any number of diverse settings and communities where daily life and compulsion have their own histories, purposes, and habitual practices.

HR: We also felt it was important, not just to be present at the screenings of *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE*, but to be visible in the gallery space, and accessible to visitors to *EVERYDAY*. Too often, the people who put together exhibitions—the gatekeepers, who in a very real sense decide who is welcome—are invisible; the curators make the decisions before the show ever opens, and the community never has a chance to discuss those decisions with them. Unlike movies, where we all know the names of the directors and can speculate about what it means when so-and-so is tapped to helm this-or-that project, curators are often completely unknown. We wanted to be accountable, and to be accountable, you must first be visible.

COMPULSIVE PRACTICE Statement

For the 2016 Day With(out) Art, Visual AIDS presents *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE*, a video compilation of compulsive, daily, and habitual practices by nine artists and activists who live with their cameras as one way to manage, reflect upon, and change how they are deeply affected by HIV/AIDS. This hour-long video program will be distributed internationally to museums, art institutions, schools and AIDS organizations.

From video diaries to civil disobedience, holiday specials and backstage antics, Betamax to YouTube, *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE* displays a diversity of artistic approaches, experiences, and expectations. The compulsive video practices of these artists serve many purposes—outlet, lament, documentation, communication, empowerment, healing—and have many tones—obsessive, driven, poetic, neurotic, celebratory. *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE* demonstrates the place of technology, self-expression, critique, and community in the many decades and the many experiences of artists and activists living with HIV/AIDS. *COMPULSIVE PRACTICE* highlights subjects ranging from historic actions against government neglect to contemporary issues such as Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) and living with an undetectable viral load. Altogether, the program charts over three decades of AIDS-related video production in the face of the ongoing crisis.

Jean Carlomusto is a filmmaker, activist, and interactive media artist whose work explores the complex nature of unique individuals and marginalized populations. Her films are often unorthodox investigations of LGBT history and HIV/AIDS. Her work has been exhibited internationally in festivals, museums, and on television. She produced and directed HBO's Emmy-nominated documentary, *LARRY KRAMER IN LOVE & ANGER*, which was featured at the Sundance Film Festival.

Dr. Alexandra Juhasz is Chair of the Film Department, Brooklyn College, CUNY. She is a core faculty member in the Interactive Technology and Pedagogy Certificate Program at the CUNY Graduate Center, where she also teaches in the MALS program. Dr. Juhasz writes on feminist, fake, and AIDS documentary. Her current work is on online feminist pedagogy, YouTube, and other more radical uses of digital media and their archives. Her work as media artist, curator, and writer engages with linked social justice commitments, including AIDS, black queer and lesbian media, feminist and queer/trans film, and activist archives and collectives.

Hugh Ryan is a writer, curator, and speaker in New York City. His work is about queer politics, culture, and history. His book, *WHEN BROOKLYN WAS QUEER*, from St. Martin's Press was released in March 2019. He was the founder of Pop Up Museum of Queer History and was the 2015- 2016 Martin Duberman Fellowship at the New York Public Library.