



Left: A scene from *Voices from the Front*, produced by the Testing the Limits Collective.

because while connoting *processes* of production, it has equally served to signify production ideology. The terms express our understanding that the 'mainstream' media has consistently represented dominant (bigoted, distanced, judgmental) ideology about AIDS for the 'general public,' while the 'alternative' media represents a critique, reevaluation or resistance to these 'bad' images for a smaller, more committed audience. This simplistic understanding of the media has functioned to describe what has proven to be a relatively straightforward history of AIDS media. It has also contributed to a movement-wide awareness of the power of representation, giving words to a recognition of the negative consequences of mis- and under-representation by dominant institutions as well as the immense significance of resistant, critical, or *alternative* representations.

This terminology, however, does not allow us to see how the 'alternative' AIDS media is itself composed of individual tapes which are conceived, funded, produced, and distributed in an infinite variety of ways. The eight case studies which follow are examples of 'alternative' projects based within the New York AIDS video community. They range in budget from \$2,000 to \$1,300,000, and in form from art tape to traditional documentary; they are shot on camcorders, Betacam, and 16mm film by producers who are self-identified as amateurs and professionals; and they range in distribution strategies from screenings at high schools to airings on PBS.

But their similarities are also telling. Several agencies and names involved in these projects appear in more than one case study which indicates commitments broader than one distinct project, and also point to the interrelation between alternative producers who are highly aware of each other's work. While interaction within the alternative community provides inspiration, however, all eight of these projects explicitly position themselves in some relationship, however diverse, to the form, reach, or agenda of the 'mainstream media.' Equally crucial, each one of them would never have been made without the highest level of passion and tenacity by their respective producer or collective. Such media is based primarily upon the urgency of politics and, according to Sean Cubbitt, the notion of *struggle*: struggle to find funding and equipment, struggle to learn skills, to organize distribution, and to invent the best forms for new content; struggle for specific real-world goals because the work is primarily and consistently motivated by a shared commitment to altering the course of the crisis.

# MISCONY MATTERS NATIVE

## THE ALTERNATIVE AIDS VIDEO MOVEMENT

BY ALEXANDRA JUHASZ

In the twelve years since AIDS was first identified with a name, thousands of programs about the crisis have been produced by videomakers who work outside of commercial television.\* Most critics, viewers, and producers refer to this large and diverse body of work as 'the alternative AIDS media.' The term distinguishes the unique conjunctions of finance, ideology, artisanship, profit, and style of independent video from the standardized, profit-oriented, seemingly authorless, and unbiased network TV productions typically called 'the main-

stream media.'

Of course, the binary terms 'mainstream' and 'alternative' obscure a great deal of cross-fertilization, mimicry, and hybridization: actually, *both* media use experimental as well as conventional forms; either format can espouse conservative ideology; 'alternative' videos can have budgets larger than those of the 'mainstream,' and can make a lot more money.

Nonetheless, those of us who make and use AIDS media have held on to this sometimes obscuring terminology

## The Audio-Visual Department of The Gay Men's Health Crisis

The Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) hired Jean Carlomusto as an audiovisual specialist in 1987. At that time, Carlomusto explains, the organization had "a TV set and one VCR and a need for information to get out." Today, the Audio/Visual Department is staffed by two full-time employees (Chas Brack, and Juanita Mohammed) and several part-time staff (Alisa Lebow, Carlomusto, and Gary Winter), has its own 3/4" production studio and on-line editing equipment, and is responsible for the production of over fifty tapes, including *Doctors, Liars and Women*, *Seize Control of the FDA*, *The Safer Sex Shorts*, *Thinking About Death*, *Work Your Body*, *It Is What It Is*, and my own *Women and AIDS* and *Prostitutes, Risk and AIDS* (all of which are widely distributed for low prices by GMHC's Publication Department). GMHC also produces hundreds of "more volatile shows," maybe "good for a month," says Carlomusto, made for cable broadcast and sometimes for limited distribution, including *Medical Update*, *Focus on Women*, *Caring*, *Mission Nutrition*, and *HIV Portraits*.

To generalize about a GMHC look, tone, or content is impossible because work is made individually or in collaboration by members of a staff who themselves have different styles and interests (as well as by free-lancers, like myself, who are invited to produce segments or shows on issues of importance to them). The department's video production strategies have continued to change, as does the crisis they cover.

*Women and AIDS*, a tape I produced with Carlomusto in 1987, utilizes a conventional documentary style to relay the then unconventional information that women, too, suffer from AIDS. The tape consists of talking-head interviews with female activists, educators, and healthcare providers who articulately present the distinct issues which affect women within the AIDS crisis: the potential dangers of negotiating safer sex; safer sex as birth control; the effects of racism, poverty, sexism, and homophobia upon HIV-infected women; and the scapegoating of prostitutes as an attack upon all women. The tape also includes detailed information about cleaning IV drug works and safer sex.

*It Is What It Is* (Bordowitz, 1993) is a scripted, stylish, educational tape made for and in association with teens. The hour-long tape is divided into three sections which stand on their own so as to be used in workshop settings: "Identity," "Homophobia," and "Safer Sex." It fea-

tures a multiracial group of lesbian, gay, and bisexual, HIV-positive and -negative teen performers. In the tape's signature, direct-to-camera scripted statements (as well as in the teens' confident self-presentation) they express the importance of self-respect both to acknowledge and embrace a gay identity and as motivation for always engaging in safer sex. The actors present challenging information about gay-bashing, coming out, and negotiating safer sex in a forthright, intense, sexy, and intimate manner. In this case MTV, not PBS, is the style being cribbed.

**In an excerpt from her forthcoming book, *AIDS TV: Identity, Community and Alternative Video*, media activist and theorist Alex Juhasz surveys the large but still little-known body of alternative AIDS films and videos. This grassroots movement is made up of independent producers who often have close links to the communities at risk and, in some cases, are themselves HIV-positive or PWAs. In the first installment of a two-part article, Juhasz, herself a videomaker, examines the precarious production histories of these films and videos, the audiences they target, their strategies, screening sites, and, in particular, the anger that permeates many of them.**

*Living with AIDS* has performed a variety of functions in a variety of formats because it is made to fill the gaps in the media landscape. "So much of the stuff on TV was horrible," Carlomusto says. "There was a total exclusion of people living with AIDS in its audience. Instead, everything was reported in terms of a panicked public. I wanted to do a half-hour show devoted to people living with AIDS. And that sent me out on to the streets." Lacking staff and technical equipment, Carlomusto began covering the rapidly escalating AIDS activist and PWA self-empowerment movements. Shooting at ACT UP's first Wall Street demo, she met David Meieran and Bordowitz, who were also documenting the event for Test-

ing *The Limits*, the activist video collective which she joined soon after. In the following year, she became a founding member of DIVA TV, ACT UP's video affinity group.

Six years and something like a hundred tapes later, Carlomusto acknowledges that there is a different media landscape in 1994. Nevertheless, GMHC's extensive and consistent production history demonstrates that institutional support (salaries, benefits, in-house equipment, and distribution) is a most crucial factor for removing many of the hurdles typical of the production of alternative AIDS media. Even so, the Audio/Visual Department's infrastructure and production style is nothing like that of the mainstream media. The Department receives a fraction of the funding of the nightly news, and they remain connected and committed both to the issues on which, and the community to which, they report. Along with that comes burnout—Carlomusto is taking her first leave of absence since 1987, and Bordowitz, new head of the department, is also taking some time off—but also creativity, intensity, and anger.

## The New York City Commission on Human Rights AIDS Discrimination Unit and Heart of the Matter

From 1983-1991, the AIDS Discrimination Unit of the New York City Commission on Human Rights (NYCCHR) produced two AIDS educational videotapes as part of a larger preventative campaign: *The Second Epidemic*, an hour-long, made-for-public-television documentary about AIDS discrimination (1987, Amber Hollibaugh) and *Hard to Get: AIDS Discrimination in the Workplace* (1988, Alisa Lebow), a short tape made for use in training workshops about AIDS discrimination in the greatest cross section of working environments. The tapes utilize high-end documentary style to coat their more radical messages about tolerance and justice, thereby attempting to reach people who are not necessarily open to AIDS education (not just people already affected by AIDS, but those people who are *not*, and therefore most inclined to discriminate).

*The Second Epidemic* movingly covers actual discrimination cases taken up by the Unit (a young boy who is forced from school, a gay male couple who may lose their apartment), intercut with interviews with Human Rights Commission staff. *Hard to Get* uses *faux* newsreels to suggest the hysteria of much mainstream AIDS coverage. The steady, wise, informative voice of Ruby Dee counters this mis-

information with the many reasons (medical, legal, ethical) not to discriminate in the workplace.

Unlike most alternative AIDS media, these tapes were produced slowly, and with relatively large budgets and a paid staff. They look like what they are—city-sponsored health education films with a PBS flair—but, while utilizing this traditional style, their makers believe that they also espouse a “sophisticated AIDS politics” grounded in years of struggle in radical cultural politics.

The work of the Unit asks the difficult question of whether it is possible to produce progressive media through a city- or state-funded institution. In 1986, the Unit hired lesbian rights activist Amber Hollibaugh, with the specific mandate of producing educational video. She eventually worked with two assistants, Brack and Lebow, who explains that “two white lesbians and a black gay man with relatively radical politics were the force behind a video from a city agency. This was state-funded propaganda by people who are marginalized by that very state. We realized in what a unique position we were and tried to make the most of it.”

Although their videos were among the most successful endeavors of the Unit and were fully funded by the Commission, city bureaucracy and video production proved to be strange and difficult bedfellows. Nevertheless, the benefits of this system lay in the real clout and sanction given to work produced within the structure of a New York City agency. Their tapes are considered official and can go places where most ‘alternative’ work is not invited. On the other hand, this manner of work turned out to be only as solid as New York City politics. The AIDS Unit was shut down in 1990 because “we were making too much noise, we were too effective. They couldn’t control us.”

The Unit’s three video producers all continue to work in alternative AIDS video: Lebow and Brack at GMHC’s A/V Department, Hollibaugh as the director of GMHC’s Lesbian AIDS Project and as producer of the recently completed documentary film *The Heart of the Matter* (with Gini Retticker, an independent film editor). The film is the first wide-release documentary about women and AIDS. It premiered on this year’s P.O.V. series on PBS, and was the winner of the Freedom of Expression Award at the 1994 Sundance Film Festival.

*The Heart of the Matter* addresses a range of feminist issues including the connections between HIV and the sexual double standard faced by women, racial stereotypes, and women’s desire to please others. It focuses upon the life, family,



Janice Jirau, one of the HIV-positive women in *The Heart of the Matter*, with her niece.

and political transformations of Janice Jirau, an HIV-positive black AIDS activist who contracted the virus from her husband who refused to practice safer sex. Jirau acknowledges how the burdens of racism, sexism, poverty, and violence made her endangering, consensual behavior seem at first like an expression of love rather than a lack of self-respect. In private interviews and public statements to The National Commission on AIDS and to her church and family, Jirau cautions other women to struggle with the personal and cultural barriers which keep women from taking care of themselves.

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The film intercuts this portrait with shorter interviews with diverse HIV-positive women. In this way, the filmmakers attempt to reach an audience of American women who need to understand AIDS, yet are unlikely to feel they are part of the smaller, usually already politicized communities typically addressed by alternative video. Hollibaugh and Retticker initially felt that they needed to produce in film to get outside the formal and distribution limitations of alternative video. This meant a large budget, a large crew, and, ultimately, what has proven to be the kind of wide-scale release one can never hope

for with a low-end educational or documentary video. But the efforts necessary to raise the money for completing this valuable task did not match their other urgency—to get the project completed so as to educate as many American women as possible about the risk of HIV-transmission and the politics of the AIDS crisis.

The history of this project is a story of money. “This is a film about fundraising,” says Hollibaugh, “and not about AIDS. About a culture that doesn’t value women, PWAs, or filmmakers committed to social issues.” Although the project received a good deal of funding in the first years, the producers quickly moved through the limited institutions that fund progressive arts production. When the \$500,000 necessary for a feature-length project couldn’t be raised, the project was completed as a sixty-minute video. The production history of *The Heart of the Matter*, the first attempt to make a feature film about women and AIDS, reveals as much about the production of alternative AIDS video: it is cheap; it can be made without the sanction of capital; and it can espouse radical politics.

### Testing the Limits

Originally a group of six artists and AIDS activists who knew each other from The Whitney Independent Studio Program and/or ACT UP, the Testing the Limits Collective (TTL) has produced five videos since their formation in 1987: *Testing the Limits Pilot* (1987); *Testing the Limits Safer Sex Video* (1987); *Egg Lipids* (1987); *Testing the Limits: NYC* (1987); and *Voices from the Front* (1992). Part of the collective’s struggle has been to strike a balance between the desires to reach a mass audience, remain true to their art-school training, and to their commitment to the movement which they document and in which they also participate. Currently in production on four hour-long documentaries about the gay and lesbian liberation movement, the collective’s transition away from AIDS-specific video marks a significant change in their work as does this project’s million-dollar-plus budget.

In 1986, David Meieran and Gregg Bordowitz conceived of a video project which would represent the resurgence of lesbian/gay/AIDS militancy in New York City. Bill Olander’s *Homo Video* show at the New Museum served as an inspiration, bringing together for the first time a developing movement of art and activist video centered upon the politics of AIDS, homophobia, and gay identity. In the meantime, ACT UP was forming. It was a heady, exuberant, dynamic time; anything and everything was happening in the just-

forming AIDS activist community, and it all needed to be documented. "ACT UP drove us, galvanized us, gave us a focus. There was a direct alignment between the group's history and our own. We were caught up in it—documenting daily...constantly."

In early 1987, Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt, and Hilary Joy Kipnis joined Meieran and Bordowitz in the production of the first documentary video about the fledgling AIDS activist movement. Their intention was to produce the first mass-release AIDS documentary for middle America, so they set their sights on PBS.

The organizing principle for the pilot they were producing to help raise funds for their thirty-minute PBS-style documentary was "document everything." The group taped countless demonstrations, ACT UP meetings, public round tables, and interviews with AIDS activists. This documenting occurred however it could, which most typically meant "down and dirty footage" shot by whomever had a camera. This is what Meieran calls "alternative media": media production motivated by a commitment to a social issue where production occurs *because it has to*, by an unpaid staff who themselves are insiders to what they document.

*Testing the Limits* immediately began "to distribute itself" to AIDS service organizations as well as within the art and activist scene. Although the tape used a hybrid of conventional if roughly produced forms (talking head interviews with AIDS activists interspersed with sexy footage of AIDS demonstrations which is, in best MTV manner, rapidly cut to music), its content, the early history of ACT UP NY, was even less conventional. *Testing the Limits* never had its PBS airing: the style was too rough, the politics were too explicit. Thus, the group made its first steps towards professionalization, which, among other things, resulted in ideologically-bound splits within the collective.

The group's next project, *Voices From the Front*, took two-and-a-half intense years to complete and began where *Testing the Limits* ended—the 1988 March on Washington for gay and lesbian rights. The great diversity of issues, organizations, and activist strategies covered in this ninety-minute tape demonstrate how the AIDS activist movement and agenda had expanded and diversified since 1988. Transferred to film, *Voices From the Front* went on to play at art and independent theaters across the country and, with even greater success, on the international film market. In October 1992, it aired on HBO for a \$15,000 fee. Nevertheless, the tape ran up a \$40,000 deficit, and never aired on PBS, perhaps because of the group's



Beatrice Von Guggenberg, one of the HIV-positive women in *The Heart of the Matter*.

continued reliance on "guerrilla coverage footage." But Hutt and Elgear think there is another reason: "We were too close to the material. Our friends, our lives, were in that tape. If we didn't have that type of intimacy, it wouldn't have been made. We wouldn't have gotten those interviews."

1992 also brought about an escalation in antigay violence, and lesbian and gay militancy. TTL began documenting the birth of Queer Nation, and the response of gays and lesbians to antigay initiatives across the country. Now consisting of Elgear, Hutt, and Meieran, the group continued their attempt to professionalize, working on the transition from "alternative" to "independent" media production: work that, they explain, acquires funding before production; work that is job-rather than issue-driven; work that is organized, structured, and neat in its form and production strategies; work that answers first to its funders; work that is paid; work that is viewed by millions. After receiving a \$1.3 million grant from ITVS in 1993, TTL is currently producing *Rights and Reactions*, a four-part series of hour-long documentaries about the history of the gay liberation movement. In this case, their political commitments will be marked by the process and professionalism that only money can buy.

### DIVA TV

In 1989, DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television) was formed as an affinity group of ACT UP, "organized to be there, document, provide protection and countersurveillance, and participate." Catherine Saalfield, who cofounded DIVA TV along with Ray Navarro, Carlomusto, Bordowitz, Bob Beck, Costa Papas, Ellen Spiro, George Plaggianos, and Rob Kurilla, points out that DIVA "targets ACT UP members as its primary audience and makes videos by, about, and, most impor-

tantly, for the movement." The group produced three tapes in its first phase: *Target City Hall*, which chronicles ACT UP's March 28, 1989 demo against Ed Koch's administration; *Pride*, about the twentieth anniversary of NY's gay and lesbian pride movement; and *Like A Prayer*, five seven-minute perspectives on the ACT UP/WHAM demo "Stop the Church" at St. Patrick's Cathedral on December 10, 1989.

TTL and DIVA often shared footage, covered the same actions, and were committed to AIDS activism, as was also true of GMHC. But the AIDS video scene itself was diversifying and expanding along with the AIDS crisis. As their production histories reflect, by 1989 none of these groups necessarily shared ideological assumptions about AIDS video.

While TTL and DIVA TV had a close affinity in membership, content, and political commitment, the groups also differed significantly. With PBS as their goal, TTL always attempted to professionalize. DIVA, on the other hand, was remaining staunchly antiprofessional. As Saalfield explains, "Watching TTL evolve into an institutionalized organization reinforced DIVA's commitment to working as a collective. We remain fluid, make decisions with whomever comes to a meeting, and resist assigning a treasurer by dedicating any income to buying tape stock." According to Saalfield, DIVA's commitment to "the quick and dirty approach" of alternative production led to a "limited audience, inconsistent participation by collective members, and more process than product." But at the same time there remained "the essential goal of inclusivity, with open lines of communication among collective members for expressing opinions and offering analyses. Here protest is the process, communication is our form of resistance, and everyone has a say." ■

*To be continued in our next issue.*

\* Many of these videos are described in a special "Seeing Through AIDS" issue of *The Media Network* publication, *ImMEDIAtE Impact* (Winter 1992), a guide to films and videos about AIDS and AIDS-related issues. For further information, write to Media Network, 39 West 14th Street, Suite 403, New York, NY 10011, phone (212) 929-2663.

### Distribution Sources:

Gay Men's Health Crisis, Audio-Visual Department, 129 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011, phone (212) 807-7517.

*The Heart of the Matter* is distributed by First Run Features, 153 Waverly Place, New York, NY 10014, phone (212) 243-0600.

*Testing the Limits* videos are distributed by Frameline, 346 Ninth Street, San Francisco, CA 94103, phone (415) 703-8654.

DIVA TV videos are available from Printed Matter, 77 Wooster Street, New York, NY 10012, phone (212) 925-0325.