

Do not tape over: UK AIDS Activist video

Work in progress by Ed Webb-Ingall

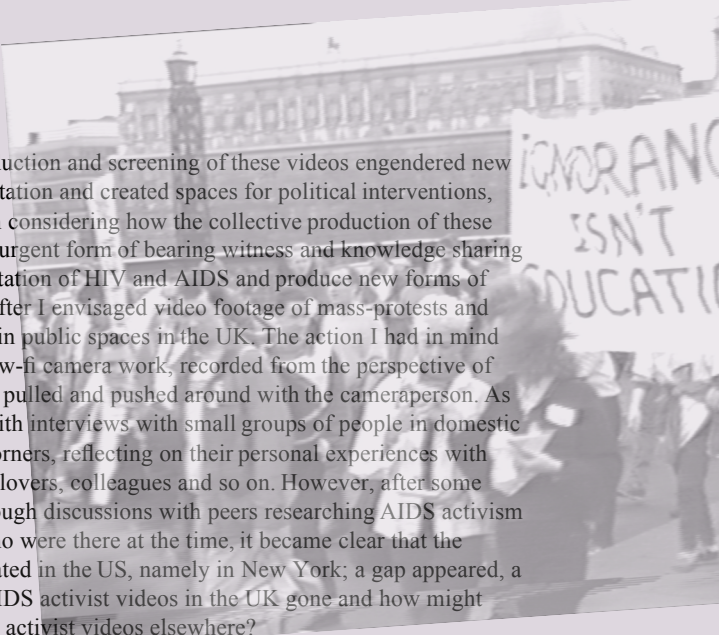
In 1987, the distribution catalogue for London-based Albany Video lists eleven videos available for hire under the heading 'HEALTH, AIDS'. When I found this catalogue entry, the majority of the videos that originated in the UK were thought to be lost or no longer in circulation.

At the same time as the HIV/AIDS epidemic, the 'video revolution' had also reached the public sphere with the introduction of the video camcorder, which was more compact and affordable compared to earlier, heavier and expensive video cameras. This new technology, accessible and easy to use, encouraged the democratisation of video production. Camcorders were quickly taken up by AIDS activist groups in order to produce and distribute low-budget DIY videos. These videos were able to provide counter narratives to those peddled by the oppressive homophobic regime, seen in newspaper headlines, advertising campaigns and characterised by laws such as Section 28 in the UK. Access to these new video cameras encouraged groups and individuals to create a counter narrative and alternative to broadcast media.

The negative depiction and life threatening treatment of people with AIDS (PWAs) by mainstream media meant that the need to create alternative images of and by PWAs, by artists and activists from within the community of those most impacted by HIV and AIDS was as much about developing modes of self-representation as it was about education and activism. Motivated to provide alternative images of AIDS and PWAs, activists, educators and campaigners understood the need to represent PWAs so that they were not seen only through their illness, but to represent them as whole people, as theorist Alexandra Juhasz explains; 'as people living with AIDS not dying of AIDS'ⁱ. American Activist and writer Douglas Crimp has written about the specific role of video for AIDS activism in his essay *AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism*, published in October Journal, 1987:

To date, a majority of cultural producers working in the struggle against AIDS have used the video medium. There are a number of explanations for this: Much of the dominant discourse on AIDS has been conveyed through television, and this discourse has generated a critical counter-practice in the same medium; video can sustain a fairly complex array of information; and cable access and the widespread use of VCRs provide the potential of a large audience for this work.ⁱⁱ

The Mediateque at the British Film Institute in London has 47 videos in its curated selection on HIV and AIDS, only twelve of these are independent productions, seven of which are public health videos and only the remaining five can be classified as alternative productions. That is, those made by artists and activists from within the community of those impacted by HIV/AIDS. The use of video by and for AIDS activists in the UK remains largely unexplored.



I have begun to explore how the production and screening of these videos engendered new forms of artistic and activist representation and created spaces for political interventions, discussion and reflection. I have been considering how the collective production of these AIDS activist videos remained as an urgent form of bearing witness and knowledge sharing in order to challenge the misrepresentation of HIV and AIDS and produce new forms of representation. This research began after I envisaged video footage of mass-protests and kiss-ins by Lesbian and Gay Groups in public spaces in the UK. The action I had in mind was comprised of handheld, shaky low-fi camera work, recorded from the perspective of the activists; the grainy colour image pulled and pushed around with the cameraperson. As I imagined it, this was cut together with interviews with small groups of people in domestic spaces, meeting halls and on street corners, reflecting on their personal experiences with doctors, the police, family members, lovers, colleagues and so on. However, after some preliminary research in archives, through discussions with peers researching AIDS activism and correspondence with activists who were there at the time, it became clear that the footage I was recalling in fact originated in the US, namely in New York; a gap appeared, a question arose: Where have all the AIDS activist videos in the UK gone and how might they relate to the production of AIDS activist videos elsewhere?

Through their production and distribution, these videos:

1. Provided an urgent and context specific form of bearing witness and knowledge sharing that challenged the misrepresentation of HIV and AIDS
2. Created spaces for disseminating information, discussion and reflection
3. Produced new forms of representation in the UK

Importantly, through this research I have begun to collect together an archive of alternative AIDS activist videos produced in the UK in order to diversify the history of AIDS activist video production and draw connections between these videos and those made elsewhere. In a recent correspondence with UK based activist and writer Simon Watney, he explained how the whole profile of AIDS activism in the USA and the UK was radically different, because the scale of, and approach to, the epidemic was so different in both countries. American activism was largely responding to a situation resulting from the absence of socialised medicine and focused on treatment issues, whereas he explained 'the activism in the UK focused on 'prevention activism' and providing a corrective to media representations of PWAs.

The distinction that Watney describes, makes it clear that although experiences of HIV and AIDS may share commonalities, AIDS activist videos also needed to respond to the specific context they were produced and seen in. The production of videos from within underrepresented and misrepresented communities allowed for media production, which was both localized and specific in its production and reception. Douglas Crimp goes on to explain the importance of localized networks and connections: 'Activist art involves questions not only of the nature of cultural production, but also of the location, or the means of distribution, of that production.'ⁱⁱⁱ As cultural theorist Roger Hallas argues, AIDS

activist videos require a multiplicity of approaches, each responding to a specific context or subject position:

Neither mere ideological critiques of the dominant media representation of the epidemic nor corrective attempts to produce positive images of people living with HIV/AIDS. Rather, I contend, that their significance lies in their ability to bear witness to the simultaneously individual and collective trauma of AIDS.^{iv}

The urge to produce and distribute videos that represent the myriad experiences of PWAs was motivated by both under representation and misrepresentation in mainstream media. These AIDS activist video projects are indebted to a history of cultural production that understood 'the necessity of self expression, the politics of self definition and the power of speaking in our own voice'. As art historian Tom Folland explains:

The history of AIDS media exemplifies the desire to use the media to speak in your own voice is initiated by the knowledge that if you do not do so, it will never happen to your liking^v

This research into AIDS activist videos produced in the UK has begun to address a gap in the history of AIDS activist cultural production and diversify the narrative of the production of alternative AIDS media. It relies on the informal exchanges of both tapes and ideas, where the distribution of these videos became in and of itself a mode of activism that helped to establish a network of solidarity. Furthermore, the range of approaches to the production of these videos speaks to the need for myriad, often localised and context specific, responses to the experiences of those impacted by HIV and AIDS.

This research was developed whilst at Hospitalfield Autumn 2019. It forms part of my ongoing research into the history of video activism in the UK. This includes the use of very early video cameras by squatters in the early 1970s, through to its use by women's groups, youth clubs and pensioners in the late 1970s. Concurrent with the establishment of Channel 4 and the Workshop Act in the UK, this was followed by the take up of portable, colour video technology in the 1980s by groups along the lines of race, gender, sexuality and disability. This new research will allow me to focus on the use of camcorders by AIDS activist groups in the 1990s.

A list of Alternative AIDS Activist Videos I have identified

Title	Director	Year
Kaposi Sacoma	Stuart Marshall	1983
Bright Eyes	Stuart Marshall	1984
Journal of the Plague Year	Stuart Marshall	1984
A Plague on You	Lesbian and Gay Media Group	1986
Compromised Immunity play excerpt on Yorkshire Television	Yorkshire Television	1986
Tall Dark Stranger	Paul Oremland	1986
This is not an AIDs Advertisement	Isaac Julien	1987
Compromised Immunity	Andy Lipman and Philip Timmins	1987
Section 28 March - Stephen Bourne	Stephen Bourne	1988
Where there was silence	Stephen Bourne	1988
Eros Erosion	Anna Thew	1989
Outrage Videos	Mark Harriot	1990
Cock Crazy or Scared Stiff	Sunil Gupta	1991
Over Our Dead Bodies	Stuart Marshall	1991
Mouthing Off: Women Speak Out about Safer Sex	Leeds Aids Advice	1991
Gay Men's Guide To Safer Sex (1992 Original VHS Transfer)	Pride Video in Association with Terrence Higgins Trust	1992
'Cruising and Lifestyle Advertisements'	GMFA	1993
Cling Film	Anna Thew	1993
21st Century Nuns	Tom Stephan	1994
'My first time: Young gay men talk sex' (endorsed by Stonewall and GMFA)	Prowler	1998

ⁱ Juhasz, Alexandra. AIDS TV: Identity, Community, and Alternative Video. Duke Univ. Press, 1995, p. 43

ⁱⁱ Crimp, Douglas. *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. MIT, 2004.

ⁱⁱⁱ *ibid*

^{iv} Hallas, Roger. *Reframing Bodies: AIDS, Bearing Witness, and the Queer Moving Image*. Duke University Press, 2009.

^v Folland, Tom. "Deregulating Identity AIDS, Art and Activism." *Mirror Machine: Video and Identity*, by Janine Marchessault, YYZ Books, 1995. p.44