’A document and a documentation of people’s lives in a time of extreme peril.’

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Still from Neil Goldberg’s “She’s a Talker”

Neil Goldberg’s short film “She’s a Talker” was not made for the internet. And yet for a huge swath of folks, that was where they found it and fell in love. As per Goldberg’s wishes, the work has all but disappeared from the ether, only solidifying the film’s fanbase IRL.

Made in 1993, the minute-and-a-half work features 80 men from across New York City petting their cats, saying, “She’s a talker.” Like much of Goldberg’s work, the film is tender and gains power through repetition, giving viewers the space and time to consider what is going on beyond the obvious. Then what is obvious changes.

For Dirty Looks: On Location 2015 Goldberg has granted permission for “She’s a Talker” to be screened once. Curators Theodore Kerr and Carl Williamson with Dirty Looks’ Bradford Nordeen have partnered with JD Samson to show “She’s a Talker”at the Rusty Knot on Sunday, July 5, at 7 p.m. as part of Scissor Sundays. J. Morrisson will be on hand with his Homo Cats collection, and folks are encouraged to come in their favorite cat attire.

In the conversation below, Goldberg speaks with Kerr about the making of the film, the role of silence in his work, how “She’s a Talker” got on the internet in the first place, and why he would prefer to stay off--for now.

Why did you make “She’s a Talker”?
I was combing my roommate’s cat and found myself saying, “She’s a talker,” and then wondered how many gay guys in the city at that very moment might be doing the same thing. I often find myself thinking about simultaneous hypothetical situations. That was the initial impetus; however, I feel like the decision to follow through with it as a video piece had to do with being situated in a context in which gay men around me were constantly disappearing. This was not something I

understood right away. As is true with many things, motivation is better understood retrospectively. I think the connection between the work and the AIDS crisis did not fully dawn on me until the editing process.

Seen in 2015, the video can read as a supercut culled from YouTube. But that is not what it is. You went to each of the men's houses and interviewed them?
Yes, that was an important part of it. I spent at least an hour with each of them talking about a bunch of things. It was free association. A lot of it was about their cats but a lot of it was just talking. At a certain point I would ask them to perform, saying, "She's a talker" while combing their cat--though many of them reported that they had indeed said that.

The supercut feel I think comes from the fact that much of the time we spent together is excluded from the final second-and-half segment in which each person and their cat in their apartment appears. A huge part of the art-making process was responding to the question, what do you exclude from the edit, and what does that leave the viewer with? I love that these are snapshots. As a teacher I feel very called upon to question students as to why their work is living in a specific form. Why is something a video rather than a photograph? I like that this project has a paired down relationship with moving image.

As you are talking about movement I am thinking about sound--or the lack of it. Silence plays a large role when it comes to work related to HIV, and yet I don't think we consider it enough beyond the idea that it exasperates the harm of HIV. When you are talking about how you edited the tapes, you are talking about silence.
I like this observation. There is a lot of literal silence in my work. There was a lot of ambient sounds I could have used in my video "Surfacing," where you see people orienting themselves as they emerge from the subway one after the other. Yet I never thought about my decision to exclude the bulk of my encounters with the men and their cats as an engagement with silence. If I think about specific encounters and what I excluded a lot of it is about the mundane. But I know there were a number of encounters where AIDS was very specifically discussed and integral to the conversation.

This is a generalization, and I am not sure it is supportable, but at the time I was making "She's A Talker" there was a fraughtness around two gay men meeting privately. Full of sexual tension in a way, which does not mean you necessarily want to have sex with each other. But the question of sex was always present in a way I don't think--at least for me--is present today in the same way. I think that has to do with the evolution of gay rights.

Do you think HIV was part of the fraughtness?
You are jogging my memory. Totally. A major feature of what talking to gay men was like at that time was asking the questions (or at least thinking them): Do you have HIV? Are you dying? It sounds dramatic, but this is what was haunting gay interactions at the time.

Death was looming, yet at the same time you were young gay men living in New York, so vitality was also at play.

There are a number of people from the video that I am still in contact with. There are others who were very sick at the time and it is hard to imagine them still being around.

Working with you on screening “She’s a Talker,” I have been moved by what an advocate you are for the men in the video and their cats. Like many people involved in HIV/AIDS I think you feel an ongoing kinship with and a sense of responsibility toward others impacted by HIV. On my screen as we talk is a clip from your video “Ten-and-a-Half Years of To-Dos,” where young men in trees are reading your to-do lists. To me this is in conversation with “She’s a Talker.” It is a lament for the unfinished. It is moving image of young people up in trees, which conveys a sense of vitality, and wanting to rise above it all. To make a crude comparison, in the same way Michael Jackson was always trying to return to a childhood he never had, “Ten-and-a-Half” can be read as you working through a desire to return to a free and easy youthful sexuality with primarily mundane responsibilities, which for you and many of your friends, never existed.
Yes, and what supplanted that historically, culturally and just personally were these lists, which speak to my own character which is prone to fretting, preoccupation and plodding. I was moved by the guys I worked with on “Ten-and-a-Half Years of To-Dos” who in my mind live with a type of relative ease I don’t recognize from my experiences at that age, or those of any gay man of my generation. Also, I need to say that I think a sign of progress is that every time I say “gay men,” I wonder who the fuck I am talking about. It feels great to have these categories destabilized.

To speak more about men, gay or otherwise, how did you find the guys for “She’s a Talker”?
It was a highly manual, hybrid process. This was of course well before everyday folks had access to the internet. Friends and friends of friends are in the tape, but I also put up flyers and I think I put an ad in the back of the Village Voice.

What did it say?
It was really simple: “Looking for gay men who have female cats that are willing to be in a video art project.” I don’t know if I would have limited it to female cats at this point given where my understanding of gender is currently at. Important to me at the time was that all five boroughs be represented.

Why was that important to you?
At that time my demographic of gay men was rooted in the East Village. I wanted to move beyond the narrowness of my particular life. I wanted something that at least connected with New York City in a more sweeping way, because for me the city is sort of a silent--if we want to use that word again--participant. Having the work encompass subjects from all five boroughs at least gestures at that.

How long did the project take?
Three to six months. It was my first video project, which I think is reflected in the work. I was borrowing a VHS camcorder from my friend’s mother. I had this intense spread sheet. I treated it like a part time job, which I was also working at the same time. I would go out and meet with six people a day. It reminded me also of the labor involved in searching for an apartment.

What were some of the reasons for taking it off the internet?
I never put it on the internet.

How did it get there?
I was a visiting artist in Russia and had some exhibitions there as well. In Russia there did not seem to exist a concept of intellectual property. The video ended up on some torrent sites. From there Kenny Goldsmith posted it on UbuWeb--as his is practice--without permission. From there it was reposted on many other sites. To Kenny's credit, when I contacted him to take it down, he did. And on every occasion where I have contacted someone to take the video down, they have done so. I am sure it is out there somewhere and it will end up there again maybe even with my permission.

Why don't you want it online?
I know it is a losing battle, but it is something about the way the web flattens, neutralizes, equalizes, decontexualizes media content. You have extremely limited control over framing work that is up there.

The biggest reason I don't want it online has something to do with the fact that it is not just a campy romp through the living room of 80 gay men. It is that, but it is also a document and a documentation of people's lives in a time of extreme peril. Having it thrown into the blender of the internet does not work for me.

Some artists use the specifics of the internet in their practice and their work plays to this element. I might change my mind one day and work like that. But for now, the internet is inconsistent with my stewardship of the representation of these men and their cats.

What do you hope for the people watching the video?
I would like the presence of time, the passing of time and the meaning of what it meant to be a gay man at a particular historical moment to be evoked or felt. I want people to enjoy it. I want people to laugh. Humor is really essential to my work.I also want people to think about who these people are and where they are now, and think about them in relationship to this historical moment we are situated in today, days after the Supreme Court ruling.

A pleasure for me of making art is the range of response people can have to a work. There is a way in which I am drawn to making work that has an open ended emotional valiance that allows for multiple readings. It is always deeply gratifying when people come back with responses I would not have imagined, so I guess I don't know.

Postscript: While Goldberg's video is no longer online, the internet being what it is, offers this gem from artist James Mulder: She's a Talker.

Theodore Kerr is a Canadian-born, Brooklyn-based writer and organizer. He was the programs manager at Visual AIDS and is currently doing his graduate work at Union Theological Seminary.

Neil Goldberg has exhibited video, photo and mixed media work over the past two decades at venues including the Museum of Modern Art (permanent collection), the New Museum of Contemporary Art, the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum, the Hammer Museum, the Kitchen, the Pacific Film Archive, NGBK Kunsthalle Berlin, and El Centro de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona, among others.

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