Artist Cathy Busby in Conversation with Writer Amy Fung

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This e-mail exchange between artist Cathy Busby and writer Amy Fung took place in the weeks leading up to Busby's book launch for Steve's Vinyl on March 27, 2014 at READ Books in Vancouver, Canada. Beginning as an art installation and World AIDS Day event at the Khyber Centre for the Arts in Halifax in 2011, Steve's Vinyl (2013) is published by Visual AIDS, New York and Emily Carr University Press in the Pile Driver Editions Series.

Amy Fung: In 1993 after your older brother, Steve, passed away from AIDS related illnesses, you were bequeathed hundreds of vinyl record albums, amongst other personal items, which you kept for some 18 years after several moves across the country. What made you able to finally let them go?

Cathy Busby: They felt hot, like emotionally charged for a long time. I didn't want to look at or play them because they reminded me too vividly of Steve and that he was gone. Over the years, this feeling gradually decreased. Everything about accepting that Steve had died got easier over time.

I knew the albums were interesting, both the graphics and music, and as a collection, could be the raw material for an art event. Collectively, I saw them as a portrait of an era and of Steve. I often work with collections in my practice and with commemorating people or events. And there's

usually accompanying printed matter. The idea simmered in my mind for a couple of years before the time and place were right. I wanted to do something celebratory and exciting with them, something fun and memorable and the idea occurred to me to stage an installation and performance giveaway and to document it all and make a book. The idea didn't come together quite as tidily as I make it sound here, but looking back, that's what happened.

AF. Let's talk about the albums, specifically. In the book, you refer to them as a "time machine," as stimulants of memory and pleasure. I read that in terms of each object holding personal significance, but also that as a collection, they spoke of an underground gay subculture coded into pop culture and mainstream visual language. How did you relate to the underground then? And looking back, how do you feel about it now?

CB: The albums collectively, their graphics and music, take me to the 70s, even though many of them are from much later. I was in my teens. I remember playing records like Jethro Tull's, Aqualung and Cat Steven's Tea for the Tillerman in the living room of our family home on the Hi Fi stereo.

A couple of years after Steve left home in the suburbs to live in downtown Toronto, he moved in with his boyfriend, Yvon. That was 1974. I remember being with the two of them and Steve expecting me to see their relationship as normal and I soon did. They enjoyed their home-life together also liked to 'go out', together or on their own. Steve's friends, who were wide-ranging in their levels of ambition, education, their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, but they were almost all gay and I guess that was the common thread.

The part of the "underground" I recall strongly was going to Gay bars, "Boots," or something like that. There was something wondrous about this scene for me. A big dark room full of mostly buff guys with tight t-shirts and leather jackets, sometimes chaps, all hot and sweaty. I'd stick close to Steve. He'd introduce me as his sister to the guys. I remember hearing the Village People's YMCA on one of these occasions and everyone dancing together including us. It was so much fun!

Looking back, it was an exciting, mind-opening exposure to another world. It made a deep impression on me. I felt accepted, even though I was an outsider.

AF. Let's talk about the status of the outsider. I am thinking in particular of being a woman in the context of HIV/AIDS visual representation, as both a creator and a voice, but we can also talk about being an outsider in the context of gay and queer culture, especially as it overlaps with the art world. I don't think these things are mutually exclusive, but as an artist, a woman, a human being working across all of these worlds, what are the advantages of being an outsider?

CB. It's an interesting question. I don't usually see myself as an outsider, but let me try it on.

The advantage of being an outsider is mobility. If you don't mind being an outsider you can move between different social worlds. It's a privileged position to be in, being in different places and being accepted as an ally or "passing" in that setting. I don't do it casually, but it's part of my life and my art practice.

Many of the most important things I feel I've done or made have been from this position of belonging someplace temporarily. Like when I was in New York researching AA groups between

1995 to 1996. I'm not an addict or an alcoholic, but I was writing about victim-to-survivor culture as fundamental to self-help culture. I asked and was accepted as an observer in many meetings. In return, I told my story. It was a privilege because I wasn't suffering the way other attendees were; I wasn't part of their shared struggle, but I was included and trusted.

Getting back to your question, as a woman in the context of HIV/AIDS visual representation, which has always been mainly the domain of gay men, my involvement came as a continuation of being alongside my brother during his illness. While he was sick, we made a little video of all the pills he was taking where he introduced each of them and described what it was for. I didn't do anything with this video, but it was part of going through this time with him. Also in these years, I was co-editing an anthology about pain, When Pain Strikes (Burns, Busby, Sawchuk, eds, University of Minnesota Press, Theory Out of Bounds series, 1999, pg 287.) and we asked Steve to write a chapter ("Taking Control: How I Learned to Live with AIDS").

Towards the end of Steve's life, we were connecting in a new way through conversations about what AIDS meant in his life; and also through his actions, like his writing, and public presentations to medical professionals. In that sense, with Steve's Vinyl the event and the book, I picked up that thread.

Instead of an outsider, I'm more comfortable identifying as an ally. I align myself with issues where I feel there's an urgency to push for justice. I feel a need to push things to the foreground that touch my life and that I feel are important. My work is always about things I care deeply about. My art practice pushes.

AF. I think you've touched on the core of what I am drawn to, and that's empathy and the power to evoke and the power to feel and communicate empathy. Even when family and siblings are involved, there hasn't historically been a lot of compassion or understanding let alone empathy when people started getting sick from HIV AIDS. I should preface this by saying that I was born in the generation during the AIDS crisis, someone who has always known a world with AIDS and grew up internalizing the stigmatization before I ever really understood what the letters even stood for. Only in recent years am I learning how through systematic neglect, it became a political act to care for one another, to stand up for each other. I'm wondering what your thoughts are on the positions of the politically engaged artist in relation to the position of the caregiver?

CB: I remember seeing a cover story about AIDS in Time magazine in the summer of 1985, the same year Rock Hudson died. It was around that time that it occurred to me that Steve was vulnerable to this disease as a gay man. I didn't say anything about it to him then. In 1992 when Steve's HIV positive status shifted to AIDS and his health was deteriorating, he told us.

I remember the call from my dad in the winter of 1991 telling me Steve was sick. Turned out he had been HIV positive for at least five years. I'm sure Steve realized the news of the diagnosis would be excruciating hard for all of us. I know he had lots of feelings he had to deal with. The illness and Steve's decline encouraged all of us who were close to him to do the best we could to be there for him.

I'm sure there are thousands of stories of siblings, parents, friends, lovers and ex-lovers gathering around their loved one, forming support circles, listening, figuring out how go through this. I had some sense of belonging to a clan of sufferers - friends and family of those with, or lost to AIDS-

related illness. I especially felt close to Steve's friends, mostly gay men, who I got closer to in the process of being with Steve in the two years between his diagnosis with AIDS and his death.

Empathy, yes. At the same time, whenever possible, empathy shouldn't be without concern for the bigger picture, for public policy, for improvements to the system. As Paul Bloom writes, "Empathy has some unfortunate features--it is parochial, narrow-minded, and innumerate." (Paul Bloom, New Yorker, May 20, 2013) I attempt to attend to both in my life and art. Steve's Vinyl is about our lives; me, Steve, our family and friends. The book's about remembering Steve and it's also about contributing another story to HIV/AIDS representation and discourse, and about doing that now. AIDS isn't over.

AF. Ongoing AIDS. Ongoing Art. I think that's a good place to end this conversation for the time being. Thank you.

Bios:

Cathy Busby is an artist based in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She has exhibited her large-scale installations and printed matter in Canada and internationally. She was recently artist-in-residence with the Institute of Art, Religion and Social Justice at Union Theological Seminary, New York and then at Emily Carr. She is currently a visiting professor at the University British Columbia.

Amy Fung is currently a Vancouver-based writer and curator who publishes nationally and internationally in journals, magazines, catalogues, and monographs in print and online. Her recent projects include There are reasons for looking and feeling and thinking about

things that are invisible: a two day event on New Narratives in art writing and They Made A Day Be A Day Here.

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