’Ernst’s video reminds us that trans stories can also be AIDS histories and gay male stories.’

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still from Rhys Ernst’s “Dear Lou Sullivan” (2014)

To honor the 25th year of Day With(out) Art on December 1, 2014, Visual AIDS commissioned seven artists/collectives--Rhys Ernst, Glen Fogel, Lyle Ashton Harris, Hi Tiger, Tom Kalin, My Barbarian, and Julie Tolentino/Abigail Severance--to create provocative new short videos that reflect and respond to the ongoing AIDS pandemic for a program titled ALTERNATE ENDINGS.

Here, Lucas Hilderbrand considers Rhys Ernst’s contribution to the video program, “Dear Lou Sullivan.”

Rhys Ernst, “Dear Lou Sullivan” (2014) from Visual AIDS on Vimeo.

“It’s almost a poetic justice that I’ve spent my whole life trying to be a gay man and running into a lot of opposition and being told that I couldn’t do it, that it was impossible. I feel that, in a way, this AIDS diagnosis--because AIDS is still seen at this point as a gay man’s disease--that it kind of proves that I did do it, that I was successful. I kind of took a perverse pleasure in contacting the gender clinics that rejected me and said that they’ve told me for so many years that it was impossible for me to live as a gay man, but it looks like I’m gonna die like one.”

Rhys Ernst’s video “Dear Lou Sullivan” (2014) ends as Sullivan, an HIV-positive FTM activist, makes this statement during a video interview.[1] The statement is equal parts provocation and punch to the gut, and a fascinatingly contradictory articulation of queer life in which recognition only came with death. Premature loss defined a generation of gay male life and public visibility during the first wave of the U.S. AIDS crisis, and conditions of violence and death too often continue to structure the lives and representations of too many transgender people still. Sullivan poignantly states during the video, “I’ve had to deal with an uncooperative body. … AIDS is just one more problem with my body.” As a transgender man, Sullivan experienced the administrative and even social refusals to recognize his claim to be a gay male.[2] As the video demonstrates when Ernst swipes through screen captures of his own various chat exchanges on the MSM app Grindr, a number of men still do not understand the acronym FTM or continue to negate the potential for FTMs to be recognized as gay men.[3]

When Sullivan died in 1991, gay male life was culturally, politically, and epidemiologically overdetermined by AIDS. This was also just as queer theorists were beginning to give us the conceptual frameworks to think through the complexities and potential incongruities of sex, gender, and sexuality. Indeed, if the AIDS crisis had given urgency to queer politics and thought, transgender identities often figured as the case study for critical theory, if only rarely conceived from transgender perspectives. Transmale HIV/AIDS stories remain rarely acknowledged, and representations of FTM experiences have tended to focus on ways of embodying gender without necessarily also articulating ways of experiencing lived sexuality and erotic pleasure. Sullivan was not only a trailblazing trans activist, but he self-defined himself as much by his sexuality and sex positivity as by his gender.

Although Sullivan’s voice can be heard throughout “Dear Lou Sullivan,” his image only gradually comes into clarity. Ernst presents a layered image effect, with video noise and glitches intercut and overlaid. Ernst likewise literally layers the image, holding his smartphone in front of a TV screening playing VHS gay male pornography. The image then transitions to images of pages from Sullivan’s book, Information for the Female-to-Male Crossdresser and Transsexual, internet research finding, and Sullivan interviews--still filtered through a grainy video haze. This attention to technological interfaces and interferences reflects our mediated ways of searching for connections, identifications, and fulfilled desires. Such mediations are visible through the degradations of time (the material decay and effects of the video) and of virtual social encounters (the Grindr chats); yet technologies still also allow us the possibility of connecting with the past or in the immediate future. Ernst’s uses of pornography and hook-up apps reflects Sullivan’s commitment to being a sexual gay man yet rarely being recognized or represented in the primary

technologies of gay male sex. The period-specific technologies also reflect the dual temporalities in the video: Sullivan's (the analog era) and Ernst's (the digital one).[4] These screens suggest some of the ways that video formats can record and embody personal and cultural memory.[5]

By extension, the clarity and sustained attention that gradually accrues to footage of Sullivan enacts Ernst's own process of discovering Sullivan. Ernst first learned of Sullivan through the "Heroes" issue of Original Plumbing[6] and sought out more information at his local gay archive (discovering in the process that the Sullivan papers are housed in San Francisco[7]), and then sought out all the interviews he could on YouTube when he couldn't get to the Bay Area. His search for a queer elder became a search through various media platforms, one that extended the practices of from his prior work creating the opening credit sequence for the Amazon series Transparent (2014), which features images from the documentary The Queen (dir. Frank Simon, 1968); those credits foreground video distortions to suggest the images' historicity and a genealogy of trans representation. For one brief glimmer in "Dear Lou Sullivan," Ernst's own reflection (and his partner's) is visible on a TV monitor as he holds a camera to record the porn images when the found footage momentarily goes black. Thus, Ernst records his own desire to see himself reflected.

After Sullivan's statement about dying like a gay man at the video's close, Ernst cuts to a black screen on which a ghostly tremor of white video noise is the final image before the credits. This choice suggests that Sullivan's legacy will not just fade out but will continue to have an afterlife. Sullivan's significance has been celebrated in trans histories,[8] and Ernst's video importantly reminds us not only of Sullivan's radical self-determination but also more broadly that trans stories can also be AIDS histories and gay male stories.[9]

Lucas Hilderbrand is an associate professor of film and media studies and the director of the graduate program in visual studies at the University of California, Irvine. He is the author of the books Paris Is Burning: A Queer Film Classic and Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright.

[1] The source material was uploaded to YouTube from the collections of the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society. See this and related videos.

[2] For brilliant analyses of the structural conditions of administrative and physical violence that are enacted upon transgender people, see Judith Butler, Undoing Gender (New York: Routledge, 2004) and Dean Spade, Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics and the Limits of Law (Boston: South End Press, 2011).

[3] One of the chat screens that appears in the video was culled from the Tumblr site Trans Men on Tumblr.

[4] Lyle Ashton Harris's "Selections from the Ektachrome Archive 1986-96," also part of the ALTERNATE ENDINGS program, likewise vibrantly and movingly attends to a period-specific

mediated memory, in that case via a specific film stock for still photography.

[5] I've previously written about the period-specific look of video formats in AIDS activist videos, as well as the material and affective connotations of VHS aesthetics and of uses of YouTube as a cultural archive. See my essay "Retroactivism," GLQ 12, no. 2 (2006), 301-15, and my book Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009).

[6]The issue of Original Plumbing.

[7] The Lou Sullivan papers are at the San Francisco GLBT Historical Society.

[8] In addition to the OP special issue (#11, spring 2013) profile, Susan Stryker writes about Sullivan in "Portrait of a Transfag Drag Hag as a Young Man: The Activist Career of Louis G. Sullivan," Reclaiming Genders: Transsexual Grammars at the Fin de Siecle, eds. Kate More and Stephen Whittle (London: Cassells, 1999), 62-82.

[9] I would like to express my appreciation to Ernst for responding to my questions and sharing his insights into his video.

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http://beta.docker.poz.com/blog/ernsts-video-reminds