Interview with Filmmaker Jim Hubbard

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Candlelight Vigil, Christopher Street, May 1987 from “Elegy in the Streets” by Jim Hubbard

Jim Hubbard has been making films since 1974. In 2012, he completed United in Anger: A History of ACT UP, a feature length documentary on ACT UP, the AIDS activist group. He and Sarah Schulman also coordinated the ACT UP Oral History Project. Here, Visual AIDS Programs Manager Alex Fialho interviews Jim about his upcoming screenings at Filmmakers Coop.

Alex Fialho: What is the context for your three night series of screenings at Filmmakers Co-Op, and how did the film pairings come about?

Jim Hubbard: The Film-makers’ Coop has distributed my work for more than 30 years, so when

M.M. Serra who runs the Coop suggested doing the shows, I was delighted. She wanted to show United in Anger and my shorts. I insisted on adding a screening of Homosexual Desire in Minnesota. It's a 69-minute hand-processed Super-8 film and very few venues have the capacity to show it. This was the first screening in New York in 17 years. One film that I am not showing is Memento Mori, my 16mm Cinemascope film meditation on death. The prints are in delicate shape and I can't find the original printing materials so the film is in desperate need of preservation. In fact, much of my work needs preservation and digitization. I have filmed or videotaped every gay pride march since 1978 and much of that work is inaccessible because it's on Super-8 or outdated video formats.

AF: Elegy in the Street (1989), with its searing color and moving communal imagery, remains one of the most evocative and moving works of film I know that addresses the HIV/AIDS crisis. Can you describe the process of conceiving of and creating the film in detail?

JH: When AIDS first appeared in the early 1980s, I decided that I had to make a film about it. I wanted to explore both the private, emotional responses to AIDS as well as the public, political consequences of mass death. I had a great deal of trouble finding a way to do that. I refused to barge into hospital rooms to show people on their deathbeds, literally in the worst light possible.

I tried filming a friend of mine who had AIDS, but he quickly grew impatient with me and my camera. Two things happened. First, my ex-lover filmmaker Roger Jacoby was diagnosed with AIDS and wanted to be filmed. I documented the last year and a half of his life and then inherited his outtakes, so I had a large body of personal material to draw on. Secondly, ACT UP erupted and provided a highly visually arresting public, political response to the epidemic. These two elements worked together as a filmic equivalent of the elegy, a poetic form that uses the death of someone close to the maker as a pretext to make a larger political statement. The hand processing adds an emotional and poetic layer to the entire work.

It's important to note that it is a 30-minute silent film. I know that that demands a great deal from audiences. It's silent for several reasons. First, it's a literalization of Silence = Death. Second, as New Yorker, I find silence to be a rare and wondrous pleasure. Third, it forces the audience to really look at what there is to see. The lack of sound in situations like demonstrations that are usually loud with purposeful sound gives people the opportunity to see how people behave and what else is going on. Lastly, sound, and particularly music, is often used in films to force people to react with specific emotions to what's on the screen. I wanted the audience to be free to feel multiple, unforced emotions.

AF: You been actively involved in programming new film work through your role as co-founder of MIX Experimental Film Festival and you've also worked closely on archiving through your role with the ACT UP Oral History Project. How have these projects and others fed into and inspired your own artistic practice?

JH: I've always been inspired and excited by new experimental film work, but I can't say that it's fed into my film work in any specific way because I've always just done my own work. The work of many AIDS activist videomakers documenting ACT UP and other AIDS activist groups allowed me

the freedom to make Elegy in the Streets, Two Marches and The Dance, and ultimately made United in Anger possible. One example might be seeing Barbara Hammer do a performance piece at MIX that featured 35 mm slides side-by-side made me want to make a film that big and led to Memento Mori being in Cinemascope. My archiving work led me to make preservation an integral part of the ACT UP Oral History Project and United in Anger. Unfortunately, I've never had the resources to preserve the rest of my work.

AF: You've been active in recent screenings events highlighting Roger Jacoby's films. What are some of your reflections on Roger and his film practice?

JH: Roger died in 1985 and his work has been largely overlooked, partially because it's very difficult to see. When I first saw Roger's films, the complexities and the abstract beauty made possible by hand-processing was a revelation that completely changed my film work and my life.

Aged in Wood, the film I will be showing on April 1st, is the only print of his that I own. Three people are filmed in a darkened movie theater as they watch and comment on All About Eve. Mostly what you see is grain. It is a film about the primal cinematic experience of seeing and creating meaning in your head.

AF: What are your primary motivations when you sit down to make new work?

JH: Filmmaking is how I understand the world so I always set out to understand something new about existence.

AF: What types of audiences do you hope your films will have now and in the future?

JH: Of course, I want everyone in the world to see my films. People have to come to my films with a willingness to put aside their ingrained notions about film and look at them and experience them as they are and have their emotions whatever they are. It's okay to hate my films, but you have to be willing to examine your feelings and understand why.

AF: The title of this Friday's film program is MOURNING MILITANCY AND QUEER RESISTANCE. What was your thinking behind this as the evening's theme?

JH: Douglas Crimp's essay "Mourning and Militancy" was published in 1989, the same year that Elegy in the Streets was finished. I didn't read it then, so it didn't influence the film, but we were both in ACT UP and thinking about the relationship between the two. When I made Elegy, I thought that militancy was an aspect of mourning, that the motivation behind every person in a demonstration was someone dying of AIDS. So Roger in that film becomes a figure who stands in for all the dead as well as being a specific individual with certain qualities, good and bad. I've since come to think that perhaps militancy wasn't the best form of mourning and that much of the trauma we are now seeing among former AIDS activists is the result of repressed sadness and unexpressed anger over the deaths of so many loved ones.

The Queer Resistance part is something of an awkward addition. We used to say that AIDS, as well as killing so many people, was devastating gay culture. Now we're faced with a much more efficient destroyer of queer culture – assimilationism. So I wanted to highlight the remnants of gay

culture and call attention to all those queers who are trying to create an alternative, subversive vibrant culture. The All About Eve triptych comes about because three filmmakers who knew and loved each other were bound together through a shared queer love of certain aspects of mainstream culture and could create something new and very queer out of that.

Jim Hubbard has been making films since 1974. In 2012, he completed United in Anger: A History of ACT UP, a feature length documentary on ACT UP, the AIDS activist group. Sarah Schulman and he are continuing work on the ACT UP Oral History Project, as well. One hundred and two interviews from the ACT UP Oral History Project were on view in a 14-monitor installation at the Carpenter Center for the Arts, Harvard University as part of the exhibition ACT UP New York: Activism, Art, and the AIDS Crisis, 1987–1993, October 15 – December 23, 2009. A version with 114 interviews showed at the White Columns Gallery in New York, September 8 – October 23, 2010. He, along with James Wentzy, created a 9-part cable access television series based on the Project. Among his 19 other films are Elegy in the Streets (1989), Two Marches (1991), The Dance (1992) and Memento Mori (1995). His films have been shown at the Museum of Modern Art, the Berlin Film Festival, the London Film Festival, the San Francisco Jewish Film Festival, the New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Tokyo, London, Torino and many other Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals. His film Memento Mori won the Ursula for Best Short Film at the Hamburg Lesbian & Gay Film Festival in 1995. He co-founded MIX - the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film/Video Festival. Under the auspices of the Estate Project for Artists with AIDS, he created the AIDS Activist Video Collection at the New York Public Library. He curated the series Fever in the Archive: AIDS Activist Videotapes from the Royal S. Marks Collection for the Guggenheim Museum in New York. The 8-program series took place December 1-9, 2000. He also co-curated the series, Another Wave: Recent Global Queer Cinema at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, July and September 2006... Recently, he curated a series of videotapes from the collection of the New York Public Library to accompany Why We Fight!, their landmark exhibition about AIDS activism.

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