Rhys Ernst: ’For a number of complex reasons transmasculinity is wildly underrepresented.’

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Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, “Relationship No. 44” (2008-2013)

Rhys Ernst is on a roll. In the last year alone, Ernst was including in the 2014 Whitney Biennial, worked as producer and consultant of the Golden Globe-winning series Transparent, and contributed the incisive short video “Dear Lou Sullivan” to Visual AIDS’s Day With(out) Art 25th anniversary video program, ALTERNATE ENDINGS.

In a response essay to “Dear Lou Sullivan,” Lucas Hilderbrand writes that “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.” Visual AIDS interviews Rhys below about Transparent’s Golden Globe and his “Dear Lou Sullivan” video below.

In “Dear Lou Sullivan,” you merge archival footage of transgender activist Lou Sullivan and old-school pornography with contemporary Grindr chats. Why was it important for you to layer the past with the present on-screen in this way?
In his interview, Lou details numerous experiences of body dysphoria and transphobia. He also discusses the joy and fulfillment he experienced as a result of his successful gay sexual experiences. Sex is central to Lou’s story--both in how central it was to his gender affirmation, as well as to his death.

If he was a trailblazer in creating a distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation, it’s ironic that his male identity was most validated when he was sexually accepted by the gay community. That paradox resonated with me.

Over the course of years I saved screengrabs of my experience of transphobia, ignorance, and debasement on Grindr. It’s more often ignorant statements or questions than open harassment (though I’ve experienced both). My experience of transphobia on MSM apps is not unique--after I began collecting my own screengrabs I discovered a tumblr dedicated to this topic. What really blew my mind is how often gay cis men didn’t even know what the terms “ftm,” “trans man” or “trans” even mean--it’s incredible how many cis gay men can live in an insulated bubble and be completely disconnected from the rest of

the queer/trans world--this points to a very particular type of cis privilege.

I used one “found” grindr chat in the video, around 4:15, in which a poz guy is discriminated against. I sought that one out specifically for the video. There’s a parallel in the discrimination that poz cis guys and neg trans guys experience in the MSM scene. Lou Sullivan was a rare overlap of that Venn diagram, of poz cis/gay trans, and experienced both of those types of discrimination. The Grindr screengrabs illustrate how little has changed since Lou’s days in how trans men are perceived and treated in the MSM scene.

One thread that emerged in the making of this video was that of screens: the Grindr screengrabs on my iPhone, the VHS interviews of Lou bracketed in the YouTube page, the VHS porn shot off of my TV screen. The screen as a means of collapsing time, a mediation of the experience, a means of communication and reflection (literally and figuratively).

Can you describe the influence of Lou Sullivan, and your process of both being inspired to make the project about Lou and where your research into his life and work took you?
I’m often frustrated by the conspicuous void of visible trans-masculine elders and histories. Thankfully, there’s a good deal of trans-feminine history out there, and I’ve been lucky to have access to amazing trans feminine elders. For a number of complex reasons however, transmasculinity is wildly underrepresented. I learned about Lou Sullivan two years ago from the Hero issue of Original Plumbing.

The absence of visible trans masculine elders and my search for them is part of what motivated me in the making of this video.

As a trans man who primarily dates gay men, finding elders that fit that archetype is a challenge. Lou was all of those things, whilst previously my investigation into the history of this demographic had left me pointedly empty handed. It’s almost as if these two identities--gay cis male and gay trans man--have cancelled each other out. The way Lou talks about discovering he had AIDS, and the ways that that diagnosis could be seen as a “success” in being a gay man was really striking to me. He would eventually die of AIDS related illnesses. He referred to his ultimate circumstance as his “poetic justice.”

In spite of his extraordinary obstacles, in the video footage Lou’s optimism, steadfastness and strength shine through. In the late stages of AIDS related illness, Lou describes the positive aspects of his life, concluding “all is not doom and gloom.” His spirit of perseverance endures beyond his passing and is embedded in this analog footage of him.

I initially went to the ONE archives in Los Angeles, thinking that they would have some of Lou’s archive there. ONE connected me to Lou’s book, Information for the Female-to-Male Crossdresser and Transsexual (which I used in the video), but I learned that the vast majority of L.S.-related materials are at the San Francisco GLBT Society. I wasn’t able to travel to San Francisco at the time (I was headed to Europe and ended up completing the video in Berlin) so I turned instead to the internet. I came across the San Francisco GLBT Society videos of Lou on YouTube. My online research of Lou reflected my larger search for transmasculine elders--screengrabs of my web searches became a part of the video as well.

You’ve also been closely involved with Transparent, the 2015 Golden Globe-winning best comedy series, whose lead, Maura, is a contemporary--albeit fictional--character of noteworthy visibility. You’ve described your time as producer and consultant on Transparent as a creative/activist role. What was the range of parts that you played for the project, and how did your role emerge?

I met Transparent creator Jill Soloway when we were both premiering short films at the 2012 Sundance Film Festival. We kept in touch about trans issues in film (her parent had recently come out as trans) and when she was writing the pilot for the show, she got in touch about collaborating. I've been a part of the show since. My role as a producer and consultant has included extensive script notes, time in the writer's room, casting, locating and hiring trans crew members, time with the actors (in particular Jeffrey Tambor), interfacing between the show and the queer/trans community, and guiding the queer / trans content and political ethos behind the scenes. It's an incredibly exciting project to be a part of, not only because it's such groundbreaking storytelling, but also because it's occurring right in the middle of the trans civil rights movement and is is a part of shaping the conversation. We're beginning our second season now and are expanding some of our social responsibility programs to help trans people break into the film industry.

I also created the Transparent opening titles, which connected directly to my work on "Dear Lou Sullivan." For the Transparent title sequence, I used an old VHS camera to shoot original material, mixing it in with archival footage. All of this was fresh in my mind as I created "Dear Lou Sullivan." I even used a little leftover VHS static that was shot (but not used) for the Transparent title sequence at the very end of "Dear Lou Sullivan."

In what ways did you and your longtime collaborator Zachary Drucker work with Jeffrey Tambor to develop his portrayal of Maura for the series (which won him a Golden Globe)?
Zackary and I have spent a lot of time with Jeffrey since the inception of the show, and in addition to a collaboration, I enjoy a friendship with him. Jeffrey is just as sensitive, intelligent and empathetic as he comes across on screen and he really gets the importance of trans storytelling and what we're all doing here.

One story I like to tell about working with Jeffrey is that in the early days, before we even shot the pilot, I had the idea to bring Jeffrey in character to a trans night at a bar in the Valley. It turned into a field trip with a small group including other cast and crew members. Zackary and I met Jeffrey and Jill at his hotel and got him into character as Maura for the first time. He had been to some fittings but hadn't put the whole look together as one yet. The group of us sat around for several hours and shared stories about gender and our lives as Maura slowly emerged for the first time. Jill had to leave for a screening of her film Afternoon Delight, so Zackary and I and Jeffrey as Maura drove together to the bar in the Valley to meet our gang. That was the first time Maura ever stepped out and it was a revelation. We all had a fantastic time--Judith Light, who's a huge LGBT activist, met us there, and it was like Shelly meeting her former husband post-transition for the first time. Maura led us all to the dance floor. It was an incredible moment and left us all feeling that we were a part of something special.

What was the experience on set of Transparent? Any charged or emotional moments to share?
The Transparent set is lovely. It's a group of immensely talented people, no big egos, not a rotten apple in the bunch, doing what they do best. Some of Maura's big scenes have felt really special to be witness to and a part of--when Maura comes out to Sarah in episode 2, or when Sarah and Ali defend Maura in the women's room both come to mind.

It's always amazing when we shoot on location with a bunch of queer and trans actors and extras. The LGBT Center scenes, and in particular the "Trans Got Talent" scene, were examples of these. Zackary and I cast all the queer and trans background actors from the community, and there would be sometimes 70 or so queer and trans people in a room. Everyone was moved to be a part of it--the trans folks would often say that they had never been around so many other trans people before. There were always

gender-neutral bathrooms on set, and the whole cast and crew were well versed in trans issues, including gender-neutral pronouns, etiquette, etc.

Another favorite was Camp Camelia--the early ’90s flashback episode in which Maura goes to a weekend retreat for cross-dressers. We were out in Malibu State Park somewhere in an actual summer camp environment, with cross-dressers frolicking around. I was working on the title sequence at the time and brought a big VHS camera to shoot party footage on set alongside the primary production. Jill liked the idea and suggested I cross-dress and actually be in the scene on the dance floor as a party-goer while shooting VHS for the titles. I did a full drag look--early ’90s with a copper sequin dress that went wrist to ankles--very Tootsie--a bob wig, full makeup, though I refused to shave my mustache. My drag alter-ego, “Copper Penny,” was on the dance floor during the whole climactic scene with Maura and Marcie, though I didn’t make the final cut, sadly.

Rhys Ernst is a filmmaker and artist who works across various forms and modalities to investigate transgender identity, masculinity, and the intersection of gender and narrative construction. He is a producer on Amazon’s Transparent and created the title sequence for the series. He has shown work at the Sundance Film Festival, the Whitney Biennial, Oberhausen Film Festival, Rushes Soho Shorts, Brisbane International Film Festival, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, MIX Brazil, Indie Memphis, REDCAT, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, MOCA Los Angeles, The New Museum, Brooklyn Museum, and The Hammer Museum, and won awards at Outfest, Chicago International Film Festival and Carrboro Film Festival, among others. He was the 2010 HBO Point Scholar and received a Princess Grace Awards Honoraria in 2003. Ernst received his MFA in film/video at CalArts in 2011 and a BA from Hampshire College in 2004. He lives in Los Angeles.

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