“The injustice politicized us.”

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Jean Carlomusto and Larry Kramer

Larry Kramer’s fiery response to an ill-fated AIDS Institute Forum in 1991 is the opening scene of Jean Carlomusto’s documentary Larry Kramer in Love & Anger, an HBO production. The footage is an apt introduction to Kramer’s activism. It demands your attention. It grabs you and shakes you. Carlomusto makes it strikingly obvious that Kramer can out-shout anyone.

The film is anchored by Kramer’s demanding and vehement personality, and underscored by his ability to polarize the gay community with his unwavering and controversial viewpoints. Carlomusto didn’t embark on this project to envision Kramer as a saint of AIDS activism, but rather as one of the voices who woke up the mass media and the American government during this bleak period of mainstream inaction. Carlomusto is a veteran activist and filmmaker whose latest recounting of Kramer’s emphatic presence relies on archival footage, interviews and scenes from the The Normal Heart, a largely autobiographical play written by Kramer. The commercial release of Larry Kramer in Love & Anger sheds light on a critical tipping point of the gay liberation movement--when a “plague” forced a community to re-center its values and strengthen its interconnectedness in an act of survival.

Here, Carlomusto discusses her filmmaking career, the impact of the AIDS crisis and her latest documentary with Visual AIDS intern Maia Paroginog.

How did the AIDS crisis impact your community and your development as a filmmaker?
A crisis of the magnitude of AIDS in the 1980s and ’90s had a formative impact on NYC. George C. Wolfe says it best in Larry Kramer in Love & Anger: “This horrible disease gave this community a focus that it didn’t have. It turned a community into a community and by that I mean caring for and protecting others.” This sense of caring is at the heart of it. There were incredible community-based initiatives all over the country that created the kind of care and protection people with AIDS didn’t have access to because of institutionalized homophobia and bigotry. Injustice and unfair treatment shaped the AIDS crisis. It forced communities to come together in response to being treated as second-class citizens. The injustice politicized us. As Larry Kramer articulated early on, “If this mysterious illness had struck initially in straight white populations, it would have been attended to a long time ago”. He was referring to the rapid response to incidents such as the first outbreak of Legionnaires’ disease in 1976. The Legionnaires’ scare was front-page news for months and every resource possible was marshaled immediately to contain and treat it. But, because AIDS first affected mostly gay men, women, people of color and IV drug users, the response was encumbered by judgmental attitudes and fear rather than rapidity and engaged inquiry. Communities formed to fill that vacuum.

The other formative aspect of the AIDS crisis was the need for visibility at a time when many gay people were still in the closet about their sexuality. Early AIDS activists were people who dared to be public about their lives. David Summers and Bobbi Campbell spoke openly about what AIDS was doing to their communities and to their lives. Not many others were “out” there doing that in the early 1980s. Early pioneers faced a good deal of scorn for their openness. But their braveness and transparency made it easier for others to come out and join them, and that’s how you start a movement. The AIDS crisis brought people together through the formation of community groups and coalitions. These groups forced a cry for action that pushed the government to face homophobia, racism and sexism, and respond more rapidly to a disease that was killing thousands.

As a filmmaker, AIDS formed me into a documentarian. Before AIDS, my stories were experimental narratives that relied mostly on plot and allegory. I had to reconsider that approach in doing work about AIDS. For a narrative to be experimental, there has to be a body of work from which to differentiate. When I started working at GMHC in 1987, there was a dearth of meaningful representation of AIDS and people living with it. I began making documentaries as a call for response and a way to amplify our voices. I view that early work as the start of a conversation. Being an activist artist, I was also influenced by the other filmmakers I worked within groups like DIVA TV [Damned Interfering Video Activists, an affinity group of ACT UP], GMHC and Testing the Limits Collective. I was also inspired by the work of artists groups like Gran Fury and the creative posters generated by members of ACT UP.

It was an intensely creative time. However, the exhilarating feeling of coming together in ACT UP started to change into grief over the years as so many of our friends got sick and died. This is always the other side of working with archival footage of the AIDS Crisis. There’s the gratifying experience of seeing old friends, but they are now framed in a larger context of loss. I think some of my desire to keep working with this material over the years in documentaries like Shatzi Is Dying was to put it together in a larger narrative that preserved the memory of friends as I remember them. I wanted to put these stories into a context that shows what can happen when an inspired group of activists come together and give it their all.

What was your involvement with ACT UP?
I was involved in several groups including DIVA TV and the Women and AIDS Caucus. DIVA TV had two goals: to amplify the work of the movement onto the TV screen and to document any violence against our members when we were engaged in nonviolent protest. We even made our own fake press passes, which actually worked for a short time. One DIVA member reportedly used it as photo ID when she opened a bank account. The front side bore a strong resemblance to the official NYC press pass at the time. We did this so we wouldn’t be shooed away from shooting protests without press credentials. The back of the DIVA press pass had our mission statement, which read in part: “We are committed to making media that directly counters and interferes with dominant media assumptions about AIDS and government negligence in dealing with the AIDS crisis.” The folks in DIVA were incredibly resourceful and engaged in producing documentaries about the movement. We made a number of documentaries cobbled together from shorter works made individually or in small working groups. Target City Hall and Stop the Church were examples of that work. When the energy of the group started to dissipate, James Wentzy really took up the reins of DIVA with the weekly ACT UP TV show.

In terms of ACT UP work around women and AIDS, in 1988, the Women’s Caucus organized the first ACT UP protest specifically around women and AIDS when we staged a successful protest challenging Cosmopolitan magazine for printing an irresponsible article that stated women were not in danger of contracting AIDS from heterosexual sex and their partners need not wear condoms. We got a lot of

national attention, and Cosmo issued a retraction. Doctors, Liars and Women (Carlomusto and Maggenti, 1988) examined the genesis of this action and the response to our call.

I also worked with a group of men and women in ACT UP whose mission was to change the CDC's definition of AIDS so that women and the poor were recognized, counted and cared for. The definition was finally changed in 1992, but it took several years of organizing protests to accomplish what should have been a given--that the opportunistic infections that were killing women and IV drug users were counted along with the CDC statistics of the HIV related infections that men were dying of.

In what capacity did you know Larry Kramer?
I first became aware of Larry when I started working for GMHC in 1987. He had already been forced out of the agency at the time, but was still the person people were talking about due to his very public criticism of GMHC for not taking bold political action. I thought it was great that he continued to agitate for stronger action. So much so that when I heard he called for a group centered on civil disobedience--that would become ACT UP--I grabbed a camera to document it. Although I knew Larry and saw him at meetings and events, I was shy and didn't go over to him all that much. However, I remember shooting his 1989 GMHC Oral History Project interview. Between some of what other board members said of Larry, and Larry's reputation, I thought he was going to come into that interview with knives a-waving. But he was very sweet and articulate, and made it a point to ask me what I thought about what the other interviewed GMHC board members said. I told him it was like the film Rashomon (where everyone offered their own self-serving version of the truth). He wasn't surprised at all by my analogy, and added, "I think the reason it's Rashomon is that so many of us, myself included, have all had to defend ourselves so many times that you begin to look for the justification somehow of whatever was done." I didn't expect that kind of introspection from him. That's one of the things I find interesting about Larry--you don't know what he's going to say.

How would you describe Larry Kramer's activism?
Larry is a terrier activist. Once he gets his teeth into something important, he's going to hold on and pull. I credit Larry's activism with inspiring a movement that would change the world.

What was Larry's reaction to the film?
By time Larry saw the finished film, he was out of the hospital and on the road to recovery. It was just the two of us (and his aides) squeezed behind his computer screen watching it at home. Given the film's "warts and all" approach, I was apprehensive how Larry would react. On top of this, he was stoically quiet throughout the screening. I think it was overwhelming for him to see himself so ill, especially at his wedding to David. Afterward, he made a few complimentary remarks, but he did request a surprising change. He wanted the documentary to talk about the break up of ACT UP. I told him the break up (really the splitting off of TAG from ACT UP) was a complicated story, another film in and of itself. Near the end, we added some material about how ACT UP's demise broke Larry's heart, and that solved the issue. Today I'm happy to say Larry is doing really well. He's gaining strength and writing a sequel to The Normal Heart.

You've documented the HIV/AIDS epidemic for over 30 years. Can you describe that journey?
It's hard for me to describe it as a linear journey because there are so many efforts woven together that intersect with each other and carry on the work in different directions. Rather than a journey, it's more like a recurring dream where I'm constantly packing and loading the car only to realize I've left something important back inside the house. Over time, I've come to a more peaceful relationship with the inherent frustration of this dream. I think it's indicative of the impossibility of any one story capturing

the global tragedy of AIDS. It’s also a dream about loss and memory of those left behind. The compulsion to continue to gather this information together is a sign we are still unpacking a densely formative time.

Jean Carlomusto is a filmmaker and interactive media artist whose work explores the unorthodox complexities of LGBTQ history. Her work has been exhibited internationally in festivals, museums and on television. Her acclaimed documentary, Larry Kramer in Love & Anger, was featured this year at the Sundance Film Festival and premiered on HBO on June 29. She produced, directed and edited Sex in an Epidemic, which premiered on Showtime on World AIDS Day 2011. Her interactive video altar, “Offerings,” which commemorates AIDS activists, has been featured at the Fowler Museum in Los Angeles and the Museum of the City of New York, and has toured South Africa as part of the Stop AIDS/Make Art project. Jean was an early pioneer in the AIDS Activist video movement and helped to bring about positive change in the face of the AIDS epidemic. She is a Professor in the media arts department at Long Island University in New York.

Maia Paroginog is an intern at Visual AIDS who is entering their final undergraduate year at Stanford with focuses in visual art-making, arts writing, and comparative studies in race and ethnicity. Their work employs several mediums and representations, which range from abstract sculpture to figurative painting. Their artwork and academic interests revolve around body dysphoria, queering interpersonal relationships, intersectional feminism, power/privilege and the abject abstract. They use queer art to interrogate notions of “identity” and are interested in its uses in addressing collective trauma.

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