


When I met Douglas Crimp in his apartment in Lower Manhattan in March 2007, it wasn't my first visit. I'd already been in his bedroom in the textual architecture of his seminal article “The Boys in My Bedroom” published in Art in America in 1990. Written during the high tide of the AIDS crisis in the US, Crimp re-evaluated his understanding of postmodernist art through an anecdote about the “boys in his bedroom.” “Boys” referred not only to the young kids in the pictures on his bedroom wall by Sherrie Levine – appropriating Edward Weston's photographs of his son – but also to the unnamed men who visited the space. This was the first text I read as an art history student that demonstrated the importance of thinking about subjectivity and sexuality when writing about contemporary art and politics. Taking his bedroom as a point of entry, Crimp questioned the blindness of gender and sexuality in postmodern art discourse, pointing out how “homophobia structures every aspect of our culture”.

I'm not the only one who's been inspired by Crimp's "queer pedagogy", to borrow John Paul Ricco's description of this particular anecdote. For several years Crimp has taught visual and cultural studies at the University of Rochester, where he's Fanny Knapp Allen Professor of Art History. Since the 1970s he's written extensively on postmodernism and representation, sexuality and aesthetics, AIDS activism and queer theory, both during his thirteen years as co-editor of the influential journal October, as well as in publications such as AIDS Demo Graphics (with Adam Rolston, 1990), On the Museum's Ruins (1993), and Melancholia and Morality – Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics (2002).

In his 2006 article “Back to the Turmoil” in the exhibition catalogue for The Eighth Square: Gender, Life and Desire in Art Since 1960, Crimp introduced one of his new projects entitled Before Pictures. The title refers to the famous exhibition “Pictures” that he curated at Artist Space in 1977, presenting the early work of Sherrie Levine, Jack Goldstein, Philip Smith, Troy Brauntuch, and Robert Longo. Two years later he elaborated the discussion of postmodern artistic strategies in an essay with the same title in October, including Cindy Sherman in what was to be known as The Pictures Generation. While his exhibition and article became important for the development of a critical postmodernist art theory in the US, Crimp's work before “Pictures”, is not so well known. My conversation with Crimp started out with a question on this current project, wondering if it was a memoir he was working on.

DC

First of all I should say that Before Pictures is gestating, not fully formed. It comes from various things. One of them is that a number of people have said that it would be interesting for me to write about the 1970s, especially about the gay world at that time. This is a period that has been either repressed – or romanticized – in contemporary discussions, and there's not very much interesting history about it. That was something that was lurking in the back of my mind.

I had also begun thinking about autobiographical matters, which I guess is a result of growing older. I initially went back to a moment in my life before the ’70s. I arrived in New York in 1967, and although I had gone to gay bars in New Orleans, where I went to University, I think that the biggest influence on my sense of “how to be queer” was a period of hanging out in the back room of Max’s Kansas City with the people from the Warhol crowd. So I became interested in investigating New York queer culture of the 1960s, the period that preceded my arrival here, for example, the work of underground filmmaker Jack Smith, the beginnings of the Theatre of the Ridiculous, the films of Andy Warhol. This eventually evolved into a book on Warhol's films, which I'm completing now. It's tentatively titled Our Kind of Movie.

The other thing that got me thinking about writing a memoir was teaching a course on Yvonne Rainer. It was at the time when Yvonne was writing her memoir, published in 2006 as Feelings Are Facts. She writes about her early life, her work as choreographer, and her transition to filmmaking in the early ’70s. I read the memoir in manuscript while planning my course, and I used part of it in my teaching and got Yvonne to come Rochester to give a talk. Yvonne is a good friend, and so I talked with her about how she went about reconstructing
and narrativizing her past. Of course, Yvonne kept all sorts of things I don’t have, letters and journals and so on.

The spring after I taught the Rainer course, the Guggenheim Museum mounted a major exhibition of the work of French artist Daniel Buren, and they asked me to give a lecture in conjunction with the show. I worked at the Guggenheim in 1971 when Buren’s piece *Peinture-Sculpture* was removed from the “Guggenheim International Exhibition”. That created an enormous outcry and, together with the Guggenheim’s cancellation of the Hans Haacke exhibition a few months later, came to be seen as a historic art scandal.

The Guggenheim, which these many years later wanted to exculpate itself, knew that I was one of the few people who actually saw Buren’s piece, because it was removed just one day after being installed and before the show opened to the public. In addition, I was the curatorial assistant to Dianne Waldman, the curator who was responsible for removing the piece from the show, so I was invited to tell the story of what “really happened”. Of course I couldn’t do that. First of all, I had no documentation. Secondly, I don’t trust my memory – like everyone else, I’ve read a great deal about this event in the meantime. And thirdly, I don’t believe that the “truth” of history lies in a positivist project of reconstructing “what really happened”. I was interested in how memory worked in relation to a historically crucial event. So I wrote the piece that became the first part of this memoir project, and that’s when I decided that I really wanted to do this.

If I tell you something about the piece, it might help to describe what I’m trying to do with the project. On the one hand, it’s a kind of cultural history; on the other hand, it’s full of autobiographical details, which I think might add something new to how we think about that moment of culture. But I am also motivated by issues that interest me in the present, the position from which I’m writing. The reason why I’m thinking about certain things that happened in the past and not others is determined by debates in the present that matter to me.

The Buren piece turned out to be my take on the current animus toward design, for example in Hal Foster’s book *Design and Crime* (2002). I juxtaposed the stories of my two first jobs in New York. One was working at the Guggenheim, the other is something people in the art world would not know about: I worked very briefly for the fashion designer Charles James. He was the greatest American couturier in the 30s, 40s and 50s. I was hired to help him organize his papers to write his memoirs, which he never did. If you were in the fashion world and I told you I worked for Charles James, your eyes would pop out of your head. It would be like saying I was working for Balenciaga or Christian Dior. Charles James was the American equivalent of a Balenciaga or a Dior, and in fact both of those designers revered James. He was also revered by people in the art world. My discussion of James focuses ultimately on his decor for a house that Phillip Johnson designed in 1949-50 for Jean and Dominique de Menil, the Houston art patrons (the Menil Collection is one of the great museums of modern art in America). Johnson designed a Miesian-style modernist house, but James created an over-the-top, queeny decor for the interior. So this chapter of my memoir is largely about decor and modernism, about what I call “the decorative unconscious” of modernism.

So what I’m attempting to do is to use these stories about myself as a way of thinking about issues in contemporary art – with a particular emphasis on the queering of art discourse, in this case, unmasking the fear of the feminine, the fear of the effeminate, in high modernist discourse, which is now represented by the journal *October*.

Different worlds

MD I’ve read that you were fired from the Guggenheim. What did you do after that?

DC Yes, I was fired from the Guggenheim. I had worked closely with Buren on his piece for the Guggenheim International, and I did know the true story. The Guggenheim officials lied about what had happened, and I think my presence was too uncomfortable for them, so I was fired. Then, for several years, I taught at the School of Visual Art (SVA). This was 1971-76, and then I went to graduate school in the fall of 1976. That period between ’71 and ’76, when I was working entirely freelance and teaching courses at SVA, coincided with the explosion of gay culture including importantly, gay sexual culture. This was the immediate post-Stonewall period.

I was very much involved in the New York art world, but I was equally involved in the gay scene. I was initially living in Chelsea, then in Greenwich Village, so I lived right in the heart of the bourgeois gay world at that moment. But the two worlds – the art world
and the gay world – were quite separate at the time. That is really the subject of my book, the fact that these two worlds came together in my life – and in many people’s lives – but are not considered together in either art history or gay history. This is odd, because the “alternative modernists” in the U.S. at the time – that is, alternative to the Clement Greenberg, Partisan Review, crowd – they included a huge number of important gay men. For instance Lincoln Kirstein, who was the director of the New York City Ballet and responsible for bringing George Balanchine to America. The circle around Kirstein included George Platt Lynes, Pavel Tchelitchev, Paul Cadmus. In addition there were the people involved with View magazine – Parker Tyler, Charles Henri Ford. There were a great many figures who are rarely thought of in relation to the story of modernism in New York and America but were in fact absolutely central to it.

There are so many aspects of the story of modernism in America, where you can now look back – some scholars do – and show that gay people were central to its development. A good example is Nadine Hubbs’s book on the contribution of gay composers to modern American music, with such figures as Samuel Barber, Aaron Copeland, Virgil Thompson, Leonard Bernstein, Ned Rorem – it’s quite an impressive list.’ And you can see that in the reclaiming of Andy Warhol, Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, John Cage, Merce Cunningham. But in the immediate post-Stonewall period, when there was a huge explosion of gay culture, bathhouse culture, disco culture, there was an uneasy relationship between the gay world and the art world – at least in my experience of it. This is not to say that the two worlds didn’t come together in certain ways or that there weren’t clearly important gay figures in the art world. But their sexuality wasn’t openly acknowledged. The gay liberation movement and the founding of gay institutions – and I want to insist that this includes bars, discos, bathhouses, and sex clubs – were certainly not part of the institutionalized art world. We were making our own culture, in a way. Of course the cultures intersected, as I said. There were many gay people in the art world – artists, critics, museum professionals, poets, editors – who went to the bars and bathhouses. But these two worlds are not talked about together culturally. That’s part of what my current project is aimed at – thinking about these two worlds in relation to each other. To hold in place what was the case for me. I wasn’t in the closet, and I didn’t exactly live a double life, but in a certain way I did. In some ways I had my “art-world” friends and I had my “gay-world” friends. And of course my gay-world friends knew that I had a role to play in the art world, and my art-world friends knew that I went to the discos, but they were different worlds.

In the back room at Max's

MD In the article “Back to the Turmoil” you describe how the bar Max’s Kansas City was physically divided like that: the back room was the place for the queer Warhol crowd, while the front room was the place for the conceptual and minimal artists, like Lawrence Weiner and Carl Andre.

DC Yes, and it really was. If you read about it now, Max’s has the reputation of being a place where these cultures were totally blended. And in some cases this was true. But there were two rooms – at the front, where the bar was, and the back – physically very distinct, and with a very different milieu. At dinner time, there would be spillovers when you would go in the back room to get a dining table, but late at night, when people just hung out, the Theatre of the Ridiculous and the Warhol Factory crowds hung out in the back room, and the art crowd hung out in the front room. It was really clear. You wouldn’t find Holly Woodlawn and Jackie Curtis and Candy Darling in the front by the bar, except when they were walking through on the way to the back. They always went to the back room, and so did I. And at the same time, you probably wouldn’t find Lawrence Weiner, Robert Smithson, Carl Andre, or Dorothea Rockburne in the back room. It was a sort of spatial metaphor. You had to cross the “straight” space to get to the “queer” space.

MD The split between these two different worlds also seems to manifest itself in the writings on art at the time. I suppose it was not until the AIDS crisis – more specifically in 1987 with your special AIDS issue of October – that you explicitly merged the worlds of sexuality and art in your writings. And this was at the same time as the art critic Craig Owens also published his important text “Outlaws: Gay Men in Feminism” (1987). How so?
DC  Well, there was not an enormous amount of gay scholarship at that time. There was the early work in gay and lesbian studies, much of it done by independent scholars, like Jonathan Ned Katz. A lot of this work was in social sciences, history, or anthropology, such as Ester Newton’s early work on transvestites, *Mother Camp* (1979). But in contemporary art, which was what I was involved with, there was much less of that. The first piece I wrote that has an explicit gay argument was for a special issue of *October* I edited on Rainer Werner Fassbinder. That was 1982, the year that Fassbinder died; I wrote an essay on Fassbinder and Barthes.8

Certainly as a journal editor I cannot say that *October* published much queer work, but we published Leo Bersani. For instance the article “‘Merde Alors!’ (1980) that Bersani wrote with Ulysse Dutoit on Pier Paolo Pasolini’s *Salò* (1975). We didn’t use the word queer then, and you would not have called Leo’s work Gay Studies, but it was obviously written by someone interested in sexuality and representation. Now I think of Bersani as a major figure in the world of Queer Studies. Sexuality was not – apart from psychoanalysis – at the core of the cultural work that *October* did.

But I was certainly interested in what was published. I read what was coming out – starting in ’70-’71 with the first so-called “gay liberation books” by, for example, Dennis Altman, Mario Mieli, and Guy Hocquenghem. Guy was a friend. He stayed at my apartment for a short period of time around 1973. He had come to New York for an extended stay, and we became very good friends. I was interested in that discourse of gay liberation, but I didn’t know how to think about it in relation to what I was doing. My work shifted dramatically when I edited the AIDS issue of *October* and got involved in ACT UP. That was the beginning of what we now call queer theory. For instance, I met Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick when she was completing *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), and I had read her earlier book *Between Men* (1985), but also D.A. Miller’s *The Novel and the Police* (1988).

MD  You mention in “Back to the Turmoil” that you wrote on women artists before you discussed sexuality and representation more explicitly in your work. This is something you could say about Craig Owens’s work as well. Were women artists and feminist art a starting point for your writing on sexuality?

DC  In fact, it was more than that. Around the time that I was reading these first “gay liberation books”, I was also reading feminist books. I read Kate Millet, Germaine Greer – the early books of second-wave feminism. It was very easy to read those as being about yourself if you were gay. When you read analyses of misogyny or patriarchy, as a gay man you understand your relationship to it easily.

Craig got involved with feminist theorists in the art world, and he was one of the first men to do so. He wrote some of the early crucial feminist texts in the early and mid ’80s, like “The Discourse of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism”. The anthology it was in, *The Anti-Aesthetic*, came out in 1983. So I guess it was gestating for a long time. We were interested in aspects of recognizable gay culture. I’d read Jean Genet in college, and I’ve always been a great fan of Pasolini. In fact, one of the first things that I wrote about sexuality, before the AIDS issue of *October*, was published in the first volume of Dias conversations, which was about art in the public sphere.9 I talked about something that is not unlike the metaphor of the back room at Max’s, oddly enough, now that I think about it. There was a show at the New Museum called “Homo Video” that Bill Olander had curated. It had some of the first AIDS-tapes that I’d seen, such as Stuart Marshals’ *Bright Eyes* (1986), the pilot for *Testing the Limits* (1987), and Todd Haynes’s *Superstar: The Karen Carpenter Story* (1987) – the beginnings of what we now see as queer film. At the same time, there was major Hans Haacke retrospective in the New Museum’s main galleries. So I talked about the fact that the museum had staged these two shows, with two different notions of political art practice, in two separate spaces – with no mediation at all. It was like the back room was “Homo Video”, and the front room was Hans Haacke. So “gay” and “straight” were spatially separated – it’s basically the same story as the front and back room at Max’s.

This is the place, after the Fassbinder essay, in which I first discuss gay politics. In fact, I quote Pasolini in this essay. It’s one of my favorite statements, from his *Lutheran Letters*. Pasolini says that “tolerance is always and purely nominal. I do not know a single example of real tolerance. That is because real tolerance would be a contradiction in terms. The fact that someone is “tolerated” is the same as saying that he is ‘condemned’.”10 What he’s saying, obviously, is that tolerance is asymmetrical. I think that was my first foray into talking about my own subject position as a gay man writing criticism in the art world. And this was in a powerful art-world institution – the Dia Art Foundation – with critics like Thomas Crow and Benjamin Buchloh, important voices in the art discourse at that time.
AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism

**MD** This was in 1986, a year before you did the special issue of *October* on AIDS. When did you start working at *October*?

**DC** I started in 1977 with issue number 4. *October* was founded in 1976 by Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, and the “forgotten figure” of the crew – Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe, who was pushed out very early on. Until MIT Press became the publisher and I was hired, *October* had been not published regularly.

**MD** You were a student of Rosalind Krauss?

**DC** Yes. When I went back to graduate school I went to the CUNY Graduate Center, where Rosalind Krauss was teaching. I had met Rosalind shortly after she came to New York, which was around 1971. Before that she had been in Cambridge. I didn’t know her well, but I had met her and I knew her work. CUNY had a unique graduate program where you could actually work on contemporary art and criticism, rather than history.

By the spring of ‘77 Rosalind asked me to be the managing editor of *October*, and eventually I was promoted to senior editor, and then to being one of the full editors. And that was pretty much the entire staff for the time that I was there, but for a very short time when Craig Owens was associated with the journal, and eventually Joan Copjec came on as an associate. And then all of those other guys came after I left: Benjamin Buchloh, Yve-Alain Bois, Denis Hollier, Hal Foster. They had all had an association with the journal – all of them had published in it. I had brought Benjamin to the journal. Yve-Alain was a friend of Rosalind’s. Eventually Denis Hollier became Rosalind’s husband, so he came after I left. But basically, I always claim that when I left *October* it took five straight white men to replace me. (laughter)

**MD** Let’s talk about the special issue of *October* that you edited in 1987 – AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism. This is often said to be one of the early founding moments of queer theory, as well as an important moment in the AIDS chronology from a cultural perspective.

**DC** AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism represented two things: One was that it made AIDS something that people in the academy could consider, using the postmodern theory that we were all involved with at that time. We could begin analyzing representations of AIDS – artistic representations, but also media representations, science, and so on. Simon Watney had already published *Policing Desire* – *Pornography, AIDS and the Media* (1987), so there were precedents for what the *October* issue did. In fact, Leo Bersani’s famous essay “Is the Rectum a Grave?” was originally commissioned by me as a review of Watney’s book. I asked Leo if he would review *Policing Desire*, and he said that he had to think about it. In the end, he produced not a review, but a seminal queer-theoretical text.

The second thing the special issue represented was a combination of activist and academic perspectives. I initially planned to approach AIDS from within October’s usual purview – how the art world was dealing with AIDS. I’d thought of doing a few essays, but I didn’t know what I was getting into. Around that time I saw the pilot of *Testing the Limits*, and I met a member of the video collective who produced it, Gregg Bordowitz. Gregg said to me “if you really want to know about AIDS you have to go to ACT UP”. This was right after ACT UP had been founded in March of 1987. I started going to ACT UP meetings, and I got hooked. I went one week, and I never stopped, at least until the group began to fall apart. Going to ACT UP meetings made for a very fast AIDS education. I got to know Gregg and asked him to write something for the issue, and the whole thing mushroomed from there and grew into special issue. I was given permission by my fellow editors to do a special issue, but then it just got bigger and bigger. We initially wanted to publish it as a double issue, but MIT wouldn’t allow double issues, so it just became a big issue, twice as big as most *October* issues.

In the process of working on it, I realized that it was important to get people who were working within the affected communities – activists who weren’t academics – to write for it. There was a woman who went under the name Scarlet Harlot, who worked on prostitutes’ rights in relation to AIDS. I met her in the movement, and I thought that it would be great to get a prostitute to write about prostitutes’ rights in an AIDS context – so I did. And I got people from the PWA Coalition, because these were the people who knew about the epidemic by dealing with it every day of their lives. I wasn’t thinking, “let’s put activists and academics...
together”. I was just thinking “who knows the issues?” In the end it became a strange hybrid of different kinds of voices speaking about AIDS, including people who were writing as activists, writing manifestos. It resonated with all sorts of people. Whether from the activist or the academic perspective, it was a different kind of language than they were used to reading. The activists who suddenly reading Leo Bersani, who was writing from a complex psychoanalytic notion of sexuality that was certainly not part of the activist discourse. And then were artist-activists like Gregg Bordowitz...

MD He has such a powerful opening line of his essay “Picture a Coalition” in the issue: “As a twenty-three-year-old faggot, I get no affirmation from my culture...” His voice really feels strong in that academic context.

DC Yes. The issue was a success. It sold more copies than any other October issue prior to that time, and then we reissued it quite quickly as a book. It’s still in print. It still sells, oddly enough, because it’s really out of date now. But it’s understood as a model, I guess. You know, I was doing it blind. I just got caught up in it. I just started to go to ACT UP meetings, and then demonstrations, and I met all of these people. It became a huge part of my life while I was working on it. The issue I was editing before the one on AIDS was a special issue with Benjamin Buchloh on the Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers. So you can see – again – the “back room/front room of Max’s” schizophrenia in my life. But it was a time of great intellectual excitement for me – and fear and panic. It was a rollercoaster emotionally. I was doing the best I could, essentially, but I also knew that what I was doing was important. I knew that I was producing something that was necessary, especially from the perspective of the art world. People were blind to the reality of what was going on, and I knew that this would get people thinking. I knew who read October, and it wasn’t people in the AIDS movement, except in so far as a lot of people in the AIDS movement were also people studying in the Whitney Program – young art world people. But in general the readers of October wouldn’t expect something like the AIDS issue. It got a lot of attention.

October’s high modernism

MD What did Rosalind Krauss and the other editors of October think about the issue? I’m wondering in relation to the fact that you left October just a couple of years later.

DC The AIDS issue is, in fact, the reason I was pushed out of October. Of course on some level my fellow editors were pleased that October got so much attention. But in the end I think it got too much attention for their taste. You know, my name was suddenly up front. I had been seen by them as the younger one going to the office and doing the day-to-day work on the journal. Even after I became a full editor, I still essentially did the job of managing editor. I did all the proofreading, I did the layout, I did everything. By then it had gotten to the point where the other editors were not as hands-on with the journal as they where when I first got involved with it, so a lot was left to me. So when I said that I wanted to do a special issue on AIDS, they said OK. They never read any of the material before it came out, and I think they probably didn’t read it at all until later, after it got so much attention. And then they didn’t really like it. For them, it wasn’t what October was about. And you can see from what they’ve done since I left what they think October is about: it’s about a retrenchment around a traditional notion of high modernism. In the 1980s, October was thought of as the journal of postmodernism. But the commitments of Krauss and Michelson and the people now connected with the journal have always been much more high modernist in their orientation. But I wouldn’t have been able to articulate that at that time. I think the fall-out felt more like it was about issues of sexuality and cultural studies. My interests are not in high culture specifically, but culture in a more hybrid sense.

MD The book you co-edited with your reading group Bad Object-Choices – How do I Look? Queer Film and Video (1991) – wasn’t that initially supposed to have been an October issue?

DC Yes, that was the precipitating reason that I left. The papers of the conference that my reading group organized had been accepted by the editors for an issue of October, but when the texts came in they didn’t want to publish them. There were two texts in particular
that they rejected. It’s a long and complicated story – like any divorce – but I was forced out. That was in 1990. And luckily Bay Press published the papers as a book instead.13

MD There seems to be a huge split in the focus of October around that time. I’m thinking, for instance, about the roundtable discussion published in 1993 on the Whitney Biennial, where Rosalind Krauss, Hal Foster, Miwon Kwon, Benjamin Buchloh and Silvia Kolbowski strongly criticize the issues of “identity politics” and “political art” that the show addressed.14 Compared to your AIDS issue of October, well, they’re miles apart...

DC It’s a different world...

MD They don’t even mention the word AIDS in their discussion, even though this was an important backdrop for several pieces in the show. Instead they discuss “political art” in almost universal terms, without relating the show to the current social and historical context. Only Benjamin Buchloh seems to have a different angle on it all.

DC I think that there was a reaction to what I had done. The editors brought in allies whose work and interests were more narrowly focused in the direction in which they were moving. That direction was against the direction in which the academy and intellectual life toward cultural studies and questions of identity and difference. This was the moment of queer theory, for example. Shortly after I left October I began teaching in the Visual and Cultural Studies Program at the University of Rochester, and I think that then things got more and more polarized. If you look at October’s issue on “Visual Culture” (Summer 1996), there’s a real retrenchment with regard to disciplinarity, whereas October had earlier been committed to interdisciplinarity, because of its commitments to poststructuralist theory, but also to not just the visual arts, but also literature, film, and a range of different subjects such as politics and psychoanalysis. But then interdisciplinarity came to seem to them something else, something that threatened their high modernist position.

Queer before gay

MD You write about that in the essay “Getting the Warhol We Deserve: Cultural Studies and Queer Culture” (1999), where you discuss different understandings of visual and cultural studies, especially in relation to Krauss and Foster’s reactionary critique of it.

DC I wrote that essay initially as a response to the October issue on visual culture, as a defense of cultural studies. The essay went through a lot of different versions before I published it, but by the time I published it I had begun thinking about a project on Warhol. Shortly thereafter I wrote an essay on Blow Job (1964) – the first of my essays on Warhol’s films. In “Getting the Warhol We Deserve”, I was considering a project more about New York queer culture in the 60s that would include Warhol among a wide number of artists. But Warhol’s films were being brought back into circulation at that moment through the Warhol Film Project, and I thought, there’s plenty of Warhol: More than a hundred films, nearly 500 portrait films – the Screen Tests – and that’s plenty of material. Now I have actually reduced the project. I’ve written a few essays, and I’ll write a few more.

I’m doing close formal readings of some of Warhol’s films, but I do so in order to think about “queer” as it existed before Stonewall. Initially I had the idea of calling the project “Queer Before Gay”, though at this point I’ve changed the title to “Our Kind of Movie”, based on something Warhol says: “We didn’t think of our movies as underground or commercial or art or porn; they were a little of all of those, but ultimately they were just our kind of movie.” In any case, I’m trying to reclaim a polymorphous sexuality before the kind of fixed gay identity that came in the wake of Stonewall, not immediately with the radical gay liberation movement, but soon afterward as the movement became not a liberation movement but a rights movement, beginning with the Gay Activist Alliance. But I’m not really writing about that, but rather the culture that you can see in Warhol’s works – the kind of sexual world at that time. And I’m trying to draw meanings from the films that are relevant to thinking about queerness now.

I have written an essay on Blow Job, one on Screen Test #2 (1965), and another on Warhol’s collaboration with Ronald Tavel – one of the founders of the Theatre of the
Ridiculous – who wrote screenplays for Warhol’s films in 1965-’66, including a number of well-known ones like Vinyl (1965) and Kitchen (1965). I’ve written one on a group of films about seductions and refusals in confined spaces, and I’m completing one on The Chelsea Girls (1966). I’ll write a few of other essays on the films that I am particularly attracted by, or that concern issues that would be interesting in the context of this project.

MD Warhol’s films have received a lot of attention lately, but they’ve been suppressed for quite a while. Why is that?

DC Warhol took his films out of circulation in 1972 on Paul Morrissey’s advice. Morrissey thought they were pretentious and boring, and I think he wanted the attention for his own films. You know, Warhol was probably just canny enough to know that taking them out of circulation would make everyone want to know about them. But it did mean that for quite a long time the scholarship on Warhol neglected what was the major mode of Warhol’s production in the ‘60s. From 1963-1968 he made a hundred films – that’s a lot of work! In Warhol studies in general, there’s a lot of focus on the short period of the “real” Pop paintings. After that Warhol is seen as going astray – becoming decadent, getting too commercial – which I find ridiculous. In any case, shortly before he died, Warhol was convinced by John Hanhardt, then a curator of film at the Whitney Museum, to allow the films back into circulation. It’s a very complicated project. About 45 of the films have been restored; a lot of the screen tests have been restored. Callie Angell, a very fine scholar, is the curator of the Warhol Film Project and author of the Catalogue Raisonné of the films. The first volume on his screen tests is out now. It’s really beautiful.

MD Unfortunately I haven’t had the opportunity to see many of Warhol’s films. I’m presuming that’s – at least partially – the result of archival and distribution issues?

DC Most people haven’t. And even now that they are available, and any institution can rent the restored films from Museum of Modern Art, the opportunities to see them are rare. They’re not available on DVD, except for some pirated ones. They don’t circulate that much, although one is more likely to have the chance to see Warhol’s films than, say, Hollis Frampton’s or Michael Snow’s films.

This year I was teaching a course on queer film and performance around 1970, and I showed some of the queer films from around the time that Warhol was working. Some of these filmmakers’ work is totally out of circulation. There’s a wonderful Puerto Rican filmmaker, José Rodríguez Soltero, who made a legendary film called Lupe (1967) with Mario Montez. I got José to bring the film to Rochester to show it at the Eastman House. He brought his sole print. He doesn’t even have a negative of it! The underground was truly queer at that moment – they were making this stuff for their own pleasure, and not troubling too much to take care of it. Think of Jack Smith! Warhol is different. Warhol took very good care of his films.

MD Your two book projects then engage with the New York art world in the ‘60s and ’70s. Yet they seem to be conceived quite differently?

DC Yes, the Warhol one is autobiographical only in the sense that I am interested in his films in part because they show something of the world in which I found myself when I came to New York in 1967.

MD Did you know Warhol?

DC No, I knew people from the Factory. I met them – at Max’s – after Warhol had been shot, so he was not so easy to get access to. Warhol was not particularly well thought of by many of the people around him. The Superstars that I knew all felt used by him, but of course they still gravitated towards him and wanted to work with him because he made them famous. It’s a weird phenomenon. Almost all the people who worked with Warhol will live their entire lives in the shadow of Andy Warhol. Their only fame is the fact that they worked with him. So the level of resentment on the part of many of them is enormous.

Holly Woodlawn lived with me briefly during the time she was making Trash (1970), so I knew the experience from the other side, the side of a drag queen who was being exploited by the Factory. I didn’t want to be part of that. I didn’t want to go there. I didn’t want to meet Warhol. I never had that desire. I’m interested in interpreting Andy Warhol’s films. And I’m also fascinated by Warhol’s interviews, by what he says. But I’m fascinated with them in such a way...
that I’d never want to be one of the interviewers. Read the interview with Warhol by Benjamin Buchloh16 — they don’t speak the same language at all! It’s really hilarious. Of course, Warhol is a genius at evading questions and appearing to have no ideas of his own. Talking to him would not have been something I would have wanted to do, and I’m also extremely shy, so I wouldn’t have been able to say anything. [laughter]

ACT UP

MD I would like to return to your writing on AIDS, and your relationship to this work in the present. Yesterday [March 13 2007] Larry Kramer held a commemoration talk on the 20th anniversary of ACT UP at The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center here in New York.17 It was held in the same room as he held his famous speech twenty years ago – the speech that’s always said to have “founded” ACT UP. Were you there yesterday?

DC No, I didn’t know about it, but I’ve heard enough of Larry Kramer’s talks to last a lifetime. I’m always made furious by the completely ahistorical statement that Larry Kramer founded Gay Men’s Health Crisis and ACT UP. It’s true that he was instrumental in both, but I don’t think a person founds an activist organization – a community founds an activist organization. The fact that he gets the credit for ACT UP more than any other person is simply wrong. There were so many people who put so much more work and thought and energy into ACT UP than Larry Kramer, but it’s his name that gets associated with it. This is mythology, not history.

MD In his speech yesterday, and the following discussion on ACT UP’s twentieth anniversary march on Wall Street coming up on March 29, Kramer discussed the urgent need for ACT UP to return to its former strength and start fighting again. There were also several people from the “old” ACT UP movement there, for instance Ann Northrop, who lead the discussion. How do you feel about this belief in ACT UP coming alive again?

DC The idea of ACT UP coming back... I don't know. I do feel a kind of despair about the fact that there isn't more political activism in the US, particularly about the war. As someone of the Vietnam War generation – the anti-war generation – it's amazing to me that there isn't more activism against the Iraq war. I suppose the explanation is that there's no draft. I was susceptible to being drafted, to fight in Vietnam. But I could get out of the draft because I said I was homosexual.

MD Did you do that?

DC I did. I had to “prove it” with a psychiatrist’s declaration. That’s how I escaped the draft. Other people that I knew stayed in graduate school, others left the country. It was a huge issue for my generation, because we could be forced to go to Vietnam and fight. It was the same thing that created ACT UP: middle class people’s lives were threatened, and we became activists. Otherwise we probably wouldn’t have been. It was more than that in the anti-war movement, because we also then had the lesson of the Civil Rights Movement, which helped us to understand what a movement could do. Some of that remained in the founding of ACT UP. There were people who had extensive activist histories – especially women – and they were very smart about how to organize. For instance, some people had been involved with activist movements in the ’60 and ’70s, and they did the training for civil disobedience. But the greatness and uniqueness of ACT UP was that it was a very different kind of activist organization. Even though we learned a lot from the ’60s and the New Left organizations, we were really different in lots of ways. I wrote about that in AIDS Demo Graphics (1990).18 Even our graphics were different. We understood something about media that had not been understood before. I don't know what the solution is now with regard to revivifying activism. Maybe you could do it under the name of ACT UP, but it can't be Larry Kramer and Ann Northrop again. It actually has to be a group of people who are feeling the need to do something now.
The utility of melancholia

**MD** Your current projects deal with art and politics in the decades before the AIDS epidemic. I was thinking about this in relation to a moving passage in the closing paragraph of Simon Watney’s book *Imagine Hope – AIDS and Gay Identity* (2000) where he writes: “For all of us, but especially for those of us infected, the epidemic is sadly very far from over. For now we soldier on. I’ve had my say”.19 Watney’s “goodbye” to writing on AIDS comes after he’s been working on the epidemic for over a decade, as you yourself have done. Do you still work on AIDS at all?

**DC** In the mid ’90 – or early ’90s even – I experienced what a lot of people involved with the AIDS epidemic did, a kind of burn out, which made it impossible to continue with that as the centre of my work. Around 1993 I began to think about gathering my work on AIDS into a book. I didn’t get around to doing that until 2000, when I finished the manuscript of *Melancholia and Moralism*, which included everything that I’d previously published, and also stuff that I hadn’t, like panel discussions. The idea, I suppose, was to tie up everything I’d done and call it quits. I had done that before with *On the Museum’s Ruins*, which was all the work that I had done in the ’80s, and when I published it in 1993 I thought I didn’t want to work on the museum anymore. But I suppose you can never really finish anything. And yet...for many years I taught courses on AIDS, and now I can’t. Because there was a time when I could approach AIDS in a sort of parochial way, in a way that had to do with people I knew, my world: New York City, gay men. That’s really what my work on AIDS is about. But that’s not any longer what AIDS essentially is about. To think responsibly about it today, you have to talk about the global situation, you have to talk about other communities that are not getting access to health care, so it’s a question of the way health care is structured in this country. It always was, of course, but still, it’s no longer the same discussion. I don’t keep up with it in the same way, and so it would have to be a whole reengagement and reeducation. When I decided to publish *Melancholia and Moralism*, simultaneously I was deciding to get involved with other material.

The most recent essay that I published – except for the one in *The Eight Square* that is part of this memoir project – was an essay on Yvonne Rainer and her use of music.20 It was an essay that came out of the course that I taught on Rainer, and I really loved writing it. I’ve been interested in dance for a long time, but this is the first thing I’ve ever written about it. There are a number of things from my past that I want to work on now. I think that my Warhol book and my memoir project have political relevance. They’re meant to be about the issues that still really matter to me in queer life. But they are partly retrospective. This all sounds like a certain kind of melancholia, but I actually think there is a utility to a certain kind of melancholia; you can turn it into a kind of utility.

So no, I don’t work on AIDS anymore. But at the same time, because I’m positive and I have many friends who are, it still remains a huge part of my life and the lives of many people I know. I think about it a lot, especially in relation to my younger friends, who don’t ever talk about it. It’s as if for them it doesn’t exists, but of course it does exist. So it’s something that I’m deeply aware of, and that I have to have a certain interest in, but it’s not something that I’m working on intellectually.

The care of the self

**MD** In relation to this, I am interested in your thoughts on ageing...

**DC** ...that could be a topic for a whole discussion! [laughter]

**MD** I’m thinking especially of your conversation with Gregg Bordowitz in his exhibition catalogue *Drive – The AIDS Crisis is Still Beginning* (2002), where you touch upon the relation between the ageing body and the sick body in our body-obsessed culture.21

**DC** What I can say about it is that it’s probably why I am working on the project that I’m working on. It has something to do with trying to reclaim, at least in memory, my youth, to go back to what my interests were. You think you can drop things at some point in your life, but then you realize that they still have meaning for you, but they have meaning in a different way. I have a lot of thoughts about ageing, but it’s banal stuff, I’m afraid. At the same time it’s...
something I try to turn into something productive. I have friends who are older like Yvonne Rainer and Leo Bersani, who are still enormously productive, so that's the hopeful side. I'm trying to make something productive of the fact that a retrospective position feels necessary to me, because I can't pretend that I understand or can keep up with what's happening in the art world. There are certain things that can interest me, and I can engage with them, but I can't have the same relation to them as I have to the artists of my generation or the next generation, the Pictures generation, that I was part of. Partly this has to do with changes in the nature of the art world. It doesn't mean that I have to stop, but rather that I can look at things again – look at my past – and reflect on them in a different way.

I think a lot about ways you console yourself, how you replace kinds of pleasures that you once had with different kinds of pleasures. My relationship to the city is different. I don't go to bars, and I always used to go to bars. Now I see more films, I see more dance performances, hear more concerts, and go to the opera. I don't feel any less active. If you're a professor and a teacher, you have a relationship to your students in which you learn from them about their interests. They open worlds to you, or they open aspects of yourself to yourself that you wouldn't otherwise think about. One of my ways of dealing with it is to be involved with people of other generations, not just stay locked into a world restricted to my own generation. But ageing is a nightmare in this country, because we don't take care of people.

For me the other side of it is that I'm not somebody who cared about being in a couple. In fact, I am quite adamantly anti-couple because I don't like the privilege of one particular kind of relationship over all my other relationships. I have so many different kinds of relationships, and I try not to hierarchize them with particular kinds of names like “the significant other”. But that also leaves me in a vulnerable situation, although I'm trying to think of it as a less vulnerable situation, in the sense that I have a system of relationships that I feel I can depend on. There's no real solution to it. People are thinking about gay retirement communities, but that's not a queer world for me.