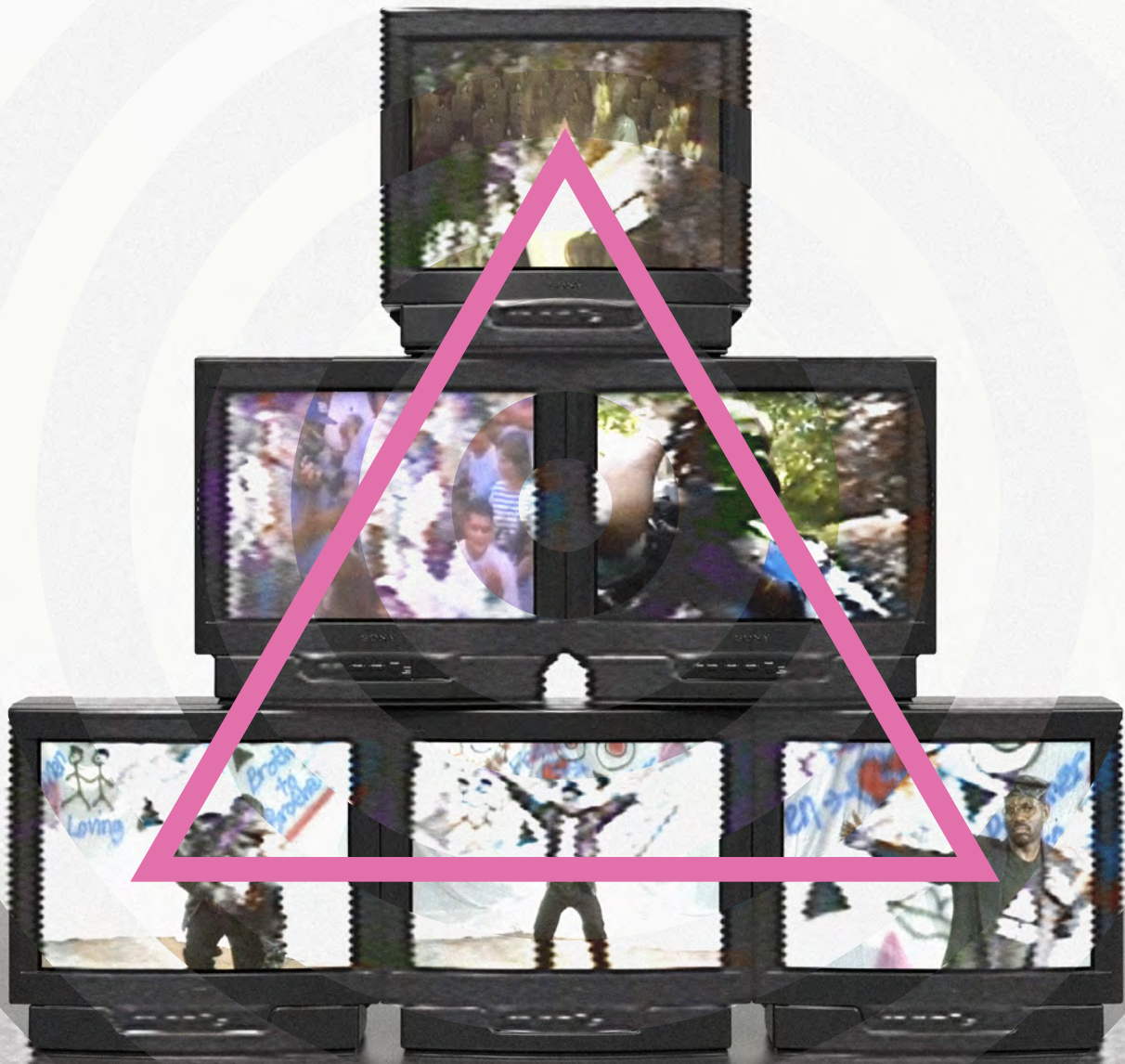


Retrospectation



Re-Viewing Media Against AIDS

A collaboration with the LGBTQIA+ Thinking Initiative of the Pembroke Center for Research and Teaching on Women and the Brown Arts IGNITE Series

Retrospectation: Re-Viewing Media Against AIDS

Exhibition of artist/activist videos

February 26-March 2, 2024, 10:00 AM-6:00 PM Daily
Granoff Center for the Creative Arts, Levels 2-5



Welcome

At the height of the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, performance and media practices took on a central role in both artistic and activist responses to the pandemic, allowing for direct action, appropriating spaces and technologies, creating new forms of “live” and screened productions, and encouraging modes of spectatorship that were anything but passive. In our recent and current pandemic times, with periods of social isolation with, for many of us, only screen media as our access to others, even as politicians enacted performances of care, media and performance have again taken center stage. As theatre and media scholars living through the COVID-19 pandemic, our thoughts have returned to the hardest years of the AIDS pandemic, an era considered “over” by some even as it continues greatly to impact the lives of those in queer, immunocompromised, poor, Global South, and other minoritized communities. Through the retrospection, speculation, and spectatorship that this project can engender, we will provide perspectives on ways of imaging and imagining, engaging and re-mediating the challenges of living through and with pandemics marked by gender, race, class, and global difference.

Our event is a form of “retrospectation” of performance and media work against AIDS, including a screening of Tony Torn’s film version of *Father is a Peculiar Man*, a 1990 play by Reza Abdoh – a queer, Iranian, experimental theater artist who died of AIDS-related illnesses in 1995 – and an exhibition of artist and activist videos against AIDS (including works by Patricia Benoit, Peter Biella and Frances Negrón, DIVA TV, John Greyson, Barbara Hammer, Scarlot Harlot (Carol Leigh), Isaac Julian, Tom Kalin, Stashu Kybartas, Marlon Riggs, Ellen Spiro, and Youth Against Monsterz).

We are hopeful that this look backward will help us look forward.

Level 2: Re-narration/Re-tellings

Patricia Benoit, *Se Met Ko* (1989, 29 minutes)

This piece, “styled after the Spanish-language soap operas known as telenovelas,” brings education and entertainment together to teach about HIV-AIDS in the Haitian community (Dinitia Smith, “Guggenheim to Show Video Series on Early Days of AIDS,” *The New York Times*, Nov. 29, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/11/29/movies/guggenheim-to-show-video-series-on-early-days-of-aids.html>).

Patricia Benoit was born in Haiti and lives in New York, where she co-founded the Haitian Women’s Program. She is best known for her critically acclaimed debut feature film *Stones in the Sun*. Benoit has received multiple awards, including the 2007 Time Warner Storytelling Award and the 2012 Tribeca Film Festival award for Best Debut Narrative Director and the Special Jury Prize for Best Narrative Director. She has participated in the Sundance Directors and Screenwriters Lab and has been an artist-in-residence at Ramapo College.

John Greyson, *The ADS Epidemic* (1987, 5 minutes)

“A catchy, upbeat, musical look at the media-induced paranoia about AIDS.” In this “short remake of Luchino Visconti’s *Death in Venice*, Greyson takes a satirical approach to respond to the problematic framing of HIV/AIDS as a gay disease, changing the cholera epidemic to the Acquired Dread of Sex (ADS) epidemic and a plague of bigots” (*V Tape Video Catalogue*, <https://vtape.org/video?vi=1192>; and “I Am Afraid of the AIDS,” *Visual AIDS*, April 2022, <https://visualaids.org/gallery/i-am-afraid-of-the-aids>).

John Greyson is a Canadian director, writer, video artist, producer, and political activist, whose work frequently deals with queer characters and themes. He was part of a loosely affiliated group of filmmakers to emerge in the 1980s from Toronto known as the Toronto New Wave; he was also the one of the leaders in the AIDS activist video movement. Greyson has won accolades and achieved critical success with his films – most notably *Zero Patience* (1993) and *Lilies* (1996). Greyson is a professor at York University’s film school, where he teaches film and video theory and practice.

Level 3S: Re-educating/Responding

Barbara Hammer, *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS* (1986, 7.42 minutes)

Barbara Hammer explained, “I first heard of AIDS in 1985 when I was teaching at Columbia College in Chicago. I noticed the strange and inflammatory articles in the newspapers and I asked my students to collect hysteric headlines for me. And so I began my work on *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS*. I examined the public ignorance, stigmatization, and just plain wrong attitudes towards this new illness. By making a snow storm of newspaper clippings I could show what a ‘snow job’ the media was making” (*Electronic Arts Intermix Catalogue*, <https://www.eai.org/titles/snow-job-the-media-hysteria-of-aids>).

Barbara Hammer was born in 1939 in Hollywood, California. She lived and worked in New York until her death in 2019. With a career spanning fifty years, Barbara Hammer is recognized as a pioneer of women’s cinema and queer cinema. A visual artist working primarily in film and video, Hammer created a groundbreaking body of experimental work that illuminates lesbian histories, lives and representations. Stated Hammer, “My work makes these invisible bodies and histories visible. As a lesbian artist, I found little existing representation, so I put lesbian life on this blank screen, leaving a cultural record for future generations” (<https://barbarahammer.com/about/statement/>).

Ellen Spiro, *DiAna's Hair Ego: AIDS Info Up Front* (1990, 29 minutes)

“Realizing the extreme inadequacy of local information on AIDS prevention, cosmetologist DiAna DiAna, with her partner Dr. Bambi Sumpter, took on the task of educating the Black community in Columbia, South Carolina. This provocative, funny and informative film documents the growth of the South Carolina AIDS Education Network which operates out of DiAna’s Hair Ego, the beauty salon where a condom display is as common as a basket of curlers! *DiAna’s Hair Ego* has been used by hundreds of educational and community organizations as a model for making a difference” (*Women Make Movies Catalog*, <https://www.wmm.com/catalog/film/dianas-hair-ego-aids-info-up-front/>).

Ellen Spiro is a Guggenheim fellow and Emmy Award winning documentary filmmaker and a Professor at the University of Texas at Austin’s Department of Radio-TV-Film. She is a two-time Rockefeller fellow, National Endowment for the Arts fellow, and winner of The Foundation of American Women in Radio and Television’s Gracie Award for both Outstanding Director and Outstanding Documentary (with Karen Bernstein for *Troop 1500*). Spiro’s films have been broadcast and screened in film festivals worldwide and are housed in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Peabody Collection of the Museum of Television and Radio, and the New York Public Library.

Scarlot Harlot (Carol Leigh), *Safe Sex Slut* (1987, 2.37 minutes)

This is a “safe sex national anthem music video” by sex worker activist, comedian, and artist Scarlot Harlot. It expresses, in an amusing way, the “challenges of changing one’s sexual habits in the wake of the AIDS crisis.” (*VHS Activism Archive*, <https://activismvhs.omeka.net/items/show/39>; “*Scarlot Harlot Video Festival*” Program, <https://fountain.fm/show/bOeXuz0OGnkkJx38hjAg>).

Carol Leigh (January 11, 1951 – November 16, 2022) worked as a prostitute, activist, author, performer, and video artist in the Bay Area for more than thirty years. She wrote and performed political satire as “Scarlot Harlot” and produced work in a variety of genres on women’s issues, sexuality, poverty, and more. Leigh is one of the “mothers” of the sex workers’ rights movement in the US and internationally; in fact, she coined the term “sex work” in the late 1970s. Leigh began making videos in 1985 and received awards from the American Film Institute. She founded the *Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival* in 1999.

Level 3N: Re-grouping/Reclaiming

Peter Biella and Frances Negrón, *AIDS in the Barrio: Eso no me pasa a mí* (1989, 29 minutes)

“A documentary on the socioeconomic and cultural context of the AIDS epidemic in a Latino Philadelphia neighborhood” that “examines the intertwined problems of drugs, poverty and the complex construction of sexuality” (Letterboxd, <https://letterboxd.com/film/aids-in-the-barrio-eso-no-me-pasa-a-mi/>, and The New York Public, *AIDS Activist Videotape Collection, 1985-2000*, Library, <https://archives.nypl.org/mss/3622#detailed>).

Frances Negrón-Muntaner (born in 1966 in San Juan, Puerto Rico) is an award-winning Puerto Rican filmmaker, writer, and scholar. Her work is focused on a comparative exploration of coloniality, primarily in Puerto Rico and the United States, with special attention given to the intersections between race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and politics. She is an associate professor of English and Comparative Literature and Director of the Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race at Columbia University in New York City. She is one of the best-known Puerto Rican lesbian artists currently living in the United States.

Peter Biella is Director of the Program in Visual Anthropology at San Francisco State University, and he has produced films in the United States, Egypt, Costa Rica, Peru, Romania, Haiti, and Tanzania. His work spans the gamut of photographic media, from 16mm film and chemical still photography to digital video and interactive communication. His experience with the latter, in Yanomamo Interactive, Maasai Interactive, and an AIDS-education CD, strengthened his commitment to applied media ethnography and to a “collaborative-activist” focus in his anthropological filmmaking.

Youth Against Monsterz, *Another Man* (1988, 3 minutes)

“Part media rebuttal and part safe sex clip” aimed at high school students, *Another Man* is a “snappy music video that examines the politics of AIDS from a radical, Gay/Lesbian and polysexual perspective.” “A short and sassy retort to all the Jerry Falwells of the world,” it features the political dance music of the Mr. Tim Collective and the analysis of lesbian activist Chris Bearchell (Thomas Waugh, “Mike Hoolboom and the Second Generation of AIDS films in Canada,” <https://mikehoolboom.com/?p=8721>; *V Tape Video Catalogue*, <https://vtape.org/video?vi=2680>; The New York Public, *AIDS Activist Videotape Collection, 1985-2000*, Library, <https://archives.nypl.org/mss/3622#detailed>).

Youth Against Monsterz was an anarchist community theatre collective in Toronto; they made DIY-style videos by and for young people that encouraged “viewers to engage in safer sex and safer drug use practices while also encouraging them to embrace their desires and reject the patronizing and moralizing media cacophony bombarding them everyday” (*AIDS Activist History*, <https://www.aidsactivisthistory.ca/2017/05/26/from-the-video-vault-please-adjust-your-sex-1988-and-another-man-1988/>).

Level 4S: Resistances/Reactivations

DIVA TV, *Like a Prayer: Stop the Church* (1990, 28 minutes)

Focusing on the December 10, 1989 demonstration by ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and WHAM! (Women's Health Action and Mobilization) at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, "*Like a Prayer* is more than a simple documentation of that event. [It] explores the many issues that were cause for the action – as well as those resulting from it – while charting the course of events both inside and outside the church." "Composed of several sections, including an analysis of the demonstration as it was portrayed in the mainstream media and reactions of Catholics who participated,...*Like a Prayer* is a show of force and pride, a challenge to the Church and its policy on AIDS and reproductive rights." (*Internet Archive*, https://archive.org/details/ddtv_35_like_a_prayer).

DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activist Television) was formed in 1989 as an affinity group of ACT UP, "organized to be there, document, provide protection and countersurveillance, and participate." Founding members included Bob Beck, Gregg Bordowitz, Jean Carlomusto, Rob Kurilla, Ray Navarro, Costa Papas, George Plagianos, Catherine Saalfeld, and Ellen Spiro. According to Saalfeld, DIVA TV was committed to "the quick and dirty approach" and to "the essential goal of inclusivity, with open lines of communication among collective members for expressing opinions and offering analyses. Here protest is the process, communication is our form of resistance, and everyone has a say" (Alexandra Juhasz, "So Many Alternatives': The Alternative AIDS Video Movement," *CINEASTE* magazine, <https://actupny.org/diva/cineaste2.html>).

Marlon Riggs, *Anthem* (1991, 9 minutes)

“Made at a time when Marlon Riggs was three years into living with HIV and the motto ‘Silence=Death’ was the queer community’s defiant response to the antigay policies of the Reagan era, this experimental music video employs a mix of poetry, African beats, and provocative imagery – sexual, political, and religious – in order to challenge and redefine prevailing images of Black masculinity. Led by the liberated dancing of the filmmaker himself, *Anthem* is a bold vision of queer revolution, proclaiming ‘Every time we kiss, we confirm the new world coming’” (*The Criterion Catalogue*, <https://www.criterion.com/films/31184-anthem>).

Marlon Riggs (1957–1994) was an award-winning filmmaker, artist, educator, poet, and gay rights activist. Riggs made eight films and videos, and also wrote numerous scholarly articles and held interviews on identity, politics, censorship, African American culture, and more. Working during the height of the culture wars of the 1990s, he examined highly contested topics, addressing questions of cultural memory and race relations and exploring personal topics such as sexuality and his HIV status in his experimental documentaries. “Most significantly, Riggs was able to use his films and writings to shift notions of shame and despair around homosexuality into acts of resistance and agency” (National Museum of African American History & Culture, <https://nmaahc.si.edu/marlon-riggs>).

Level 4N: Reflections/Re-envisionings

Stashu Kybartas, *Danny* (1987, 20.24 minutes)

This video is a moving personal documentary about Danny, a friend of videomaker Kybartas, who died of an AIDS-related illness in 1986. This powerful work explores the reason for Danny's return home and his attempts to reconcile his relationship with his family members who had difficulty facing his homosexuality...[yet] avoids sentimentalizing its subject as it juxtaposes images, text, and voice-over to build a sense of the psychological struggle brought on by Danny's impending, premature death (Video Data Bank, <https://www.vdb.org/titles/danny>).

Stashu Kybartas (1953-2023) was video artist who also worked in installation and performance art. With the emerging tragedy of AIDS in the early '80s, Kybartas participated as a founding member in the Pittsburgh AIDS Task Force. He stated, "I have chosen to work in video and performance because these are storytelling media. I want to tell my stories and the stories of others because I believe that through telling one's story, one can be healed." Kybartas taught film and video at several institutions, including Amhurst College in Massachusetts; the School of the Art Institute, Chicago; Columbia College; and the University of Michigan. (*Video Data Bank Catalogue*, <https://www.vdb.org/artists/stashu-kybartas>).

Tom Kalin, *They Are Lost to Vision Altogether* (1989, 13;12 minutes).

They Are Lost to Vision Altogether “serves as erotic retaliation to the Helms Amendment, the U.S. government’s refusal to fund explicit AIDS prevention information for gay men, lesbians, and IV drug users. Kalin paints a portrait of the national fear and hysteria that has usurped compassion and care for people with AIDS... [and] eloquently conveys the need for a sane and human response to the crisis that retains passion and sexuality” (*Video Data Bank Catalogue*, <https://www.vdb.org/titles/they-are-lost-vision-altogether>).

Tom Kalin is a screenwriter, film director, and producer. His debut feature, *Swoon*, is considered an integral part of the movement known as New Queer Cinema. In addition to his feature work, Kalin has created a number of short films and videos. Much of Kalin’s work touches on issues of sexuality and AIDS. He was a member of ACT UP and a founding member of the AIDS activist collective Gran Fury, which gained attention for its provocative public art projects. Kalin’s work has won critical acclaim and garnered a number of awards and nominations. He has taught filmmaking classes at Columbia University School of the Arts and is currently lecturing at the European Graduate School in Switzerland.

Isaac Julien, *This Is Not an AIDS Advertisement* (1987, 10.37 minutes)

“In its stylish and erotic imagery, *This is Not an AIDS Advertisement* might be seen as having been a riposte to the Puritanism of the mid-1980s ‘moral panic’ around AIDS. A two-part video, the first part deals with lyrical images of death and loss while the second part is more joyful and musically assertive.” The video “moves us towards understanding desire must be asserted over fear in his stylistic cinematic protest video” (*International Film Festival Rotterdam Catalogue*, <https://iffr.com/en/iffr/2004/films/this-is-not-an-aids-advertisement>; and *Black Film Archive*, <https://blackfilmarchive.com/This-is-Not-An-AIDS-Advertisement>).

Isaac Julien is a British installation artist, filmmaker, and Distinguished Professor of the Arts at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Julien achieved prominence in the film world with his 1989 drama-documentary *Looking for Langston*, a poetic exploration of Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance, followed by many other acclaimed works. “One of the objectives of Julien’s work is to break down the barriers between different artistic disciplines, drawing from and commenting on film, dance, photography, music, theatre, painting and sculpture, and uniting these to construct a powerful visual narrative. Thematically, much of his work directly relates to experiences of black and gay identity, including issues of class, sexuality, and artistic and cultural history” (*Ruby City*, <https://www.rubycity.org/artists/isaac-julien>).

Curators Biographies

Lynne Joyrich is Professor of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University and the Director of the LGBTQIA+ Thinking Initiative of the Pembroke Center for Research and Teaching on Women. She is the author of *Re-viewing Reception: Television, Gender, and Postmodern Culture* and of articles on television, film, cultural studies, and feminist and queer studies that have appeared in such journals as *The Black Scholar*, *Critical Inquiry*, *Cinema Journal*, *differences*, *Discourse*, *Jump Cut*, *Journal of e-Media Studies*, and *Journal of Visual Culture*, and such books as *Private Screenings; Modernity and Mass Culture; Logics of Television; Inventing Film Studies; New Media, Old Media; Queer TV*; and *Unwatchable*. She has been a member of the editorial collective of *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies* since 1996.

Patricia Ybarra (she/her) is Professor in the Department of Theatre Arts and Performance Studies at Brown University. She is the author of *Performing Conquest: Five Centuries of Theatre, History and Identity in Tlaxcala, Mexico* (Michigan, 2009), co-editor with Lara Nielsen of *Neoliberalism and Global Theatres: Performance Permutations* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2012; paperback 2015), and *Latinx Theatre in Times of Neoliberalism* (Northwestern University Press, 2018). She is currently working on a digital humanities project on Reza Abdoh's *Father Was a Peculiar Man* and a monograph on Abdoh and the development of queer theory. She is the former President of ATHE and the recipient of Brown's graduate mentoring award. She is also this year's chair of the Pembroke Seminar: De-colonial Retrospectation.

Special Thanks

Our deep thanks and appreciation go to: Regina Longo for securing the videos; Isabel Roth-Dishy for video editing; and all of the wonderful people at the Brown Arts Institute (Peter Chenot, Chira DelSesto, Jason Goodman, Madeline Gravelle, Avery Willis Hoffman, Qiwen Kevin Ju, Art Kopischke, Sophia LaCava-Bohanan, DJ Potter, Shawn Tavares, Jessica Wasilewski, Julia Zimring, and especially Melissa Kievman) and all of the wonderful people at the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research on Women (Carin Algava, Denise Davis, Sarah Gamble, Leela Gandhi, Donna Goodnow, Wendy Lee, Helis Sikk, Diane Straker, and Debbie Weinstein) for their support for the project.

Cover Screenshots From: Peter Biella and Frances Negrón, *AIDS in the Barrio: Eso no me pasa a mí* (1989); Marlon Riggs, *Anthem* (1991); and Ellen Spiro, *DiAna's Hair Ego: AIDS Info Up Front* (1990).



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