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**The Feeling of Power: AIDS Activism on/through Video**

One significant facet of AIDS culture has been the utilization of art for very immediate political ends; Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston have, for example, recently documented the widespread activity of graphic artists associated with the New York group ACT UP (the AIDS coalition to Unleash Power).1 The AIDS community has also produced a number of video artists who are likewise interested in using their medium for functions which are at least as much political as aesthetic (if not more so), as well as two video activity groups with ties to ACT UP: the Testing the Limits Collective and DIVA (Damned Interfering Video Activists). This essay will discuss tapes by two video makers associated with ACT UP, one of them a member of DIVA as well. Robert Hilferty’s *Stop the Church* (1990) and Robert Beck’s *The Feeling of Power* (aka *The Feeling of Power: #6769*) (1990) bear comparison in the they both test the limits of the documentary form, using video to provide coverage of ACT UP demonstrations (covertly taped), to convey arguments and information regarding the AIDS crisis, and, just as importantly, to promote activism on the part of viewers, to make practical suggestions for using various media (newly emerging smaller video formats in particular) to bring about social change.2

The tapes suggest the importance and potential of guerrilla video making for the AIDS community by being effective examples of such subversive activity themselves; they embody what they document, and the two functions become mutually supportive, indeed inseparable ( a phenomenon that the syntactical unwieldiness of this essay’s title is intended to draw attention to). The documentation of activities becomes activist itself in providing arguments for and practical instruction on further activity. The act of documentation is also activist, as Ellen Spiro has recently stressed in her self described “Camcordist’s Manifesto,” in protecting demonstrators from violence through counter surveillance, in recording violence that is perpetrated against demonstrators, and in allowing for multiple perspectives on and analyses of events.

Conversely, political activism becomes a documentary enterprise when the activist holds a camera, makes it a part of her or his intervention, bears witness as a means of agitation. The resultant recording has a keen (and hence all the more political potent) immediacy, capturing the events and serving as a direct index of it, a physical proof; jostling’s and misframings indicate the present physical and broader social oppressions of the demonstrators-technical shortcomings providing what Andre Bazin might call a “negative imprint” of the event, “its inscription chiseled deep.”3

This is not to suggest that the tapes I am discussing here neglect their aesthetic dimension; on the contrary, their activist, pedagogical, recording, and aesthetic (i.e., more traditionally “artistic”) functions are quite fully and successfully integrated, each serving the others. I also want to argue that these two tapes are exemplary in their political strategy because they avoid recourse to simple-minded dogmatism, choosing rather to actively engage the viewer, no matter what his or her political proclivities, in a substantive discourse on the issues at hand. The tapes shared broader formal structure reflects this shared conception of activist art. Each tape opens with a lengthy exposition about the AIDS crisis and potential activist responses to it( in one case a relatively straightforward exposition, in the other, highly stylized), only at its culmination moving to more emotionally visceral documentation of an activist intervention.

*Stop the Church* is formally the less experimental of the two tapes, documenting the planning and execution of ACT UP’s extremely controversial demonstration at St. Patrick’s Cathedral in December 1989. The tape not only provides a sympathetic, inside look at the ACT UP coalition and its political concerns, it also makes clear how the coalition plans its activities for ensure the best media coverage, to most effectively use the mass media to its own ends. This documentary portrait and activist primer gives a strong sense of the diversity of ACT UP’s membership, stressing the complexity and difficulty of the political and moral issues the group is grapping with and the range of its responses to these issues, rather then suggesting some reductive, absolutist perspective. This discursive stance is built into the structure of the tape, which Hilferty organizes as a dialogue on pertinent issues, intercutting statements of members’ differing positions. Indeed, Hilferty extends such discursively into the context of the tape’s reception by regularly appearing at screenings of the work and actively seeking debate on the issues it raises.

One of the debates in *Stop the Church* concerns ACT UP’s position with regard to the Catholic Church as a whole. While all members of the group feel quite strongly opposed to Cardinal O’Connor as an individual for the positions he has taken and statements he has made with regard to both AIDS and abortion rights, some in the group feel hesitant about an all-out opposition to the Church, pointing to the activities of politically committed Catholics in Central America, for example. Hilferty allows the airing of this position along with the position, which clearly prevails in the group: that the Church as a whole must be attacked because its dogma promotes violence against lesbians and gays. This is not to suggest that Hilferty hides his own sentiments regarding this issue, which, as the tape’s title suggests, is that of the majority rather, he openly expresses his own opinion while stressing that no position is beyond question. The tape’s stance with respect to the Church is made unequivocally clear in several irreverent swipes it takes at both the institution and the Cardinal, including a sequence in which O’Connor performs mass to the tune of Tom Lehrer’s “Vatican Rag” as a gold-adorned assistant passes a collection basket and a New York City policeman appears to keep watch over (and step in time to) the proceedings. The very structure of thi self-described “Altar Ego Production” suggests a send-up of the experience of a church service—opening with church bells and an overture of religious music over the images of a cathedral, its different sections punctuated by the ringing of bells and images of pain from religiously-themed paintings (of the type a churchgoer might glance upwards at), and culminating with a performance of choral music.

A more difficult issue for ACT UP’s members is that of whether or not their planned demonstration should include a disruption of a church service. While there is a concern that such an action might constitute an attack on freedom of worship (as one member humorously argues, “We wouldn’t want them busting into an ACT UP meeting an celebrating mass in the middle of us!”), the group on the whole feels it should stick with its general philosophy of directly confronting the forces which oppress its members. Even coalition members accepting this premise do not agree on exactly how services should be disrupted. We see video maker Hilferty describing plans for a silent “die-in” up the center aisle of St. Patrick’s, and another ACT UP member suggests changing as well. Shortly afterwards we moved to footage of the Coalition’s eventual actions. We see a massive demonstration outside the Cathedral (which Hilferty ironically glories with the use of the Hallelujah” chorus on the soundtrack), interviews with assorted disapproving passers-by and churchgoers, and shaky images of a die-in which starts silently but is soon accompanied by blowing whistles and impassioned cries of “Stop killing us” and “We’re fighting for your lives too.” The action inside the church winds down as police silently carry out the “deceased” protesters while the choir sings.

In a way, this very powerful sequence is not easy to definitively “read” because, like much of the tape, it allows for identification n more than one side of an issue; no easy answers are supplied here. While on the one hand, the commitment of the protesters and the urgency of the crisis is clear (as is the ignorance of some of the non-supporters interviewed), on the other hand, the parishioners are shown being subject to what they clearly consider a form of persecution, some of them praying intensely in the face of protests’ interruptions, others looking over nervously at the commotion. We as viewers are thus directly confronted with the issue of what, for us, constitutes politically or morally appropriate action, and are forced to weigh for ourselves what kinds of responses might be required in order to break down an institutional neglect of the AIDS crisis. It is in its ability to force us into such a consideration, whether we agree with the protesters’ methods or not, that the tape holds a substantial political potential.

One central case that *Stop the Church* makes in support of ACT UP’s interruption of the church service is that O’Connor himself has politicked the church, has actively used his substantial influence to try to shape New York City policy and national policy with regard to AIDS education, for example. Hilferty includes a number of shots which suggest a very immediate interconnection of O’Connor’s church and the State: specifically, the aforementioned images of police stepping in time to O’Connor’s mass (with the help of Tom Lehrer) and smoothly, efficiently removing protesters from this church. The demonstration is thus intended to garner enough media attention so that ACT UP, too, will be seen by policy-makers as a force to be reckoned with.

Indeed, in an important sense, *Stop the Church* is as much about the politics of mass media as it is about the genesis of a specified political action. The tape’s narrative line follows a postering campaign, which leads to public discussion and to attention both in newspapers (which reports a large expected demonstration turnout) and in local government (which decides to bring in extra police in preparation for the event). This resultant extra publicity in turn leads to grater attendance at the rally and “die-in” at St. Patrick’s Cathedral and ultimately to national media coverage, as shots of national news magazines at the close of the tape demonstrate. Thus, through the media savvy organization of its action, ACT UP is able to effectively bring the issues with concern it into wise public acknowledgement and discussion and to counterbalance the wide media attention already given to O’Connor’s views. As one member explains: “We communicate through the media, to the media. Use the media…Use this as an opportunity to communicate that we are the ones fighting for people’s lives . . . . ”

The aim of *Stop the Church,* the record of this media intervention, is in part to extend the effects of the Coalition’s action, to give it still more publicity. The tape has been quite successful in this, though perhaps not solely in the ways Hilferty anticipated. It initially generated enough interest to get many screenings on the alternative circuit-at festivals, museums, and universities, where it often provoked heated discussions. PBS then scheduled the tape for an August 1991 airing on the “P.O.V.” series, which emphasizes documentaries with non-traditional perspectives. The network abruptly pulled the piece at the last minute, however, claiming difficulty with that it described as the tape’s “pervasive tone of ridicule,” while a “P.O.V.” executive added that stations needed more time after a recent controversial airing of Marlon Riggs’ black gay themed *Tongues Untied*. While a full analysis of the claims of network, station, and series executives (and their relation to the actual substance of the tape) is beyond the scope of this discussion, it is clear that the network’s action brought both *Stop the Church* and ACT UP far more into the public eye. There were numerous debates in the mainstream press regarding whether the network’s action constituted censorship, whether the tape’s attitude toward religion was appropriate for television, etc.4 PBS’s Los Angeles affiliate KCET soon broadcast the tape with a panel discussion on the issues it raised, and several other PBS stations followed suit, while theaters in a number of cities screened the piece on film.

Hilferty has stressed that *Stop The Church* would not have been possible without the recently introduced SONY Ho-8 camera it was shot with. This technology’s low cost allowed him access to it, its sensitivity allowed him to shoot in low-light settings, and its compactness allowed him to carry it right into the demonstration and to hide it, when necessary. It is significant iron that when Hilferty’s camera was spotted while he was in the church, he was allowed to go on taping because it was believed he was doing surveillance for the police.

Robert Beck’s *The Feeling of Power* (also screened on public television, in the “Independent Focus” series) likewise makes use of emergent technologies to counteract and undermine predominant media images and sounds; it also likewise instructs the viewer on how video can become, as Ellen Spiro describes it, an “empowering device.” Indeed, the focus of *The Feeling of Power* is not the specifics of ACT UP’s activities so much as it is the nature of video technology itself. The tape opens with a kind of abstract essay on the different facets of moving image technology, on the different ends to which it can be used (especially in relation to the AIDS crisis), before moving up to a sequence taped by a participant in an October 1989 ACT UP demonstration at Trump Tower.

As *Stop the Church* works to undermine the negative influence and control of a religious institution, in particular that institutions access to the mass media, so does *The Feeling of Power* work to undermine the negative influence of corporate institutions—most directly those corporations, which develop, and attempt to shape the use of video technology. Certainly, the documented invasion of Trump Tower is a literal manifestation of ACT UP’s efforts to penetrate the force of big money. However, the real triumph of Beck’s tape is that while it was partially funded by those companies, which produce video technology, it openly subverts these companies’ aim and continually flaunts this fact. The 8mm Video Council (consisting of such manufacturers as SONY, Canon, Minolta, Olympus, Ricoh, Sanyo-Fischer, and Polaroid) had awarded Beck a small format camera for his video in a competition where he had submitted a proposal regarding the role of new Video 8 technologies in redefining familial space, much the way television did in the 1960s. While the council had hoped for a video that would promote the use of its products, it would have hardly expected a promotion for video activism, for the use of its products in an attack on the same corporate establishment of which it is part. An added twist is that corporate monies are now helping pay for public screenings of the tape, which is touring with winners of another Video 8 competition.

The “essay section” (for want of a better term) which opens The *Feeling of Power* is full of reflexive reminders that the tools and materials used to create it were coopted and that such an act of cooptation is within the reach of almost anyone, that it requires only modest means. Even the tape’s title is appropriated from SONY print promotional materials. The opening section consists primarily of clips lifted from broadcast and cable television—specifically, from *America’s Funniest Home Videos*, Madonna’s “Express Yourself” video, and consumer video advertisements—and then processed in a variety of ways. The images are digitized, solarized, and reedited (Among other things), and text is superimposed on them—first slogans lifted from 8mm video advertising campaigns, then an assortment of handwritten statements—what Beck has described as a kind of “social graffiti” that here defaces mainstream media products. Significantly, much of this image processing is done with a consumer-model processor and with the video 8 camera itself, using its various special affects and text storage capabilities, and even the “borrowed” clips are recorded with the camera’s own direct taping function. The act of cooptation thus becomes in part a self-conscious showcasing of the medium’s distinctive features.

The musical soundtrack is also a cooptation of sorts: a reprocessed sampling from the heavy metal group Metallica with an additional guitar track placed over it. Even the overall form of the segment--a rapid montage of disparate images with loud music—borrows the generic conventions of the music video and uses them for a new purpose. Beck as expressed a particular interest in the promotional potentials of music video: “The music video is the most evolved, sophisticated and pervasive promotional form: The commodity is everywhere but no-where. This is the furthest in an evolution of ways to promote the product, and it is the ideal form to choose for a promotion of video technology the camera is always referred to, but not directly shown.”5

Beck’s new promotion purpose is evidently to reveal that image technology is a double-edged sword, with the potential to both reinforce and undermine the status quo. The purpose is also to make the case that inadequate establishment response to the AIDS crisis necessitates the utilization of the technology’s subversive and activist potentials. The written text does not express these ideas in a straightforward narrative form. Rather, we get a kind of montage of discrete statements and phrases, which, in conjunction with the presented sounds and images, allow us to more actively, construct these notions for ourselves. As with *Stop the Church*, then, we are not allowed to be passive viewers, but are forced into a more discursive relationship with the text.

Among the bits of text which are thus juxtaposed: “8mm Video: The feeling of Power,” “Now you’re ready to put your life in perspective,” “AIDS is a political crisis,” “This is a promotion,” “In the U.S. over 90,000 have died of AIDS,” “Pick up a camera,” “$3.99 is the cost of a Fuji 60 min V8 cassette,” “Television was first ‘installed’ in the home in 1947,” “IT’S TIME,” “To date Hollywood has not produced a single film on AIDS,” “Black children account for 53% of all childhood AIDS cases,” “I’m out, therefore I am,” “Empowerment.” Images include those of a scantily clad, muscular man performing manual labor, of Madonna, of Levittown under construction, and of demonstrators. Although it would of course be impossible to replicate the substance of the tape in the present text, let it suffice to say that using the building blocks described above, Beck manages to construct a substantial and complex treatise on the contrasts between the traditional use of image technology in suburban American culture and the new uses that present conditions demand, as well as a provocative meditation on the myriad interrelations among commerce, technology, labor, American social organization, and the politics of race, gender, and sexual orientation. The *America’s Funniest Home Videos* segment significantly features Bob Saget giving his audience what appears to be a tongue-in-cheek lesson on shooting with a camcorder Beck clearly uses this to produce his own particular kind of lesson on the use of a camcorder, one of the slogans superimposed on this sequence appropriately being “Seize power.” The Madonna video has special resonance in this context both because of what the song implores listeners/viewers to do (“Express Yourself”) and because of the performer’s popularity in gay culture.

The somewhat abrupt shift from the highly constructed essay section to “live” protest documentation both provides a very immediate demonstration of the strategies for empowerment the tape has suggested, and advertises again the medium’s range of features. (As Beck describes it, “The schizophrenia of the tape is dictated by the capabilities of the camcorder.”) The camera is jostled as the cameraperson is told is not allowed in Trump Tower, and for a few moments conditions are such that he can only videotape someone’s hand on the lens and then his own feet. The camera follows a detainee out of the building as he shouts, “You’re hurting me!” at police, and then it moves around a paddy wagon and through a crowd of protesters. The “you are there” feel of this footage is important: on one level, it offers a kind of training or preparation for performing such an action oneself. It is also significant that not a lot actually happens in this sequence: the emphasis is partially shifted from the event itself to the fact of the cameraperson’s presence, the act of bearing witness. The sequence then culminates in an action, which underscores the crucial importance of bearing witness. A group of demonstrators should “Shame” at a policeman for his roughness with them, then “Where’s your badge?” when they notice he is not wearing one. One demonstrator then gets up close, points to the policeman’s cap, and reads out a badge number (6769), and the image freezes. In this moment, the necessity of the camcorder’s presence is clear: it records the badge number, it inhibits police violence, it makes the activism physically safer, and it thus allows the demonstrators “the feeling of power” and, ultimately, power itself.

*The Feeling of Power*, then, like *Stop the Church,* makes video a crucial part of its activism and activism a crucial part of its aesthetics. Hilferty and Beck appear to share a conception of activist video art, which derives much of its effectiveness from an attention to form, which is often lacking in such work. As Hilferty argues it, “Just clicking on a camera does not produce an activist video. A tape has to be structured and thought out in order to be useful, cutting-edge tool.” The two videos discussed here confront the viewer with a crisis and, in their carefully organized, discursive approaches, demand a response. Their special strength lies in the fact that they also provide the viewer with the immediate means for a positive response, for activism rather then despair or denial.

**Notes**

1 See Juhasz for a discussion of the notion of AIDS culture as emerging from a community which shares “common experiences and a common oppression” (24).

2 Hilferty’s tape is available through Frameline, 349 Ninth Street, San Francisco, CA 94103. Beck’s tape is available through the artist at 717 East Fifth Street, #1D, New York, NY 10009.

3 Hilferty himself commented on the pertinence of this Bazinian notion in his discussion of *Stop the Church* at the Donnell Library in New York City on March 21, 1991. See, for example, Bazin’s “Cinema and Exploration” in Bazin 154-63.

4 See, for example, Hilferty and Kerrison.

5 This and ensuing quotations from the video makers come from discussions with the author. The author wishes to thank the artists for their assistance in writing of this essay.

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