

VIDEO REMAINS

Nostalgia, Technology, and Queer Archive Activism

Alexandra Juhasz

The 1992 videotape interview of my best friend, actor and East Village personality James Robert Lamb, had become for me a haunted and hated object. We shot it less than a year before he died of AIDS, and it served as an inadequate surrogate. The tape did not represent Jim—a sometimes go-go dancer, several-year member of Charles Ludlam's off-Broadway Ridiculous Theatrical Company, and consummate performer—at his best or in his complexity. A fifty-five-minute interview cannot adequately represent a marvelous, mischievous life. And yet, I did have this video in my archive. Something of him, and that time, remained within its signals. After many years, the plastic cassette lured me back, forcing me to consider what changes and what lasts after death, across time, and because of videotape. I could use this remnant to revisit Jim's life and death, as well as that of AIDS activism and AIDS video activism.

And when, in 2004, I succumbed, my process was more intuitive than for my previous work, which tends toward the analytic or polemic. I followed my dreams (often being visited by Jim at night), pored over old pictures and letters, and allowed myself to be led by freak circumstances. When Silverlake hairstylist Michael Anthony, who had never cut my hair before, initiated a conversation about AIDS in New York in the 1980s only an hour after I had agreed to videotape young gay men in the AIDS Project Los Angeles support group Mpowerment, I knew I must integrate them both into the piece. Using the mirror, I shot Michael cutting my hair while simultaneously performing oft-told tales of his friend and my namesake, Alexandra, a drag queen who died of AIDS in the mid-1980s; I shot hours of support group meetings where the gay boys of color at Mpowerment would

incidentally chance upon AIDS within larger conversations about boyfriends, queer bashing, and familial violence.

The experimental documentary that emerged, *Video Remains* (55 mins., 2005), plays Jim's ancient interview in sometimes meandering and very real time while these present-day characters (themselves, respectively, the voices of AIDS's past and future) bleed in. While Jim plays out the permanent record of his words caught on tape, the sounds of four lesbian video activists, whom I had interviewed on the phone, also enter his frame. Alisa Lebow, Juanita Mohammed, Sarah Schulman, and Ellen Spiro had all loved and supported gay men as they participated in AIDS activism in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In *Video Remains*, the women's voices most explicitly, and the men more organically, reflect upon AIDS, death, activism, and video. Together we consider whether the massive AIDS deaths and activism of the 1980s affect us today; what remains from that remarkable and gruesome period; whether we can learn from the dead and from the past; and whether video might help. While Jim performs himself, poetry by Emily Dickinson, and a poor imitation of Truman Capote, he also attempts to narrate a meaningful rendition of his life. We watch, knowing he and so many other campy, musical-theater-loving queens died, despite their own, and a movement's, commitment to self-representation (fig. 1).

Video Remains is simple in format, relying solely upon an AIDS video activist staple: the talking-head testimonies of the "real" experts about AIDS, those caught on tape living and analyzing it. We watch and listen to Jim in 1992 mixed with today's characters caught in 2004. The intrusion of present-day AIDS—suffered differently, represented less, lacking a movement, aware of the awful and inspiring legacy of the past—enlivens my old tape and recommits to a contemporary conversation about AIDS, its representations, feelings, activism, and history. I conjured Jim from the AIDS activist video archive, both personal and institutional, private and public, and wondered what others might see in him, and whether we might be ready to revisit this past, not so much to heal as to think again together. Certainly, for those who knew Jim, or men like him, the tape functions as eulogy. But on top of this, *Video Remains* begets two terms that may point to larger concerns for those interested in queer art—*nostalgia* and *video*—as well as one practical and theoretical possibility, what I call "queer archive activism." Thus I make this contribution to *GLQ*'s print archive for similar reasons, if in a different medium: not merely to get stuck in remembering AIDS images but rather to relodge those frozen memories in contemporary contexts so that they, and perhaps we, can be reanimated.



Figure 1. Alex and Jim, Attorney Street, from *Video Remains*

Nostalgia and video are, like me, profoundly linked to what Svetlana Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia* terms “a rebellion against a modern idea of time.”¹ Nostalgia and video are, like *Video Remains*, attempts to hold onto time, given its inevitable loss. One term is psychic, the other mechanical; one irrational, the other logical. But here, and in *Video Remains*, I am interested in thinking through both how they are linked and, more important, what happens when they are asked to work together. While nostalgia is typically understood as an emotion that is paltry and passive, I propose that when mixed with video, it has the potential to be substantial and productive.

Pamela Lee uses the term *chronophobia* in her book on art of the 1960s with the same title to describe the conjunction of time and technology definitive of many movements in modern and postmodern art, including video art, the field in which *Video Remains* sits. She describes chronophobia in several ways that seem pertinent here: “As registering an almost obsessional uneasiness with time and its measure. . . . the chronophobic impulse suggests an insistent struggle with time, the will of both artists and critics either to master its passage, to still its acceleration, or to give form to its changing conditions.”² Recognizing myself in Lee’s obsessive artist and critic, I tweak her definition and posit my own equation about time and technology: nostalgia plus video allows for a refiguring of time and

feeling in response to personal losses that in so doing become collective and also potentially productive of new feelings and knowledge that might lead to action.

Significantly, I do not name the motivating feeling or problem of *Video Remains* with the terms *mourning* or *melancholia*, words that are most often used to describe art, like mine, about death, loss, and AIDS. In “Mourning and Militancy” Douglas Crimp reminds us that these motivating states have been understood (by Freud as interpreted by Michael Moon) as problematic in that both the feelings and the art they enable are primarily private, debilitating abdications of responsibility or solipsistic capitulations to feeling over action.³ The thinking is, if one mourns a private loss, so be it, but mourning in the face of ongoing slaughter halts the possibility of working toward change. Crimp writes: “Public mourning rituals may of course have their own political force but they nevertheless often seem, from an activist perspective, indulgent, sentimental, defeatist.”⁴

But what, I wonder, of art rooted in nostalgia? To begin, let us imagine nostalgia as a kind of duration trouble in that one defiantly wants something to endure that cannot and has not. Importantly, that thing—usually a time or place—is communal, not personal. Boym differentiates nostalgia from melancholia in terms useful for queer archive activism: “Unlike melancholia, which confines itself to the planes of individual consciousness, nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory.”⁵ Of course Freud also knows melancholia as a severe, pathological, ego-destroying mourning that belies description and guarantees that the one so suffering must reside outside the social. So in this sense Boym’s understanding of nostalgia, rather than Freud’s or Crimp’s of melancholia or even mourning, is well suited to my project, given that the yearning that motivates my work is not simply for a lost person, Jim Lamb, but more so for a lost, shared, collective time and place: AIDS activism, New York City, late 1980s. Through the incorporation of the present-day audio interviews with my fellow female AIDS video activists, who testify to similar sentiments, *Video Remains* documents that this is not a private problem but rather a yearning shared by a community of others. Losing an actual person, time, or place becomes only the first tragedy if we also subsequently submit to giving up our embarrassing or solipsistic yearning for that person/time/place. Outside the psychic costs of repression these linked losses could surely endanger those who follow, like the working-class and poor, teenage, gay youth of color in Mpowerment, who tell us as much when they evidence little knowledge of, connection to, or interest in my ancient regime, and it shows in their relation to AIDS. “I’d kill myself if I was HIV positive,” says one, while another asserts, “People wouldn’t treat you right. You know, they’d think you were a fag-

got.” One generation’s yearning could fuel another’s learning, if we could look back together and foster an escape from melancholia through productive, communal nostalgia.

This is not the classic interpretation of nostalgia, a condition that Boym reminds us is typically understood as a pathetic and even pathological sentiment: “Nostalgia (from *nostos*—return home, and *algia*—longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. . . . Nostalgia in this sense is an abdication of personal responsibility, a guilt-free homecoming, an ethical and aesthetic failure.”⁶ Of course, she is right. There is something wretched and pitiable in this state: dreaming a past that is always better, never attainable, and by no means true. But I offer up a more righteous picture through a different technology. For here, video enters the scene. I am forced to ask, what if you can return? What if the nostalgic romance is not with a fantasy? What if the past is videotaped and so you can prove that it was there? What does video do to or with nostalgia?

For just as nostalgia is a duration trouble, video is a duration solution, in that it allows things to last. Unlike memory or fantasy, which are personal and subjective, video is collective and objective in that it is unchanging while also being a mutually verifiable record of things that once were, are no longer, but remain present through the form of its mechanical reproduction. Video is what is left over of what visibly and audibly was in space and time. Video lasts even if we have stopped talking about what it records. When we are ready to talk about it again, it is still there even as we change and AIDS changes. Video stays the same; it shows what was. In *Video Remains*, Sarah Schulman says something to the effect that, “When I am dead and gone, and the people that I interviewed are dead and gone, these tapes will still exist, so that someone later can use them to understand what happened.”

In my memory, events change as my needs, moods, and mind change. Sometimes I can imagine our day on the beach as Jim wanted it to be, another of our glorious adventures, part sightseeing, part art making (fig. 2). Yet, look, I have a videotape of it: he was demented, and I was mad. That keeps me in check, for the tape stays the same, even as I change. Because of the indexical nature of this sign system, that undeniable trace of Jim in the material, the videotape takes on an ominous validity that my flexible memories cannot. It holds the past truly with a power I have not. I will name this definitive structure of video “melancholic.” Nostalgia enters when I work that frozen material to death: edit it, screen it, make it public. With these sensuous engagements with the material, this practice with



Figure 2. Jim in Miami motel, from *Video Remains*

tape, I hollow out its melancholic, indexical power—video as technological duration solution—and sacrifice this to a shared project of nostalgia, where a mournful love for the past initiates a public, hopeful, future-looking project. With this activity, the videotape trace becomes less about Jim in Miami and more about a newly imagined tracing of possibility: the chance for fresh exchanges, memories, trips, and encounters. When I showed the tape at the 2005 MIX Experimental Queer Media Festival in New York, Mike, the lover of Jim’s lover Joe, was in the audience. Mike saw Jim—until then a melancholic, magnificent specter haunting his current relationship—as Jim was. Crying, Mike thanked me for this nostalgic gift of moved and shared time. Of course, for the historians who watched the tape at a seminar on “the Archive,” the tape referenced the status and style of documents and archivists. *Video Remains* houses neither the stuff nor structure of official history, given its subjective hold on the past and its activist yearnings for the future. Again, audience response proves that my loving and visible hand as documentarian, interviewer, colleague, friend, and editor can alter the melancholic grip of technology.

In *Light in the Dark Room*, Jay Prosser insists on photography’s melancholic structure of feeling in that it always contains a realization of loss. He writes: “Photographs are not signs of presence but evidence of absence. Photographs con-

tain a realization of loss. . . . They show the irreversible passing of time.”⁷ While this is also true of a primary videotape document, duration in the sense of the long take, the raw material, my real-time playing of my interview with Jim, Jim as he was, this is video only at its most indexical, its most melancholic. This is only the first application of video.

Video’s nostalgia differentiates itself from photography’s melancholia because it is also a duration machine that captures time’s movement, editing, and montage. For, while *Video Remains* is composed primarily of one long take from the past, visited again today in real time, it is also a system with which I can alter this frozen testament to the past. With editing, I bleed in other video recordings, each alone, on its own, its own melancholic vessel for some other lost person/time/place. Yet something happens in this new mixed-up sense of time other than the paralyzing and antisocial force of melancholia. The new duration recorded on videotape is a record of the interaction of these many melancholic traces. It is this conversation, through editing, that creates a sense of active nostalgic time from which, perhaps, new things might be produced.

In *Video Remains*, my friend and fellow AIDS video activist Alisa Lebow discusses the negative lessons of Marlon Riggs’s *Tongues Untied* (1990), one of the great AIDS videos from that earlier time. She points to the contradiction and power of video’s same-time duration and movement, and nostalgia’s same-time activity and retroactivity. As we talk, we are overtaken by our knowledge that Marlon and his friends—black gay men demanding autonomy and agency in the face of AIDS and its related homophobic racism—*did* take control of the media, name their condition, and defiantly, mightily proclaim: “Black men loving each other is a revolutionary act.” Yet Alisa suggests that the meanings embedded in *Tongues Untied*, while indexical, are nevertheless also transitory and contextual: revolution turned eulogy. These black gay men frozen in time through signals on tape were proud, beautiful, articulate, and defiant. This we can see, and yet still a great many of them died. So the old and new tapes linked in *Video Remains* are evidence that today we mourn because all of our good politics of representation could not forestall the bad political-economic-material conditions of biology, presidential disavowal, and the capitalist imperatives of the pharmaceutical industry. Making meaning did not stop AIDS or death, although it certainly changed it. Crimp similarly looks back today on his essays from this earlier time and explains how the “overwhelming effects of cumulative loss . . . might be characterized as melancholia.”⁸

But I believe that from this desperate melancholic knowledge can be created new kinds of AIDS art: more realistic, pessimistic, nostalgic. *Video Remains*

allows us to consider that to use video as a duration solution stemming from nostalgia creates the possibility of collective action rather than individual stasis. I am committed to understanding the activity and collectivity in video, how through making a video in 2004 about AIDS in 1992 I left my solitary, backward-looking circumstances and made them public and forward-looking through interviewing, screening, and discussing. I made my mourning productive, collective, and interactive through video production, montage, and reception.

Thus I must amend my earlier descriptions to suggest that video is both duration and action machine that allows us to embrace responsibility and interactivity in the face of mourning; video archives, production, editing, and viewing can be necessary components of social justice movements that while rooted in nostalgia strive to ensure that remembered abuses will not happen in the present or future. Editing at its most Eisensteinian enlivens dead things through the clash of the cut. The melancholic traces of once live people, places, and time from my AIDS video archive of the 1980s have been cut against traces of more recent yet still already lost moments from the different times and places of the receding present. Through the edit, the stuck sense of duration, video at its most indexical, is unhinged, awoken with a rough kiss. What might result is a more adaptive, contextual, and living kind of lasting (fig. 3). Video plus nostalgia looks not just to an indexical trace of the past but creates the possibility for an anticipated trace of the future. This I call “queer archive activism”—a practice that adds love and hope to time and technology. Because we once loved, and recorded it, we have proof that we did and that others will. Because we lost but lived, we wish to spare others this pain while we take pleasure in sharing its memory. We can use archival media to remember, feel anew, analyze, and educate, ungluing the past from its melancholic grip, and instead living it as a gift with others in the here and now.

Video Remains practices a queer archive activism in its reliance upon the recorded personal stories of regular people played out largely in respectful real time. But as significantly, the tape enacts a queer practice by commingling history and politics with feelings, feelings of desire, love, hope, or despair for both my videotape evidence and my anticipated audience. In *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous*, Gregg Bordowitz calls this the “affective condition of political activism.”⁹ Love, desire, hope, despair. Without pretense of or interest in objectivity, *Video Remains* names nostalgia as necessary for this feelings-based project caught in the past and looking toward a better future. The tape renounces the divide between the personal and the political, the past and the present, a liberal identity-based politics of naming and visibility and a radical politics of the material. My edited vid-



Figure 3. James Lamb, on the beach, from *Video Remains*

eotape makes possible such renunciations of binaries, as it also holds an indexical and transitory trace of me, the loving, yearning, active video maker, also edited therein. In *Video Remains* you see my hand, as I gesture to Jim from behind the camera; you see my face, in mirror reverse, as my hair is cut; you hear my voice as I respond with exasperation to my ill, rambling, dying best friend. I make this history and politics from a proud and visible queer love for this gay man and that time, and toward a promise that such promise might be felt again.

I made *Video Remains* from an archive of video records of my past and the recent past of AIDS and for my contemporaries, people who lived through this dying, people who, I believe, are currently engaged in a debilitating, private melancholic remembrance of AIDS in the 1980s. We have disciplined ourselves to silence our grief and anger, keeping this private, hidden, and personal; of course, our indifferent culture does not seem to mind this quiet. But silence does equal death, after all. By sacrificing our melancholic memories and making them public, I think we can make our mourning visible (as well as our analysis and our anger) and use this to produce something better for the future. The question certainly remains whether our grief is of use for other generations and, more important, whether another's grief can inspire one's own action. Screenings of the tape seem to prove that this is not its major contribution. Rather, I think the grief of our gen-

eration has caused not merely our paralysis but that of those who follow us, given that their experience of AIDS, usually devoid of death's grand and tragic nature, seems, in comparison, insufficient of representation's and the community's attention. It is not our suffering that is compelling but our willingness to name and record it, and in so doing, make it communal and move it into the present.

Is there anything particularly queer to this kind of time, or art, created through nostalgic activity bent upon keeping AIDS, and its histories, deaths, meanings, and activism, present through love, an archive of videotape, conversation, and hopes for the future?

I use "queer" to speak of a kind of movement and stasis—across and still in time, generation, gender, and feeling. But I am certain that we cannot make of this queer practice a sustained AIDS politics or art unless we also remake community. For it is unclear whether a politics can be sustained by nostalgia or even videotape. Alongside these feelings and machines, politics must have real people, in numbers, in the world, acting (up) together.

Notes

My appreciation to Lucas Hilderbrand and David Roman for their thoughtful responses to my tape, this writing about it, and the possibility of contemporary dialogue about the past and future of AIDS activism and art.

1. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xv.
2. Pamela Lee, *Chronophobia: On Time in the Art of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), xii.
3. Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 134.
4. *Ibid.*, 132–33.
5. Boym, *Future of Nostalgia*, xvi.
6. *Ibid.*, xiii, xiv.
7. Jay Prosser, *Light in the Dark Room: Photography and Loss* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 1.
8. Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 9.
9. Gregg Bordowitz, *The AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), xix.