**Jean Carlomusto Made Me Queer**

*‘Jean Carlomusto Made Me Queer: Video Activism, Queer Archives and AIDS Crisis Revisitation’ conference held in Frankfurt, Germany on 14-16 July 2022*

Hosted by Goethe University, the ‘Jean Carlomusto Made Me Queer’ conference combined screenings of the work of filmmaker, activist and media artist Jean Carlomusto and that of other queer video artists from the 1980s to the present. This included several roundtables of artists, activists and scholars who spoke to queer archives and historiographies, video activism and the revisitation of historical material of the AIDS crisis in art, activist scenes and popular culture.

Jean Carlomusto started the Media Unit at Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York City in 1987. She was a founding member of DIVA TV (a video affinity group of ACT UP New York) and a member of the Testing The Limits Video Collective. In addition to her collaborative activist work, her solo works include *L Is For the Way You Look* (1991), *Shatzi Is Dying* (2000), and most recently *Esther Newton Made Me Gay* (2022). Carlomusto’s work explores lesbian and queer histories, HIV/AIDS, and documentary practice in the form of experimental videos that attend to loss and collective trauma through humor. While Carlomusto has been written about by several prolific queer thinkers, especially Douglas Crimp and Ann Cvetkovich, her videos are nonetheless still rarely accessible to contemporary academic audiences or the general public. One key aim of this event was therefore to turn the spotlight on Carlomusto’s oeuvre and consider the important role it has played in AIDS activist history and continues to play in contemporary queer discourses.

The conference was opened with a screening of Jean Carlomusto’s most recent film *Esther Newton Made Me Gay* (2022), which tells the story of anthropologist, queer theory trailblazer and dog lover Esther Newton. Weaving Newton’s story with archival material and thus situating it in a broader historical frame, the film moves from pre-Stonewall lesbian bar culture through gay liberation and lesbian feminism, to 1980s AIDS activism, drawing out both the energy of queer movements and the sore points of community debates around gay respectability politics, the feminist sex wars, and the continuities and ruptures between butch/femme practices, drag culture and contemporary trans identities. The screening was followed by a conversation between Jean Carlomusto and the conference organizers Josefine HetterichandMarc Siegel.

In the first roundtable, titled ‘A Desire for History,’ Heather Love and Nguyen Tan Hoan explored the entanglement of longing, eroticism and queer historiography based on the screening of three shorts: Jean Carlomusto’s 1991 video *L Is For the Way You Look*, followed by two works by Nguyen Tan Hoang: *K.I.P.* from 2002 and *I Remember Dancing* from 2019. All three of those videos spoke to both the history *of* queer desire and a queer desire *for* history and opened up a space to explore the ambivalent affects that surface when desire, longing, and even nostalgia emerge alongside histories of trauma and loss, such as the AIDS crisis. Heather Love spoke about the queer need to fight the isolation imposed by the closet but also across time through the silences of the archive. She argued that in this context video becomes a tool of unforgetting and connecting across localities and times through speculating future intimacies into being. Nguyen Tan Hoang added to that by stressing the role of audiovisual technologies like videotape as kinship practices. Highlighting the traces that are left on analogue video by communities of desiring viewers who rewind and rewatch the tapes and the queer labor that maintains the archive, Nguyen pointed to the materiality of these intergenerational exchanges.

After a screening of DIVA TV’s *Like A Prayer* (1990) and Jean Carlomusto’s *ACT UP 1989-2019* (2019), Alexandra Juhasz and Chris Tedjasukmana spoke about AIDS Crisis Revisitation in the second roundtable, commenting on the ways in which AIDS activist materials continue to circulate in digital media cultures. Alexandra Juhasz outlined the tentative periodization of AIDS that she and Ted Kerr write about in their new book, [*We Are Having This Conversation Now: The Times of AIDS Cultural Production*](https://www.dukeupress.edu/we-are-having-this-conversation-now) (2022). She considered the ways in which activists and academics have returned to AIDS activism to think through the COVID-19 pandemic.Chris Tedjasukmana explored the potentials and limitations of the ACT UP video archive functioning as a model for ongoing media activism and emphasized the challenges contemporary video activists are facing in the context of platform capitalism.

The day concluded with a screening of Jean Carlomusto’s video *Shatzi Is Dying* (2000), which attends to loss and mourning practices at a moment in AIDS activist history when the introduction of antiretroviral treatments in 1996 led to a waning in both mainstream attention and broad movement efforts to intervene in the HIV/AIDS crisis.The video approaches these subjects through telling the story of the prolonged illness and imminent death of Jean’s and her then girlfriend Jane’s Doberman Shatzi. In that way it takes seriously the intensity of the relationships of queers and their animals and draws connections to the AIDS crisis and the forms of queer kinship and mourning that each engender. In the ensuing conversation, Jean Carlomusto, Sarah Horn, Sophie Holzberger, and Josefine Hetterich discussed rituals of public mourning and queer spirituality.

The third conference day began with a roundtable titled ‘Drag, Mourning and Militancy’ that started off with a screening of *Marta: Portrait of a Teen Activist* (1990) by Matt Ebert and Ryan Landry, followed by *Liberaceón* (Chris E. Vargas, 2011) and *Homotopia* (Chris Vargas & Eric A. Stanley, 2007). Chris E. Vargas explained that *Homotopia’s* intersectional feminist critique of the institution of marriage took inspiration from AIDS activist videos in its attempt to find pleasure and humor in otherwise often austere leftist politics and situated *Liberaceón* as a mythologizing rewriting of ACT UP’s origin story. Expanding on Douglas Crimp’s seminal essay, Marc Siegel argued that drag, camp and humor are just as necessary to AIDS activism as mourning and militancy. Both discussed the sincerity of camp, its relationship to drag and the way it was theorized by Esther Newton and Susan Sontag respectively.

During the last roundtable, Jean Carlomusto, Jim Hubbard and Ed Webb-Ingall discussed AIDS activist and queer video archives, each showing excerpts from the archives they work with. They shared challenges faced, specifically concerning the preservation and distribution of these materials. Ed Webb-Ingall presented excerpts of videos that originated in the context of UK AIDS activism, namely *Compromised Immunity* (Phillip Timmins, 1987*), Cock Crazy or Scared Stiff* (Sunil Gupta, 1991), and *POUT* (1992). Jim Hubbard shared an edit that combined the interview with Jean Carlomusto from the ACT UP Oral History Project with footage of the protest that she was referencing in the talking head and Jean Carlomusto showed an excerpt from Costas Pappas’ *Target City Hall* tape as well as a short video of her interactive video altar *Offerings* that commemorates AIDS activists.

In the closing conversation, participants discussed the prominence of US-driven AIDS activism, and ACT UP New York in particular, in contemporary AIDS Crisis Revisitation. They considered ways to connect various ongoing European projects on AIDS histories with one another. Another strand of discussion that re-emerged throughout the conference was how the potential of coalitional politics modeled by AIDS activists might be of particular interest at a moment in time when long-haul COVID activism coalesces with HIV activism, disability justice and ME/CFS communities during the ongoing interlaced pandemics. Participants further reflected on the role of video in intergenerational exchanges as well as the desire for history and longing for queer kinship across time.