Nancer LeMoins interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

San Francisco, USA, 22 May 2004

This is a complete transcript of a recorded interview. The text has been slightly edited to correct some grammatical errors (which are inevitable features of spoken conversation), but only where this was necessary to aid comprehension.

Paul Sendziuk: Can we start with you telling me if you've had any formal artistic training or training at college or in a university, and then how you came to be making art.

Nancer LeMoins: I actually went to art school. I'm one of those people who always wanted to be an artist since I was a little kid. I had stopped making art and was basically working in restaurants and not doing any art and it was actually HIV that got me to do art again. I got involved in a program called 'Positive Art' that basically was art classes for people with HIV and AIDS. I started going and I started doing little things and then I just – I don't know – I realised it was so cathartic to be able to make art about HIV and so I started making art again.

When would that have been?

That was about 19… probably 1990.

When did you get your diagnosis?

1986.

And when you say it's cathartic can you explain what that feels like?

Well, the first time I did a piece I was just… I did the 'HIV demon' piece and I really – I don't know – I just felt so happy to be able to...

I think there's too much talking about HIV [a little laughter]. I think you get to this point where there's just nothing else to say about it and it's kind of the same thing over and over again. I'd been through all these groups and I'd done all this talking about HIV and I was really sick of talking about it. It was so brilliant to just be able to make art about it and to be able to make a piece that was how I felt, like it was this demon in my body. I've really changed my mind about that over the course of the last ten years, about it being a demon in my body. But at the time I did feel like I had a demon in my body and that we all had demons in our bodies…so it was as if making that piece about it, it was just so, *lucid*[1] for me.

[1] Italics denote emphases here and throughout.

How do you feel about it now if don't feel like it's a demon?

I don't feel like it's a demon anymore. I feel like it's actually been a kind of a gift. But I hate to say that. I mean, I think that always sounds stupid, when you say that it's been kind of a gift but it really has opened up my eyes a lot. It's not to say that I think it's easy to live with this disease 'cause I think it's really incredibly difficult but it really has made me change the way that I live my life and the way that I look at things . … like I make sure that I get what I want now and I never did that before in my life.

So you went to… you said you went to an art college – that was in San Francisco?

No, that was in Olympia, Washington.

Okay, so when did you move to San Francisco?

I moved to San Francisco in about 1982, I think [laughter]. It's all kind of a blur. I actually moved here twice.

What, did you forget that you had moved here the first time and had to come again?! [Laughter]

No, I actually moved here and then I moved back to Seattle and then I moved back here again so, I'm not sure what all the dates were but sometime in the early eighties I was moving back and forth between here and there, and then I ended up here totally for good in 1983 or 1984.

And, so, you would have been in art college in…1980?

Oh no.

'78?

Well, yeah, about '78. I graduated in about… Let's see, I graduated from high school in 1976, so – it seems like a long time ago – 1976 so, probably 1981 I was done with that.

Good. And who would you say, then and perhaps now, were your artistic influences, whether mentors, artists themselves, or in terms of other styles of work?

I love Rothko. I've always really loved Rothko. There's something about his work that I just find so incredibly beautiful and so touching. Although my work's nothing like his…

No.

…but I just find him so… He's my favourite artist, I would say, probably Rothko. And, um, a lot of people have helped me a lot along the way, you know, just getting to what I want to get to. I love Chuck Close. I think his work is really amazing. I used to love Rauschenberg and, you know, Andy Warhol, people like that. They don't really do the same thing for me that they used to a while ago but I still like Rothko, he never goes away. I love Frida Kahlo. I think her narrative work, like the way that she's so personal; that is something that I've really picked up. There aren't that many narrative artists, you know. God, what is that guy's name? It's so funny because I like his work so much. An L.A. artist… Now I remember, it is David Hockney. And I am very moved by many of the young artists working now. I love Faith Ringgold work and I have seen some truly inspirational video pieces.

That's alright, it'll come to you, if it does just…you can mention it. I suppose Rothko has those…they're not figurative but they still… they're using strong colours and a minimal use of colour as well, like two or three…

Right.

…bold colours and looking around at your silk screens and your lino prints – the medium sort of encourages you just to focus on a couple of colours and make them bold. That's very Rothko-like, I would say.

[Nancer laughs]

And then, like you said, the Frida Kahlo stuff – there's narrative in your work as well.

Right. Yeah, everything I do is pretty narrative [related]. It's either narrative or just overtly political, where I'm making fun of the government or I'm making fun of someone in the government – it's one of my favourite things to do, actually.

Do you get to show those kind of pieces, the political pieces?

I do. Surprisingly, I get to show them pretty much, and I actually… sometimes people even buy them, so…

That's good.

Nobody buys HIV work, but…[mutual laughter].

They should, I think. Okay…

I don't know.

…I've got some photocopies here of some of your work that's on the internet. This is from the Estates Project visual collection. I don't know if you've been

able to see it on the internet, but they actually come up with about 1MB images, really large files, and you get to see things – obviously they're in colour as well. So, maybe you could talk me through some of these pieces and try to give me an idea of what was the stimulus behind them, why they were created, where they might have been exhibited, and what kind of response they received?

This piece is huge. Do you know about how big this piece is?

No.

It's about six feet tall.

Really?

Yeah. That's why it's not here. It's actually in storage somewhere.

Yeah…

I love this piece.

…so this one's, sorry, just for the tape's purposes I'll say this one is *It Could Have Been You*. It has some text and a woman's face and hands coming out through some branches.

Why did I do that?

Yeah.

I had this experience in my life where I had this woman say that she thought I was cute until she found out I was HIV positive and it was … It was so weird to me, you know, I just thought 'boy, that's really weird'. I was thinking, you know, that there's these people who are positive and then there's these people who aren't positive and, you know, you're like a leper, you're like… You know, it was a lot tougher in the eighties. I mean it was very hard.

Yeah, God yeah.

And, um, I was really just aware of this little line and the separation between people who are positive and people who aren't positive and that's why I did this piece and that's why I said all that stuff like 'look thro what separates us, is your lifeblood so strong?' and 'it could have been you'. I mean, it could have been anybody.

Yep, 'the landscape of your fear…

'…is the landscape of your fear less bleak'.

Yep.

But I always liked that piece. It's been shown a lot.

And so it's six foot. How long did it take you to produce?

How long did it take me to do it?

Mm.

I tend to work fast when I start work and I get really obsessed so I probably did it in a couple of weeks.

Okay, and that's a painting rather than a print?

It's a mixed media painting, yeah.

So this hand here, this looks like it's a photograph.

It's a photocopy, yeah, it's a xerox.

Yep. Wow. Okay, this next one which we've just seen in your…

Studio.

...studio... this is a piece called *What Do You See?* and it's about your friend, I think David, did you say?

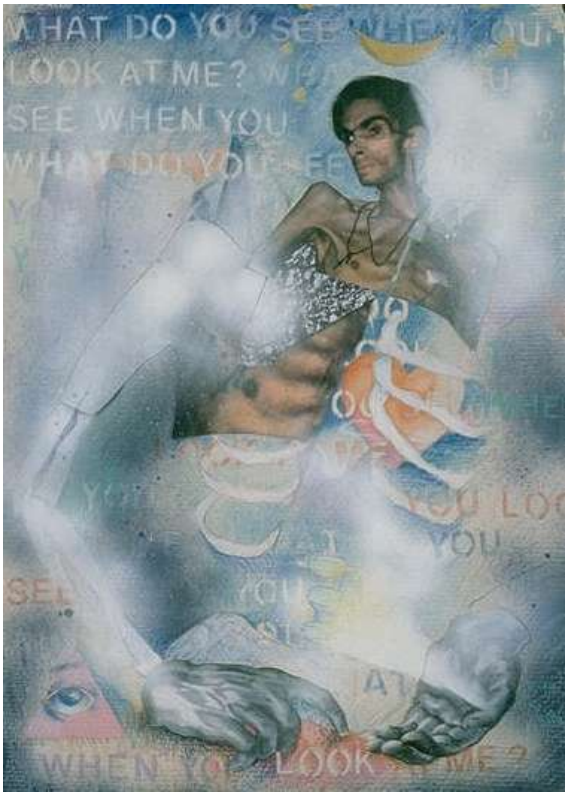
Yeah, I just wanted for people to look through... that his body was decaying and see that he was still this really strong spirit and that's why I had the light coming out of his hands. I was saying that I felt like his hands never changed, that his hands stayed really strong and even though his body was really frail his hands were never frail. And, um, that 'what do you see when you look at me?', I just wanted people to think about what they see when they look at people who are really sick or who are really... I don't know, who are really disabled, or who are really different, that they're not so different, that it's actually the same, you know that... It's kind of always the same, that it could be you, you know, that it's not so weird, anybody can get cancer, anybody can get anything.

Are the hands here also maybe representing a constancy of his own spirit and his own sort of personality – 'yes, his body is wasting away but'...

Yeah.

...he's still the person that he was, you know, ten years ago?

I think that's good. I mean, I think that's true because I always thought that about his hands.



There is a little eye down here and there was an eye in a prism, I think, in the last piece and that looks like a bit of a signature of yours.

Yeah, I used to do that.

Not anymore?

No, I don't do it anymore, just because it doesn't work with print-making very well. I was always working it into the painting and then it got a little disruptive visually, to work it in all the time, so I stopped doing it.

And this is again a painting and a mixed media because there's a photograph in there as well, isn't there?

Yeah, a photocopy.

Was David happy enough for the photograph to be taken?

He was dead.

Yeah.

Do I think he was happy enough for his photograph to be taken?

Did you discuss it with him beforehand or…?

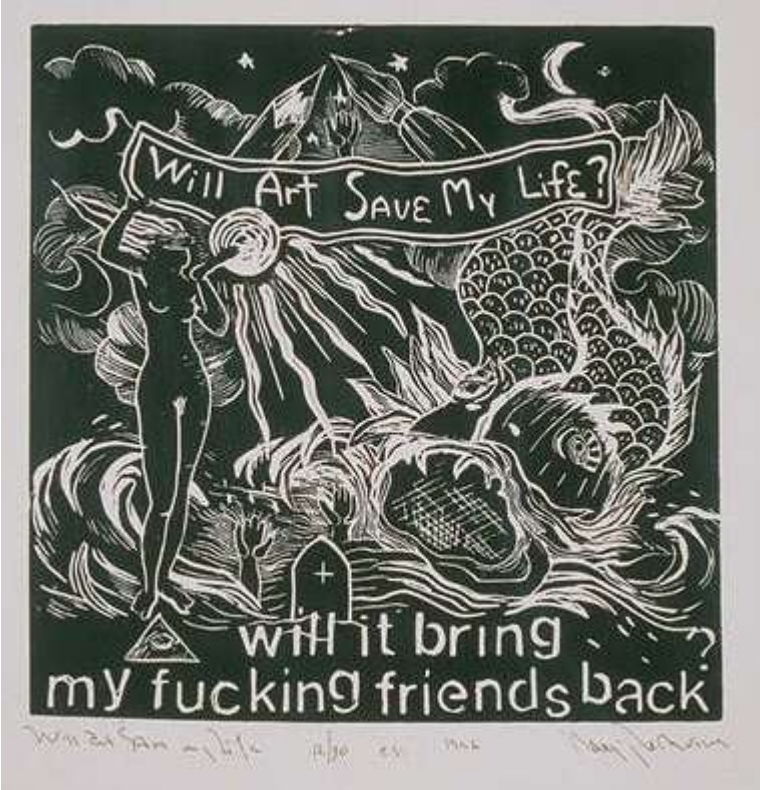
Um, he knew, yeah, that we were going to take photographs.

Yep. And then, this piece here, which is titled *Will Art Save My Life?* [see image overleaf] and it's a lino print, I think…

Well, I did that, I put that whale [in] because I thought it was as likely that art was going save my life as Noah, or whoever that guy was, was going to get spit back outta that whale…

Jonah, I think it was.

…Jonah was gonna get spit back outta that whale! Um, but it does save my life, that's what is so weird about it, it really has saved my life. It hasn't brought any of my friends back but it brings them back in a way, you know, it brings back their memories or their feelings. I did that so long ago, it just popped into my head. Usually I think about what I'm going to do but that was really just, I just was writing and I wrote that and it just happened, it wasn't premeditated at all. It's funny to me know because it did come to be true, that art did save my life.



So you were in a fair bit of despair, I suppose, when this one gets made and it's proven not to be the case so much.

Right, exactly.

Can you elaborate a little bit more on this idea of art saving your life and in a way bringing your friends back, at least the spirit of your friends back.

Well, I always think art saves my life, you know. I have a production compulsion for starters. I'm really an incredibly busy person and I think that nothing scares me more than doing nothing with my life. I think in this culture you're so defined by your job and you're defined by who you work for or what you do. I don't have that and I think sometimes that it makes me feel like I'm less than [others] or something. But then I have art, you know, and there's always making art, that's my job, that's what I do. It's just this fear I have. I think it's because of the way I grew up, a fear of not being able to do anything, like being too sick to make art or being too sick to ever do anything except lay and watch TV. That really scares me. It scares me a lot, so – that's how I think art saves my life, it gives me a purpose.

And it, it lets me communicate with other people. I've gotten so much great feedback about my work. I think it makes people who aren't HIV positive or who don't have much understanding about it look at it in a different way, when they see my work.

About it bringing my friends back: um, I mean, there are people who I've done art with who have died, and I always remember them, you know, I always think about them when I'm working. It's just, it's just kind of a presence, I think.

Do you think art can help with the grieving process?

Oh, absolutely.

And not even just for the person making the art but for other people coming in to view the art?

Definitely. I think that that's exactly what it does. I mean, I think that's its number one, number one attribute, really. And I think it helps people open their eyes about this disease a little bit.

Okay, we're looking at, I think, one that was the one of the first pieces you produced…

Right, that's…

…the *Free Yr Demons* lino print.

Uh huh.

And it says, 'Shall We Continue To Politely Discuss Our Rage. Free Y[ou]r Demons. Scream' [image overleaf].

[Nancer laughs] That actually came about because I was tired of talking and I felt that there was too much talking going on about HIV. It's not like I really think there's too much talking about it because I think if people need to talk they need to talk. But for me there was too much talking, I just got sick of hearing the same thing over and over and over again and so…

Yeah.

…so I just felt like people needed to kind of stand up and really kinda let it out a little bit. I mean, or maybe that's what I needed to do, but…

I've only known you for half an hour or so, but sitting here, talking with you, you don't strike me as someone who walks around screaming.

No.

But some of these statements are really provocative: 'Will it bring my *fucking* friends back?' [Nancer laughs]. We've got a little kitten running around here [acknowledging Nancer's cat on the armchair], you seem very placid and gentle.

[Nancer laughs] Have you changed over time, do you think, or do you still have that, is that still a part of you?

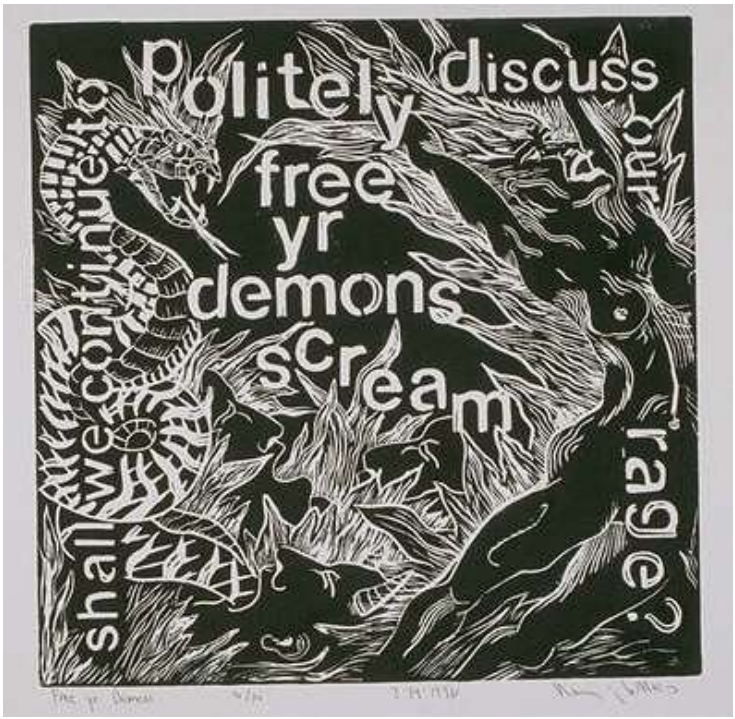
Well, I've changed a lot. Yeah, I used to be so much angrier. I'm not angry anymore. But I used to be really angry, I used to be *incredibly* angry about this whole thing. And I don't know why I'm not angry anymore because I think I should be, by all rights. Well, I don't know. I mean, it's just, I think it's a part of getting older, and, I'm still here, and I'm still basically okay, so, it takes [the edge off]. When I got diagnosed in 1986 they were, like, 'oh, you're gonna be dead in so many years' and, you know, you really buy into that stuff and you think 'it's going to happen and I'm going to be dead'. It really pissed me off when I heard that. I just wasn't ready for that. So I was making all this really angry art about it and then I just, like…'I'm still here. I'm still here, I'm still here' [in the manner of the game 'Marco Polo']. And after fifteen years or so I'm feeling like I'm gonna be here, you know, I'm not going anywhere anytime soon, so I think definitely I've changed, and I've changed how I look at it.

Are you on medication at the moment?

Yeah. I'm on a lot of medication.

Is it working okay for you?

It's okay. I definitely wish I had more T-cells and that my viral load was lower, but… it's okay. It fatigues me a lot and I throw up and stuff like that but, it's better than… I went off meds for a little while and I got really sick so it's better than the alternative.



Yeah. Although this might not have as much relevance for you anymore, these early pieces, the *Politely Discuss Our Rage* and *Free Yr Demons* pieces, would you agree that it probably still has relevance for other people who are maybe recently infected or recently sero-converted?

It does and I think that I have to say that my way of screaming is to make art, like I scream through art now. I mean, I never have been the person who would, like, *scream*, you know, 'aaaahhh'. But, um, I do think that it has relevance to other people and I really do think that that's my way of screaming.

Did you ever join ACT-UP or an organisation like that?

No, I've certainly been in lots of marches and stuff but I've never joined ACT-UP. I went to some meetings and I found the bureaucracy just totally overwhelming. I just couldn't, I just couldn't hang. There was all this talking about, you know, what we're going to do and how we're going to do it, it just went on and on and on, and…

Yep. Three-hour long debates about…

Right.

…which direction you're gonna march and stuff?

Absolutely. Like that, yeah. I just couldn't hang.

I'm interested because some of these early pieces have a real ACT-UP poster feel. You know, Grand Fury…

Right.

…artists caucus coming out of ACT-UP New York, were making pieces like this with text, explicit political angry slogans. Do you think that maybe your work is influenced by those graphics and…

Well, I had never seen them actually, until probably five years ago. At the time I was doing this, I was just doing it; I didn't really know what else was going on. I was a little isolated, I guess.

What about Barbara Kruger?

Yeah, I definitely know her work. I like her work a lot.

Yeah. 'Cause most of those guys in ACT-UP would say that they were directly taking from a lot of her work and what feminist artists were doing in the 1970s and the 1980s: using text, very explicit *graphic* art, *commercial* art almost, and bringing those images into their work.

Yeah.

And there is, I think, a bit of a myth that ACT-UP and Grand Fury actually created this aesthetic, but…

Oh something always comes from somewhere else.

…it goes back longer than that, yeah.

Yeah.

Okay, looking at this one now, *AIDS Isn't Over, No. 1*.

Oh, that's funny. I got so much shit for this that I changed it.

Really?

Yeah. I was actually being facetious and when I said that 'AIDS isn't over, fight for your right to die' [mutual laughter]… I can't believe I actually did that now. People really responded. They didn't like that, you know, they didn't like that I said 'fight for your

right to die'. But I was being facetious, you know. It's kinda like that – if AIDS isn't over then you're gonna die and, you know, you have this right to die kinda. But…

So it's black humour, isn't it?

It's black humour. And I just got so much shit for that.

Who from?

Just my friends and people who looked at it. Nobody liked it at all. Everybody was really offended by it.

People living with HIV themselves?

Yeah, everybody.

A lot of people with HIV, everybody who looked at it didn't… [they] just seemed to find it really offensive. So I actually changed it to this one, the next one. Oh, you don't have that other one?

I probably… yeah, I might not…

It actually says 'AIDS isn't over, don't fall for media hype' [see image overleaf]. Yeah, it's almost exactly the same, 'AIDS isn't over' and then it's got this little thing with the new drug and the people falling and it says 'don't fall for media hype'.

Okay.

So I made it politically correct. [Nancer laughs]

It's interesting, though. I mean, I've spoken to about eight or nine artists in New York just before I came here and some of those were doing what was considered to be politically incorrect art and… especially, say, in the early nineties, promoting the idea that not everyone is living with AIDS and climbing mountains and all that. Some people are dying in really quite horrific ways and they were representing that. Yet, again, some of the ACT-UP people were saying 'no, you can't, that's a negative image; we need to portray positive images'. And they said, 'well, that's kind of lying, because in a way…'

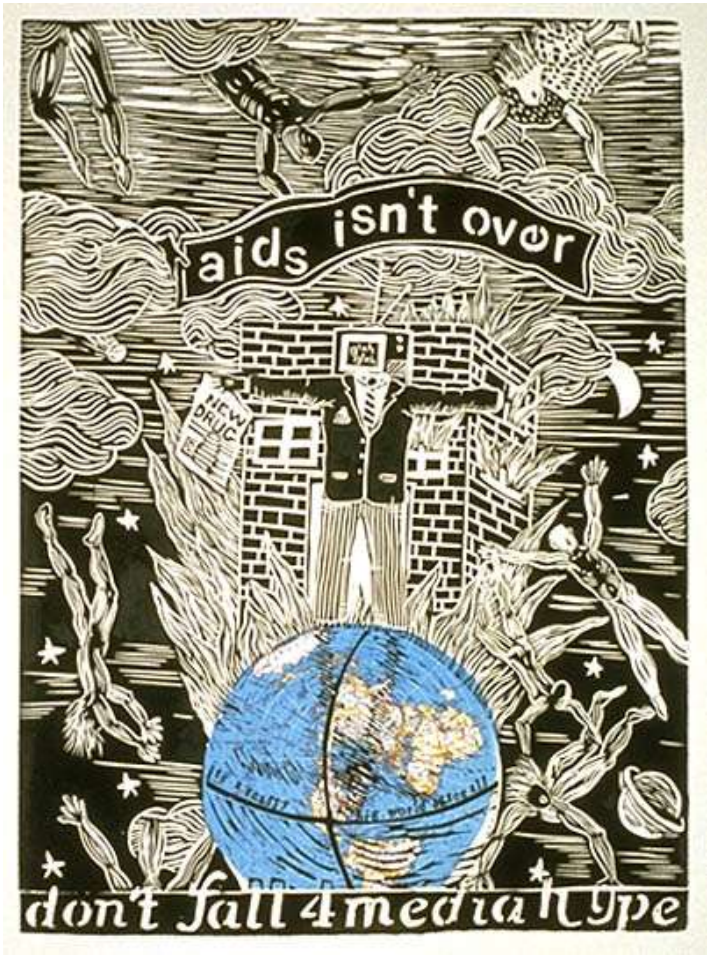
It is kind of lying.

'…it's not what we're doing here' and… yeah. Some of them were also using this black kind of humour but their critics wanted unambiguous art: 'we need positive images, we need positive statements and all we need rage but it has to be unambiguous'.

Yeah.

Yeah. And I think now it's probably more acceptable to do more ambiguous art and to really have more full range of representations. We're a little less raw…

Yeah, we seem to be.



Okay, this one's called *So Many Choices* [image overleaf] and it's depicting all the different kinds of drugs, AZT, ddI and other things that you could take.

I was in a study and it turned out to be just horrific. It was terrible. They skewed the evidence and they kicked me out and they took the drug away from me and it was just this horrible, horrible thing and I was really… [Pointing at the print] See, when I did this piece, this little monster here is the drug companies.

Yep.

And this is getting away from the drug companies. That [sentence] 'so many choices, so little time' was just…I was being facetious, you know, 'there's so many drugs and there's so little time to take them' but really [Nancer laughs] there weren't so many drugs and…

Yes. Can you elaborate on that story a little bit more? What sort of drugs was the trial for?

It was for the Aguron protease [inhibitor] and it was the most annoying study. It was just horrible. And, just the way they treated us and the way that they… I really felt like they skewed the evidence to kick me off the trial. I was really in a rage about it for a long time.

Yeah.

And then I made this piece.

What justification did they give for kicking you off?

My T-cells didn't do the right thing or something. I mean, I wasn't responding well to the drug so… But that wasn't my understanding when I started doing the study – that they were going to kick me off if I didn't respond in the right way. To me that's like skewing the evidence, right?

It is skewing the evidence, yeah. [Mutual laughter] Jesus, yeah, and so you were cross about that. And you were saying before that you've been in a lot of drug trials and studies…

Right. Not ones where you actually take the meds. I tend to be in things like a bunch of bronchoscopy studies and a bunch of…

Why would you sign up for one of those?! [mutual laughter] They are horrible!

Yeah, I didn't mind. They actually pay you money for them, so…

Yeah.

…so that, I needed the money so, I didn't really mind. I used to do them a lot but now they don't pay you so well anymore. They used to pay you a lot better, so I stopped doing them.

And there was a time there, when AZT was first coming out and there was only one or two other drugs as its competitor, when women couldn't get access to trials. They were only really focusing on men.

Right.

Did you have any feelings about that? Were you ever frustrated at not being able to get into a trial?

No, because by the time I started trying to get into trials I was getting into all these women's trials, like, there are all these specifically women's trials.

Yep.

And I never had that problem.

So those sort of problems had been addressed by then.

Right.

I like your representation of the drug companies, by the way. [Nancer laughs] Very appropriate. This one here is called *Living Every Day*. It's a painting. Can you tell me a bit about this one? I haven't seen this one.

I don't even know where the hell that painting is! It's funny that they even have a picture of it. I never liked this painting, actually. It's the same as that other block print where it says that 'living every day was...is a death defying act'. [Living with HIV] was like walking on a tight rope to me, on a tight rope of electricity. [Nancer laughs] And that was the image in this piece but I never felt like this painting really worked.

And you like the other one, the other one better.

Yeah. I like the… wow, you have all this stuff right here.

Yeah, I think there is about twenty images on the website and I haven't copied all of them. Okay, so what we're looking at here is *Something Called Fear* and it's a painting, probably a mixed media painting again.

That was about how my blood is always marking my body with fear. And I was thinking about how my blood just runs around and you never know where it's gonna land and make an infection or do something like that. That's what that piece was about.

Have you conquered that fear?

Do I have that fear? Well, I had herpes in my head recently so I really haven't. I have this great fear of it. It totally messed up my eye and my… You can kinda tell how my lip doesn't do the right thing anymore. And my eye's droopy. But my eye was totally stuck open and my mouth was really drooped down like that [making an action].

Geez.

I'm...I just...I don't want to look any worse than I have to.

Yeah. [mutual laughter] Yep. Oh, none of us do.

I'm that vain, you know. I don't want for it to mess up my face and I don't want to have little humps and I don't want to have, you know, the stomach thing and…

Yep.

I mean, I'd like to look like me.

Yep.

And it's actually kind of turned more into a thing about how I *look* for me, because it makes me really nervous ever since I had this thing with my face, which I've had *twice*. The first time all the side effects went away, my face went back to normal, but the second time my face never went back to normal. So…

I can't tell, so I don't know. [Mutual laughter]

Yeah, you wouldn't know unless you knew me before. My lip's kinda droopy right there.

It's interesting you mentioned that, though, because just looking and thinking through your work there is an absence of talk about body image or the body in your work. It seems to be more collectively engaged, more politically engaged even, and yet there's a lot of HIV artists turning towards 'the body' and thinking about the body and things like that.

I think there are pieces about my body and I think that other large self-portrait was about my body.

Have we seen this one already?

Yeah.

The first one?

The first one.

Yep, okay.

I mean, I think that was about my body but… Yeah, I agree with you.

It almost seems less important to me to talk about my own stuff than to talk about what happens to us collectively. Perhaps I am a bit shy about all of that; somehow it is harder to be completely personal than it is to be universal. On the other hand, I do believe that the personal is what really touches and moves people. But it happens to me and it happens to all of us. Everything comes from me. Like 'free your demons' was really, like, *my* feeling, you know, even if my screaming wasn't really screaming, it was about me first. And 'Will Art Save My Life?', that's about me first. And then it kinda goes into the collectiveness.

Yeah. Would you say that you've seen other people's work that has spoken to you in a way about the body?

Yeah, I have a friend who does a lot of work with blood and semen and stuff like that and his work is always really interesting to me. His stuff is so much about physical-ness and about the body and his body and…

Who's that?

John Neilson.

John Neilson. Okay.

He did a piece that says 'Oh fuck! I'm infected' and it's just so much how you feel in that minute when you know that you're infected.

Yep.

It has all this blood and it has his little card from when he found out he was infected and…

Oh God.

Yeah, it's a great piece, I love it.

John Neilson, *Oh Fuck! I'm Positive*, mixed media, blood and hair, 36" x 24", 1992.

Did he join Visual AIDS or Visual AID…

He did belong to Visual AID but I don't think he's been very active. He hasn't been really making too much art.

Did he do a piece where this guy's sort of wheeling around, like this, sort of smiling, and saying 'I'm positive!', which is very, again, black humour. Did he do that one? [Paul is actually thinking about a painting by Thom Markee here.]

I'm not sure.

I might be confusing it. I've seen a lot of art over the last three, three and a half weeks. But I just remember seeing a slide in the Visual AIDS collection in New York…

Are you hooked up with Visual AID here?

I met the director, Julie, I think…

Julie, uh huh…

…yesterday. I haven't had time to go through their collection and everything that they've got here on this trip but hopefully I'll get to come back next year and have a look through.

What are you gonna do with all this?

I'd like to write a book. I wrote a book last year that came out which is about Australia's epidemic from a public health and political perspective, looking at political responses, public health responses, the different models that Australia could have chosen to adopt to respond to HIV. We actually responded really well. We levelled off the infection rate faster than any other country and we've been really innovative with needle and syringe exchange programs and promoting condoms on television, you know, in the mid-1980s, really nice and early, so…

Oh good.

…we've been really successful in stemming the spread of the epidemic. I wrote a book about that and in the course of researching that I kept coming to this idea, or this notion, that most people in Australia have never met a person with HIV and they only come to know them through images, through representations - be they media representations, what they see on television, what they see when they glimpse an ACT-UP demonstration, or what they see when they walk through an art gallery or go to see a film like *Philadelphia*. And I thought, well, I've just written all this stuff about politics and public health but the way that most people form their opinions about people with AIDS and then respond to people with AIDS are based on representations.

Right.

And so I want to write a book about how the representations are formed and the way that they do shape consciousness and shape public responses and personal responses. I want to try to work out what is a positive representation, what is a counter-productive or destructive representation and the way that artists in particular can, in a way, become public health workers. They're the ones

actually giving information about the epidemic and about, you know, people with HIV. And I'd like to see artists recognised as public health workers…

Yeah. [Nancer laughs]

…in the way… I mean, you were talking a bit before about the… 'can art save my life?' and what it has actually meant to you. Well, I think it actually works on a really much wider level than the individual: people going in to exhibitions and coming out thinking differently about the epidemic. That might mean that when they're a landlord they don't kick an HIV-positive person out of their apartment building or, you know, if they're working with someone with HIV they still give 'em a hug at the end of the day…

Right.

…or share their lunch with them and stuff like that when maybe they didn't before. And all those little things which can improve the quality of life…

Uh huh.

…I think can be traced back to representations. Yeah, so… And the idea is to write a book about Australian responses, because that's what I know best, and U.S. responses, and that's why I'm here. Also I'd like to look at what's happening in South Africa, as a new kind of epidemic, and a place where this kind of cultural production is really needed because there's a lot of discrimination and misinformation about the epidemic there. But if it doesn't become a book hopefully it will be a series of articles talking about these things which will either be orientated towards history, public health and art journals and more popular magazines…

Uh huh. Well, I hope it works out for you.

Thankyou. [Paul laughs] It's a big process, unfortunately. You won't be seeing the book for probably three years, by the time I research and write it. Once the publisher gets the manuscript it's over a year before it comes out, so it's a long term process.

I like this one. I think you were talking before about the idea of blood and being infectious and worrying about that. It's called *One Little Nose Bleed*.

'One little nose bleed and there goes the entire dinner party'.

Yeah.

And it actually happened to me.

It happened? Really?

Yeah. Yeah, I love this piece. This is one of my very favourite pieces I've ever done. I actually sold it for a tonne of money, so I don't have it anymore but… Yeah, I was, my blood wasn't clotting and I was at a dinner party with people I had just met and my nose started bleeding and they were *so* freaked out. All I remember - and it says, it says over here in this corner - 'You want another Kleenex?' Oh, that's where it says, [speaking increasing fast] 'You want another Kleenex? You want another Kleenex? Want another Kleenex? Want another Kleenex?!' Like, that's just, it's like this little mantra in my head, you know, just these people saying 'You want another Kleenex?!' And this little kid up here [pointing] because there was this little kid who I just felt like was going… [Nancer makes a facial expression. Paul laughs.] I mean, just…

Just, for the purposes of the tape: that is someone holding their hands up by their ears and with their mouth opened in horror.

In horror, yeah.

Yeah.

And I just painted that piece in two days. I'm happy that happened because I got to make that piece out of it. [mutual laughter]

It really does convey that sense of arms and legs going everywhere in this frantic panic, and funny, it's all actually pushing away from a centre here…

From the dinner table!

Yeah.

Yeah.

And from *you*.

Right.

'Ah, get me away from this.' Yeah. So, that comes out of a direct experience?

Yes. That was quite an experience. [Nancer laughs] I had forgotten about that piece.

Can you remember who bought it?

Well, let's see. Originally it was in this calendar. I got a thousand dollars for it to be in this calendar. And then somebody contacted Visual AID and they bought it to give to a doctor. So I don't even know who it was.

Oh, okay. Well, wouldn't that be great if they've put it up in his surgery or something or rather…

Yeah.

…or the waiting room so people can actually look at that and, you know, again, reflect on…

I like that.

what that means.

I hope it's somewhere where people can look at it. I would imagine it probably is.

Yeah.

I wish I knew where it was but I don't.

It's funny, not all artists would think it would be such a good compliment to have their art hanging up in a doctor's surgery. They might not think that that's the most…

Oh, no. I would love it.

But, from a public health perspective: what a great place for this kind of message and this kind of image to be in.

I know I said I'm a snob about spaces, but I actually do want my posters and stuff to be up everywhere. I want them to be not just in galleries; I want them to be where people can just walk by and see them. You know, I like to put them on the walls outside and… [Nancer laughs]

Do you do that? You put them on the walls outside?

Yeah.

Oh, great. Great. Which, when you're screen printing, you can do multiple copies.

Yeah, sure.

It allows you to do that.

Oh, there's the other print...

***Here* we are. Here's the other, the revised version of *AIDS Isn't Over, Don't Fall For Media Hype*. That was the one we were looking at before with the images of the world.**

Right. The one I ripped.

Yep. I'm so sorry about that.

It's okay.

What did you call that technique again?

Chine colle. It is French. Chine colle

Chine colle. Okay, this one is the last one we're going to look at. It's called *Sleep Cry Eat*, but I would probably call it 'Death Defying' because that's the main message, isn't it?

Uh huh. Yeah. I just decided that it was a death-defying act to live with HIV. And I decided it was a death-defying act to just live your life, so…

And that's a more peaceful thought…a more comfortable thought than the work you were doing, say, two or three years before this, where it's more angry…

This is actually really old.

Is it really?

Yeah.

Oh well, I got that completely wrong. [mutual laughter]

The sequence is: first I did *So Many Choices*, then I did this one.

Okay.

Then I did *AIDS Isn't Over, Don't Fall For Media Hype*. But I did them all in 1999 or 2000.

Okay. It's just because they [the Estates Project archive] were saying that the date was '98 and some of the other ones were…

Oh, '98. Maybe it is '98.

…saying '95 and '96. But, I mean, they're not necessarily correct.

Yeah, I don't think they are correct but maybe they are. I thought I did that in 1999 but maybe I'm wrong.

Would you have had to give them that information?

I think I probably gave it to them. [Nancer laughs] But I just make shit up. [mutual laughter] I do, because I can never remember when I did anything…

Yep.

…so I'm just like… Unless it's written on a piece, I kinda go 'well, it was around this time or this time' and…

Yep.

…I make up sizes too.

[In mock admonishment] Now, see, if you were a good historian you would be writing dates on everything. It makes my job much easier.

Right.

That's alright. Well, that's important to know, though, because when I come to writing about these things I'll be able to use these dates sort of loosely. Okay, how are you going? Do you need a break?

No, I'm good.

Okay. Good. I want you to try to think about your experience of viewing AIDS art and other people's work, going to galleries and seeing work. Could you categorise the kind of work you've seen, say, over the last ten years? Have you seen particular themes emerge, artists who are all starting to use the same kind of ideas or mediums?

I have to say that in the last ten years I've seen very little AIDS art.

Okay.

People don't seem to be making it very much anymore.

Why is that do you think?

I think that everyone's become kinda *passé*… I don't know. I mean, I don't even make it much anymore. It's interesting because if I did something it would be directly about my body, much more than it would be political.

Yep.

I think things are better. You know, people have access to drugs. I don't believe that in other countries, but… Of course, things are getting tough here too…

Yeah.

They're trying to cut it, so…

Yeah.

I don't know. I haven't seen a tonne of AIDS work in the last ten years.

I'm surprised that there seems to be an absence of work talking about the fairly recent rise in new infections. They're calling it a spike in new HIV infections, particularly in young gay men, and we're seeing it in Australia as well over the last three years. They're still trying to work out why. And I think that if that was happening twelve years ago there would be a lot of art based around, well, 'why is this happening', 'what do we feel about it', you know, 'people keep telling us that we're stupid for becoming infected'…

[Indecipherable brief comment]

At the moment it seems that every time there is a spike in new infections, the average conservative politician gets on the television and says: 'Our AIDS programs aren't working. We need to cut the funding for the Gay Men's Health Crisis. We need to cut the funding for the gay and lesbian centre. We've got to have more testing, give all the power to the doctors. We need to rethink our HIV

laws'. And there now seems to be an absence of response amongst artists to that kind of thing.

I guess I better make some art.

Yeah. [Nancer laughs] Maybe that's why I'm…I'm challenging you. I don't know, I've just noticed that absence and… maybe it's because people don't want to stick their head up at the moment because it is a pretty politically conservative time.

Oh, I don't mind.

Yeah.

I've been making a lot of anti-government posters lately.

Yeah. Yeah.

I don't mind. I just have feelings about, about people getting infected so wantonly like that. It bothers me.

Yep.

It really bothers me. It kinda feels like it doesn't have anything to do with me, like I'm this person who's really outside of what young people, what young gay men are doing with their lives.

Yep.

That it's none of my fucking business, basically, so…

Yeah. It's outside of your experience.

Right.

Yeah.

Yeah.

You said you haven't necessarily been looking at a lot of AIDS art - and I know that's a problematic term, 'AIDS art', but we'll use it as shorthand. Can you cast your mind back to, say, twelve or fourteen years ago? Were there particular AIDS pieces, AIDS shows – this could be film, television, theatre, as well as visual art – any of those pieces which actually had an effect on you, made you think differently about the epidemic, about your responsibilities in it, about the way that the community responds to AIDS?

I saw some shorts one time in the film festival that were…They were just devastating to me. I was sobbing.

Really?

They were so touching to me.

So this is a San Francisco film festival or gay and lesbian film festival?

At the San Francisco Film Festival, yeah.

Okay.

And I don't even remember any of the names of the films or anything but one of them was this guy in this apartment after his lover had just died and it was, oh my God, it was the saddest, saddest thing. I remember that. I remember specifically those films and a lot of shorts. I was working for Positive Art actually for ten years from 19… probably 1992 till 2002. So I saw a lot of…All my students were positive and were all making art about HIV and I saw a lot of people do a lot of really amazing stuff. But, once again, you know, the classes that I teach now – nobody seems to be making any AIDS art.

Where do you teach?

At the Centre for AIDS Services and at South Market Cultural Centre.

Would your students be fairly recent infections or long-termers?

No, at the Centre for AIDS Services there are people who have been infected forever.

I just say that because it seems to be a fairly common thing to… that once you become infected you really don't want to have to deal with it, and if you're making art you don't want to have to deal with HIV in your art as well because that's all through other parts of your life…

[Nancer laughs.]

A lot of the artists I've spoken to have said well, you know, they tried as hard as they could to keep that out of their art and…

Really?

Yeah. I was talking to one fellow and he had felt that a lot of AIDS art was sentimental and clichéd and he didn't think he had the skills to be able to do something which wasn't going to be perceived to be sentimental and clichéd. So

he kept trying to keep it at a distance but he found he kept drawing self-portraits of himself crying and he said, 'Wait a second. Why am I doing this? This is not, this is not what I… Why am I doing this?' And he realised that he had to delve into himself and see what it was all about. And it was all about HIV… [c.f. interview with Steed Taylor]

Right.

And then, for six or seven years, he didn't produce anything *other* than…

Crying pictures.

Yeah, well, I mean he actually did some really empowering things which once you look at it you wouldn't automatically think it was HIV but he said a lot of it was motivated by that.

What about away from the visual arts and short films: any other artistic things that you've seen which you had a strong response to?

I don't remember even… I just didn't see *Philadelphia* until much later, so… I didn't really like it very much.

Can you remember why you didn't like it?

I don't know, I just didn't like it very much.

Yeah.

It was okay, it just wasn't so great, I didn't think.

Yeah.

I mean, they did all those tear-jerker scenes in that movie and it really kinda bugged me.

Yep.

Well, I did finally discover the Grand Fury stuff and the Gorilla Girls and that kinda stuff.

Yep.

And that was all really, really fun to me. I mean, I love good political art – there's nothing that makes me happier. I can't think of anything really. I can only think of people that I would work with, who would do these really amazing things or, you

know, they would do masks that had relation to HIV. Little weird pieces that had to do with HIV and I liked that, you know. They were very personal.

Have you ever been to a Quilt unfolding?

I have been to the Quilt a couple of times, yeah.

And how do you find the Quilt? Can you remember the first time…

I find the Quilt just *fucking* heart-breaking.

Yeah.

It just, just tears me up. I can hardly even stand it. It's so sad.

Yeah.

I'm just… It's *so* moving to me, and so… It's so sad, it's just so sad.

Does it leave you feeling depressed or, when you come home, what does it make you feel about it?

Well, I think 'what a waste', how all these people had to die so young. I'm always aware of how many of the people who…in the Quilt there is so many artists, so many, so many really young people and… It doesn't make me depressed, I wouldn't say it makes me depressed but it really makes me think that I'm lucky that I had this disease a little later instead of a little earlier because I would probably be dead too if I didn't.

Yep. It's hard to go there and look though without noticing the dates…1967 to 1997 and stuff like that. Short life spans.

Yeah. Yeah.

Have you made a Quilt panel yourself?

No, no. I should because I have a couple of good friends that have died. I should make a Quilt panel but I haven't.

You shouldn't have to do anything! When you feel the need for it…Those people did a Quilt panel when they felt it the right time. Then you might do a Quilt panel.

Uh-huh.

God, don't beat yourself up about it!

[Nancer laughs]

I'm interested to hear your responses about the Quilt, because the Quilt is seen as one of the largest artistic manifestations of the epidemic, and it is now world-wide. There has been an AIDS Quilt in Australia since 1987, there is one in South Africa. There seems to be an universal response to it. Most people describe it exactly as you did. Some people I have spoken to would say the opposite, though. They say that 'it's kitsch and it's too passive' and that 'we should be out there fighting in the streets rather than'…

See, that is a bunch of fucking men talking about what woman do too, and that really pisses me off! Sometimes I teach classes for just women and I'm always really aware of how every time there are women sitting around doing things – making a dream catcher or making art or whatever they do – that there is a way that they start talking that is really different from the way that they talk in their normal lives. There is so much power in that, when they're all working on something together. I really love that. It is something that I feel passionate about. And I think that about the Quilt; working together with so many other people to create something that is so powerful. You can go to another place, or reach this other level. It just pisses me off to hear you say that. I just find that so annoying.

Yeah. It's not my opinion!

[Laughing] Yeah, I know.

[snip: Paul talking about his impression of the Quilt - not of interest here]

Have you ever been able to get copies of Visitors' Comments books from the places that you have shown your work, from galleries or spaces?

I have, but people never seem to write very much. They write 'Great Work!', or 'Excellent!'. I've had a lot of HIV work in the San Hose Art Museum, and I got a tonne of really great feedback from that. Being in an art museum, it was a different kind of thing; people weren't expecting to see it there. It was on World AIDS Day and people really liked it.

What kind of things did they say?

Just that it really opened their eyes and that they were moved by it. It was a different audience. I mean, when you put AIDS art in a gallery with people who have seen AIDS art before [it doesn't have such a great effect]…but because it was in this museum where people don't expect to see it…It was really cool – it was in the paper – there was, like, van Gogh, Rauschenberg…Nancer LeMoins. [Nancer and Paul laugh] I actually cut this article out because, like, when do you have your name against these other artists? [Mutual laughter] I think people were going to see van Gogh and Rauschenberg and Warhol and they were taken by surprise by the HIV art there.

Which paintings and prints did they exhibit?

A tonne of them. All of these [pointing to the photographs of her block prints] were there. They had all my block prints.

That's great. That is a lot of space.

It was nice.

Has anyone ever written you letters?

No, I wish someone would, though. I would like that.

Yeah. Well, they are the things that I wanted to explore with you. Do you have anything that you want to talk about, that has come into your head?

No, that is just about it.

[Interview ends with unrelated chatter.]

If citing this interview please use the following:
Nancer LeMoins interviewed by Paul Sendziuk, San Francisco, 22 May 2004, *The Art of AIDS Prevention*, http://www.aidsart.org/#!vstc1=lemoins; accessed <insert date>