

Barton Lidice Beneš interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

New York City, USA, 4 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: This is an interview with Barton Benés in his home in New York City on the 4th of May 2004 at around about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. We've just discussed the way we're doing the interview and the transcription process and Barton's happy with that. Barton, I'll ask a few questions about yourself and then we'll talk particularly about AIDS-related artwork. So, first, how long have you been creating art?

Barton Lidice Beneš: Always.

Always?

Always, yeah. It's all I ever did.

And you make a living as an artist?

Yeah.

How long have you – you've always made a living as an artist?

Since 1967. That's when I started. That's the last time I had a job and I said, 'I'm never going to work for anybody again'. So yeah, since '67 I've been living off my art.

Ok. And this building that you're living in, this seems to be – it's an artist community?

You have to be an artist to live here. It's modelled after that place in Paris called Sites des Artistes and it's government subsidised housing for artists. It's great, it's inexpensive to live here and you're with a bunch of people that are cool.

Do you feel like there's an exchange of ideas amongst you or are you all doing separate work?

Oh, separate work, but there are people in here like [choreographer] Merce Cunningham, who has the top floor here. There are some interesting people here and then there are some people that are not interesting at all [laughs] but you pick your friends.

Oh, like all places I suppose.

[Laughs]

And I've heard there's a decent waiting list to get in to an apartment.

In here, I think it's 8 to 10 years. I moved here in 1970. I've been in this apartment for 30 something years; 34 years I think in this apartment. The waiting list is starting to move up fast 'cause people are starting to die off; you know, people who were like 40 or 50 back then, you know, they're starting to [die] – the only way I'm leaving here is in a wooden box and that's the way everyone [goes] 'cause the rent is so good [laughs].

And I should say, for people who are listening to the recording and don't get to see the apartment, it's quite an amazing apartment in a very amazing part of New York City – how would you describe it – it's between Chelsea and Down Town.

When I moved here people wouldn't come visit – now it's the fashionable meatpacking district. Back then the meatpacking district wasn't considered [fashionable]. So there are all these yuppies around here now; I can't stand them. It's a fancy area.

Well, it's, kind of, happening all over New York, isn't it?

Nicole Kidman lives just two blocks from here so you can...

Nicole Kidman? Really?

Yeah.

Wow!

All the movie people are moving down here – it's causing the rents to go sky high and it's causing the restaurants to get expensive and the supermarket to get expensive.

Progress.

She's Australian, right? I think she...

Absolutely, yeah. Well, she was 15 years ago, I don't think she's lived in Australia for a while – she keeps marrying important people.

OK, a bit of a tricky question. How do you feel about the prospect that, in making art as a HIV positive person, that's there's, sort of, a market imperative that says that as you get closer to the end of your life, the price of your art is going to be increase because of that...because you won't be continuing to make art?

I never even think about any of that.

You never think about any of that?

No. I make art and also, my art [pause] – well, you'll probably get to that – I don't make art consciously; what I do is not about AIDS, I mean, it happens to be part of my life so that's part of my work but, no I don't think – it doesn't play into it at all.

I mean – I’ve spoken to people and they’re quite disturbed about that; they feel, kind of, that the market is almost exploiting their disease and...

What market? [Laughs] There’s not a big market for AIDS art; are you kidding? I mean, I don’t like the term AIDS art but I mean, there’s a – no, it’s not that you’re not going to make a living – a good living selling art about AIDS, no way. I don’t know how they feel being exploited! [Laughs] I can’t imagine.

Over the last 10 years, I’ve seen a whole bunch of series done by you; you had your ‘Lethal Weapon’ series, you’re doing your ‘Museums’ now, there’s the hourglass piece...

I did a lot with cremation ashes and also medications, yeah...

How can you account for the diversity of your art? You seem to have a fertile mind.

I’m always moving – looking for new ways of doing things and then when you get too comfortable it’s time to move on, you know. I’m coming to an end with ‘Museums’ now, I’m not sure where it’s going but – when I started making art – the AIDS stuff... I couldn’t make art about AIDS at all when this first happened, I couldn’t deal with it, I didn’t know how to express it, it was just something I couldn’t do. And then one day I started. I had an assistant named Ann-Marie; we were working and I was in the kitchen, I cut my finger – I was chopping parsley and blood went everywhere – and I freaked and I said get the [pause] get the...

The towels?

No, not the towels, the stuff you clean it with...

The bleach?

Bleach! That’s it – the bleach – and the gloves, and I’m putting all this [on] and then I realised, I’m afraid of my own blood. I thought it was a very powerful thing and it’s what made me start the ‘Lethal Weapons’. I thought, God, if I’m afraid of it imagine what other people will feel, so I start filling water pistols and I – children’s toys like dart guns, I made all kinds of stuff with blood.

Perfume bottles...

Yeah, perfume bottles, holy water bottles.

Fake flowers...

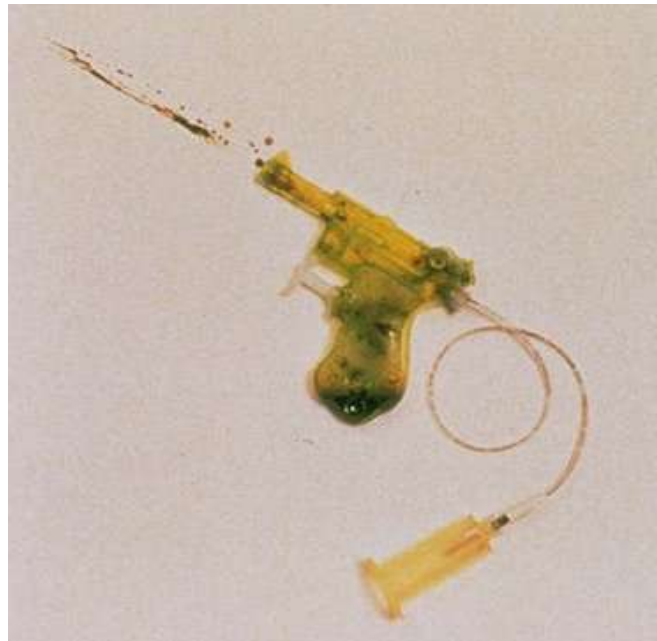
The squirt – joke flowers, exactly. Things to stop nail biting. [laughs] Anyhow, I started doing that, but I never could make anything about AIDS ‘cause I always thought AIDS was – the stuff that was being done was always so sentimental or – I don’t know – I was, I like, I’m into mischief – I’m a trouble-maker.

So this was about 1992, the 'Lethal Weapon' stage...

Yeah, I think the first show was 1994 but 1992 was when I started, yeah.

I could imagine at the time people would've been shocked. I mean, that's very - definitely not politically correct...

No it was awful.



Barton Lidice Beneš, from *Lethal Weapons*, mixed media, c.1992.

What was the response?

It was awful! Well, I shouldn't say awful; it was either great or it wasn't. I showed it all over the world. In Sweden I – in Sweden you wouldn't think this would happen – I had a show and I wound up in court. Someone complained, they said I was spreading AIDS and the Health Minister closed the show down, the gallery was padlocked and I had to go to court.

Goodness.

I got a lawyer, and of course the doctors here – I had a doctor in New York write letters who said, 'What, you want to eat the art?' [Paul laughs] It's the best place to have a court case, Sweden, 'cause they're very fair. So they came to a compromise: they said 'We'll take your exhibition to the hospital and we'll put it in the oven and we'll heat it for 2 hours at 160 degrees'. [Paul laughs] I – 'Do it!' – so each piece of work has a certificate saying it's clean. [Both laugh] So, that was Sweden. Then when I went to Prague.

In England the Tories went nuts but they couldn't do anything 'cause I had these letters saying it's clean, but they said it was immoral so there was this whole crazy thing; I remember Boy George was the one who opened that show and it was - I forget what – it

was called 'Brenda and Other Stories', and Brenda's the one I made the ribbon out of [ashes]. [The exhibition] was in the midlands – I guess they're kind of conservative there – they – you would not believe the headlines – 'AIDS horror show' stuff.

Then when I went to Prague I thought I'm not going to bring blood there, I'll send the pieces empty – 'cause you have problems with customs; in Sweden they said, 'How did you get this into this country?' 'cause I wrote 'mixed media' I guess. [Paul laughs] So for the Czech Republic I bought all the work in without blood and then there was a nurse from the AIDS group there and she – I took my pieces and she took the blood out of my arm and was filling all the pieces with my blood and so this old lady, a babushka, she didn't know what the hell was going on, but I gave her a tip and she did it. Some places I have trouble, some I don't. I had a show in North Dakota which you think would be conservative and I had no trouble there at all. So you never know.

You've got a very special relationship with the North Dakota gallery and we'll talk about that later on. I suppose I was thinking that there would have been a bit of a backlash from the AIDS community here, the ACT UP people, I mean...

No, the ACT UP people were fine with it.

Really?

Yeah, no, not ACT UP. The people who were – it was the closeted gays or the guys who – the ones who couldn't deal with this kind of stuff; no, ACT UP was fine. You [would] think you get your support from the gay community, but no way, they were really [pause] there was a lot of hostility, a lot of hostility.

Why – how did they take the art?

I think it was probably too close to home, they didn't want to know about it. [Anyway] they're so busy working out at the gym so everybody thinks they're healthy [laughs]. But, no, I didn't have support at all, that's why, Visual AIDS was fantastic. I'd done other kind of work, but this blood work, I didn't know where to put it – who would understand what I was doing? But Visual AIDS was good at that. I heard about them, they did a show – I didn't know about Visual AIDS then – they did a show called 'Blood Fairies' and I thought 'Oh my God! How come they don't know about me? Why don't I know about them?' and that's when I hooked up with Visual AIDS.

So that's about 1996, I think.

Was that when 'Blood Fairies' was?

I think so. I mean, I suppose I'm just thinking, the one with the water pistol, I think it's a green water pistol and it's spurting the HIV blood out. To me, as an observer, it looks like what you're saying is: look at this fairly innocuous, childlike, innocent, non-dangerous implement, a water pistol, but look how dangerous it really is, it's shooting HIV blood. And if you take that as a metaphor for a human, a vessel, it seems to be saying: look at these people who are just walking around everyday society, they look like they're fine but they're actually really dangerous.

Now that's something that I remember ACT UP was really dead against, that idea that people with AIDS are dangerous and they're walking weapons and time bombs.

No, the ACT UP people were pretty cool because what I was doing, because I was being very aggressive with my work – putting it out there. I had no problem with the ACT UP people at all. A lot of my friends are in ACT UP. But, like I say, a lot of the prissy queens [laughs] you know, just couldn't deal with it. I was surprised; I thought I'd have a support from the gay community with this work, which I didn't have. It was weird.

And after the 'Lethal Weapons' series, is this when *Brenda [Woods]* was constructed, around then? [see image overleaf]

Around the same time, yes, she was part of that show. I made [AIDS] ribbons out of her ashes; a lot of friends were dying, I mean they were just – all of the people here are all my friends who died at that time and every time someone would die I'd glue their picture onto a little – a shard. A lot of them left me their ashes to do things with, so I have a lot of their ashes. But a lot of people couldn't deal with that either – it was so funny, they'd look at the ashes – I did a show with the ashes – and people would go and they'd smell, they would go up to the ashes...

Why would they smell them?

I don't know, but they smelled!

[Both laugh]

So how did Brenda come about? You've told me before, but for the purposes of the recording.

Brenda was a lesbian, then she had kids and they took the kids away from her – she was a drug addict and she got AIDS and they [took the kids away]. When she died, Chris – her brother, he was gay – said the family wanted nothing to do with her when she died, nothing. So Chris had her cremated and he had her ashes. One day he was here and he said, 'What nice thing could we do with Brenda's ashes?' and I said 'Why don't I make some kind of [work], something nice'. That's how I got the idea to do these ribbons. I know Visual AIDS did the ribbon and everything but I hated what the ribbon became. I liked the original ribbon but then it became this fashion statement and it was – I hated it – so I wanted to show what the ribbon was really about and it was about people dying so that's why I made the ashes – the ribbon – out of ashes.

So it's a comment on both the way that Brenda was treated by her family - that sort of rejection - and the kitschification of the red ribbon as well.

Exactly, exactly. When you go see the Academy Awards everyone has the red ribbon on – their studios pin it on them – they – I mean they...

A moment before they walk through the door...

Yeah, and then they start selling you all these jewelled AIDS ribbon and this kind of AIDS ribbon and it was – ughk.



Barton Lidice Beneš, *Brenda Woods* (detail), c.1994.

I noticed actually that the South African millionaire that went up into space – he paid the Russians to take him up into space, \$50 million or something or other – he was the first ever ‘AIDS’ tourist into space.

He has AIDS?

No, he wore a red ribbon on his spacesuit.

Oh really?

Yeah, he’s from South Africa.

Well that’s kind of – all right, that’s ok...

It was just interesting ‘cause I was saying to Amy [Sadao] today that Visual AIDS should hit him for some money and actually say, ‘You know, you took the ribbon up there, you obviously think that it means something and it represents something and this organization created the red ribbon and we’re trying to do stuff with it’.

You know, they never did anything when they did the ribbon. It’s too bad they didn’t copyright, they could’ve had – Visual AIDS would’ve had money – ‘cause every organization now has their own coloured ribbon, every one.

Yeah, true.

But they didn't. But, who thinks about that? You know, 'I'm going to copyright a red ribbon'.

Hourglass - two gay lovers ashes mixed eternally...validating gay relationships - surviving death. These are substantial. These are loving...

And it might have stopped it, you know, spreading its appeal as well, so, you never know. So you have the Brenda piece; when was the hourglass piece done?

That was later – that was done '96 maybe. I did another show in Sweden, it was for an outdoor sculpture garden and I made that piece for that particular show. I remember I had to find someone who blew glass in Sweden. I was carrying the ashes [on the plane], I didn't want to check [it in] – put it in my suitcase out of my hand baggage. I mixed the ashes together here so they [i.e. airport security] don't think I'm a nut case. I mixed them together [and] put the one name on the thing so they didn't think I had two people's ashes mixed. I was leaving Newark airport and the guy – they were going through the checkout and they [airport controller] said, 'Over here, something's in the there'. Then they called the security and they looked in my bag – they thought I had cocaine – it's cremation ashes! They said, 'Lucky thing you didn't have it in a can, 'cause then we'd have to call the bomb people' – they can't open a can. Anyhow, so she – I remember – she put her finger in it and she smelled it and I thought, 'Why don't you taste it? Why don't you just taste it then I'll tell you what it is?' [Both laugh] But anyhow, I got through with it. Every country has different rules about ashes, you know, you're not supposed to – Sweden you're not allowed to: you have to be buried in a lead box and you have to be met by someone at the airport, a funeral person. I call different countries – the embassies – the ask about what happens with ashes and in London they say 'You can bring them over, but please don't throw them on Trafalgar Square.' [Both laugh] I mean it's funny, New York they said you're supposed to throw them seven miles out at sea, but I think Central Park has about five feet of ashes covering the whole park.



Barton Lidice Beneš, installation of *Hourglass*, c.1996.

Oh God, yeah. You're a real customs nightmare, aren't you? You're taking HIV positive blood, ashes – you bring in a whole heap of artefacts from Africa which they wouldn't be very happy about.

Oh, I'm always bringing a lot of stuff – I'm always having trouble. But you get through it.

Can you tell us again...we were talking before about how the hourglass piece was created and you said you had permission from one of the...

My friend Noel – my friend Noel and James are lovers and they were both HIV-positive but Noel was very sick and he was dying. James said 'Noel wants to talk to you' and so I went over there and he said he wants me – he was in bed – and he said he would like me to do something with his ashes, 'cause he saw what I did with Brenda. I said, sure, ok, I'd do it. When he died I got the ashes but then, shortly after, like a month later, his boyfriend died unexpectedly, you know, AIDS, so I had both their ashes. I thought I don't want to separate these guys, I want to keep them together, so I put them in this hourglass. I like that they're together. Somehow, when I die, my ashes are going into a pillow and this apartment's being recreated in North Dakota – you heard about that?

Yes, I have.

I said to my mother, 'Do you want my ashes, do you want to mix your ashes with me?' and she says, 'That's probably illegal' and I said, 'What do you mean illegal?' and she says, 'Isn't that incest?' and I said, 'Mum, don't worry about it'.

From beyond the grave! [Laughs]

Don't worry about it. I kind of like the idea of my ashes being mixed with my mother's. It's, kind of, symbolic of, you know. [Both laugh]

So how is your relationship with your Mum?

She's 93 and she lives alone. She lives in Chicago. [Pause] Fine. We have a good relationship. She's cool.

Ok, so we've looked at a couple of AIDS pieces there – I'm just staring – right in front of me I've got the 'Petite Fours' – the little tasty treats made of, what have we got, some AZT maybe?

All AIDS medicines.

All AIDS medicines.

It's the stuff of the cocktails.

When did you start making these pieces that deal with the drug cocktails?

You know, I stopped taking medicines for a while; I just got so – I was getting so sick from the medicines and I said ‘I’m not doing it’, so I took a break. I had all these medicines – they were so expensive, I thought ‘I’ve gotta do something with them’, so that’s what I did. I made these little things.

So this is 1998 or so? [Actually 2003]

[Pause] I can’t remember. I mean, I’ve done several different things like it. I’ve asked people [for their pills] – when people, friends, would die and I’d get their pills and I’d [use them].



Barton Lidice Beneš, installation of *Petits Fours*, 2003.



Barton Lidice Beneš, *Talisman*, AZT with Egyptian amulets, 1994.

Do you think are you making any kind of statement with it apart from ‘these are drugs that I don’t have need for at the moment so I’m going to make them into art’?

I never even – who knows why I do things, I mean, I never really – I just do them – I don’t really...

You see, I’m getting this impression from you that you have this idea and it’s either funny or it’s clever and it strikes your fancy and you make art out of it.

Right.

That’s not my – most people’s perceptions of artists and particularly those that make AIDS-related art generally have a political purpose and their work is actually some sort of statement.

Well I’m – probably – I’m not consciously – I’m sure there’s a political [point]. I mean, I am political in a way but I do these things – I, kind of, like to put it in your face – I like to – I like to show – do things to people, I like to hit them, but if you hit them with a joke they can accept it. It’s, kind of, a way of approaching – it makes the work approachable. Does that make any sense? I don’t know.

So what are the kind of responses you are getting from these pieces then? Are people looking at these and laughing?

I’ve never had any bad responses to any of this. There’s not a lot of money! [Laughs] But no, I’ve never met any bad responses.

That, in itself, you’ve provoked in them a political statement. ‘How can you do this? We can’t afford this, you know, this country’.

Well, it’s also, it’s about the cost of medicine, it’s outrageous. I mean, what they charge for this stuff, and then in countries where they don’t have the money. What’s the annual budget in some countries, a dollar per person? What do you – I mean – that’s nuts! I mean, I know with my insurance, it kills me to pay all my insurance – it’s all about money – the pharmaceutical companies and this president is in bed with them – it’s [pause] this sleaze-bag president. [Both laugh]

He’s [George W. Bush] not very popular in my country at the moment, either. I’m really going to try and push you here...

Sure.

...in terms of people coming to your home or coming to your exhibitions – you’ve obviously been to a few places where your work’s been exhibited – if you watch them looking at your art, what are you seeing, what sort of reactions are they making and what sort of feedback do you get?

Well, it's always pretty positive, it's pretty good. I mean, a lot of people, most people are affected in a very good way by it. [Pause] There'll always be a nutcase, I mean, you know, like someone, but with everything you'll have that.

What do you mean by positive, though? That they like it?

They're moved, very moved, yeah.

Like you said, a lot of your work has that humorous element to it, and it's a way into the art for them and that's not, like you said, not hitting them over the head with it...

Exactly.

...but then that maybe gives you a chance to think about the issues. Are you familiar with a guy called David McDiarmid, who's an Australian – he died a couple of years ago?

I think – he didn't have a partner that was an artist too, did he?

Yeah, Peter Tully.

I think; I'm not sure. Tell me about the work.

MoMA's got some of his stuff . He is probably one of our more famous contemporary artists and probably our biggest 'AIDS artist'. He did a series of works at the end of his life, in about 1992 – these big, sort of, figures, very glossy, very colourful, bright, pastel bright, crayon colours, with square heads with a diagonal through the square, one with a positive sign, one with a negative sign and they were all promoting – they were very sex positive, you know, 'Keep going out having sex, sex is great, but just remember that there's this element of risk with sex' and they were promoting, you know, safe sex, safe drug use, and things like that. And his work really got bought in by the AIDS organizations and they used his images in some of the campaigns – the education campaigns.

Can you write it down for me? I'll go online; look it up on Google, see if I can find it.

Yeah. And the reason I mention that is because his later works, he did a lot of technicolour posters with a really humorous, satirical bent, you know: 'It's my party sweetheart and I'll die if I want to'. Those kind of things, which, you know, only someone in the community who's HIV-positive could say. But once you hear it, it was kind of funny but it made you reflect about things.

It's also, like, if you're black you can say 'nigger'; if you're gay you can say 'faggot'. So you know, sometimes you can. I remember once I was at a dinner party and I said something about AIDS and someone took great offence, [pause – Paul laughs] but she didn't know what my story was, and then she found out and it was ok, I mean, I'm glad she did take offence, but, yeah, I [pause] can I take a pee?

Yeah, definitely, I forgot to say at the start we can stop whenever you want.

[Interview suspended for a short period.]

I hope I'm giving you the right answers that you think should...

Well if you're not, you're very entertaining so...

Well, I just want to be able to help you with your...

[Laughs] No, I think we're doing really well. We were just talking [during the break] about North Dakota and the museum there. You've got a bit of a special relationship with them; can you explain how that came about, 'cause New York is a long way away from North Dakota...

And I'm not from North Dakota. I used to show in a gallery – one of my dealers was from New Mexico and Harvey, the husband, was the architect for the museum – it's an incredible museum, you wouldn't [believe it] – people don't think of this out in North Dakota but it's really avant-garde and they do very daring shows. Anyhow, I did the first show at the museum. Harvey died and they thought I should do the first show at the museum. They asked me when I was doing my blood work – no one would show it; I could not get anyone to show the blood work here in New York. [The Dakota Museum] says, 'Show in North Dakota' and it was fantastic. I fell in love with the place. Teachers brought their kids to see it – I didn't have any negative [responses].

There was a period when I was not feeling well and I thought 'What am I going to do with the apartment?' The director was here and I told her and I said, 'You want it?' – she says 'Yeah, we'll keep it exactly how it is; we'll reconstruct it'. So what they're going to do is take this apartment and – they've been here already, we've done it with the lawyers, they've done the videos, they're going to reconstruct it exactly the way it is. And my ashes stay [in a pillow] on the bed there, so I thought...

Is that your bed?

That's my bed.

Jesus.

This is my pyramid. I'm living in my pyramid so... [pause] perfect.

That's fabulous.

Now I don't mind buying things; I think: 'I'll have it forever' [laughs].

Will people be able to walk through it like we've just done?

Yeah.

Oh good. Well, I'm glad that other people are going to get a chance to, you know, see how wonderful this place is.

I love North Dakota. I was just out there a couple of weeks ago and, of course, that's where Brian lives – my friend – and [pause] I said to him, 'When is the director gonna find out that you're gonna leave?' – 'cause he works at the museum – 'When you're gonna leave and move in with me? She's gonna throw my ashes in the river!' [Both laugh]

Has he got an important position there?

He's her assistant.

Oh gosh, well. You'll be in trouble. Ah well, if you're 25 years-old or whatever, you should be coming to New York at some point and this is where – if you're in the visual arts –

Well, the greatest export from North Dakota: youth [Both laugh]. Everybody leaves.

We say that about the state of Tasmania.

Youth is the export.

And if you want training in the visual arts and arts, I mean New York's gotta be the place you have to come.

Well, he was trying – he has a degree in business – but he's interested in arts administration. I said, 'Go to school here and live with me and go back and study art history or do whatever – just come and live with me, I don't care, just live here!' [Both laugh]

Ok. Art historians are quite keen to categorise art into periods or thematic areas and if we were to categorise, say, AIDS art into particular periods or areas, what would they be in your opinion, given that you've been working for the entire length of the epidemic and probably have a good idea of...

What it would be categorised as?

I mean, since 1996 – the new drug therapies – we're seeing a lot more work dealing with medicines and actually about medicine, the experience of taking meds as well as making art out of medicine, so we could call that – that's a particular period – and it's even a kind of optimistic period. What might be some other periods?

I don't know; I don't really know. You know, I went to a clinical trial at the hospital here and the nurse asked me what I do, and I said I work with my blood [in my art] and she says 'You too? You want me to give you some too?' So evidently a lot of people were asking for their blood. But [pause] I don't know; I guess you could think of it – it was like a war: it's a political art – I mean, art is political; the AIDS stuff is pretty political. I don't

know how to categorise it. A lot of people weren't taking it [i.e. AIDS-related art] seriously either. It was considered a kind of self-pity and – it was just no one wanted to deal with it. And then there was a lot of bad stuff being done too and that's...

Ok, how do you define bad art?

I think you know when you look at it. [Both laugh] No – I just can't stand sentiment – I mean, bad sentimental stuff – I can't stand it and there was a lot of that – a lot of that and it was ughk! And that's why I never did anything. [Also] I didn't know how to deal with this when it happened. I had a boyfriend for 30 years and he died and [pause] I didn't know how to process this whole thing and I wanted – everything I do [i.e. creatively] is about my life in some way or another but this was a real tough issue to [approach] – so I found my way, which was, again, a biting sarcastic way to deal with it, but I didn't want to make pictures of people dying, I mean, I just – I couldn't do that.

When did he die?

He died in '89.

Can I ask when you knew that you were positive?

I was – I was diagnosed in '87, but probably [seroconverted in] '79, 'cause I was hospitalised in '79 and they never knew what it was and now the doctor thinks it was probably seroconversion. 'Cause I had friends who died at that time of Pneumocystis [pneumonia], but they didn't know what it was then, just that they were dying. I don't know what the story is, I don't know why my boyfriend died and I didn't, I – I'm just lucky. But you know, here I am.

You are one of the lucky ones, perhaps.

Of course, it's not your job to know or to try and work out what periods or areas AIDS-related art might fall in to – it's my job – I'm the historian – you just had to make the art. So I was trying to get you to do my work there, I suppose. But what I've noticed at the moment is – there seems to be an absence of art about the recent big blip in seroconversions and new infections. We're not seeing art made about...

You know why? I think a lot of stuff isn't – there was such a negative response – I mean, a lot of artists all of a sudden – and I chose [this as well] – did not want – they were being called 'AIDS artists' and it was such an awful [category] to put someone, you know, 'Oh, he's an AIDS artist' and that's not what you are. I mean, you're an artist and to be called an 'AIDS artist' is, like, ughk! And I think that there was – normally within the people who are making art but also the art [world] – it was kind of like – 'Oh, another one of those AIDS artists' – so I think that people, kind of, [pause] I don't know, they stopped calling it AIDS art. And AIDS art is real loose...

Absolutely.

...it's very loose. [Pause] It doesn't even have to necessarily deal with AIDS to be AIDS art.

Well, I mean, in this country particularly, HIV transmission is as much to do with - especially in the 1980s - with homophobia, political inaction because of homophobia, race and denial of, say, gay men within the black community and all the things like that, so the art dealing with those themes is in itself related to AIDS as well.

Everybody – there are people who know how to take that and how to deal with that and how to transform it into something good and then there are those who can't.

That's bad art?

But, you know, there's always those that can. And that makes it special; but I don't know how to tell you who's who and what's what: you just know.

What about the absence of art about drug use and HIV transmission through shared needles and things like that?

You mean art specifically about that?

Well, art – not specifically about that, but in relation to AIDS. I mean, we're in New York City and the major mode of HIV transmission here, and in the black communities in nearly every city in the U.S., is through sharing needles. Yet most of the art about AIDS that we're seeing is about sex and it's generally still about homosexuality, although we're beginning to get some racial themes as well. But there is hardly anything, from my observation, about needles.

Well, I guess a lot of the artists aren't using needles. [Laughs]

Or if they are, they don't want to talk about it...

I mean, usually, when an artist does something, it's usually pretty personal. But [pause] I've done things with needles, actually I've got a piece here – a junkie – I made a needle out of her ashes. But [pause] I don't know – I live in – I'm not part of the whole – I live very out of the world – does that make any sense? I mean, my life is private, I don't go out there. I mean, I should 'cause I'm on the board of Visual AIDS now and I should know what's going on but I...They just had a benefit – did you hear about it – did Amy talk to you about the CMV retinitis exhibition?

Yes.

That was really interesting – what people did - I mean, and it was loose and big and it really was – a lot of people did great stuff – it was interesting.

Well, I'm going to San Francisco to speak with Elliott Linwood who, I think, won the first prize.

Yes, I've met Elliott.

He's got two shows at the moment in San Francisco.

Yeah, I met Elliott. Nice guy.

You might remember that Bill T. Jones did a dance – *Still/Here* I think it was called – about AIDS at the end of the '80s, early '90s. A dance critic [Arlene Croce] went to see it and, well, actually refused to review it and called it 'victim art'.

Yes, that's – victim art – that was – that's the thing that turns – scares a lot of artists: victim art. Shitty thing to say.

And she said it was beyond criticism. She asked how was she to judge AIDS art – how was she to judge it on aesthetic grounds? Was she to judge it on whether it promoted good politics or bad politics...?

I think, when you look at art, you just have to look at it first of all as art. I mean, all that other stuff can come into it but...I don't think you can look at it and say this is AIDS art – it has to be art first and then all that other stuff comes in.

Work from there.

OK, we've been talking about your experience as a creator of art. But what's been your experience as a consumer of art and maybe art to do with AIDS-related themes? I mean, can you remember any particular instances of seeing a piece – this can be visual art, this could be film, drama, plays, dance, anything... Did it make you feel or think differently about the epidemic, that maybe made you change the way you're living your life, the way that you saw your responsibilities and things like that?

Nothing made me think – I mean, nothing ever changed my life. [Pause] Maybe the way I see things, but not change my life – there are certain artists who have done AIDS art that I've absolutely loved – I have one down there [pointing to a table], Eric Rhein, is he down there?

Is this the outline, the bird?

The bird, yeah that's it. You know Eric Rhein?

No, I don't.

He's with Visual AIDS – he makes – he made a bird aviary for everyone who died of AIDS – he's a good artist and that's his. I have art...what made me change? I'm interested in primitive art, that's my passion, and [pause] I have a lot of stuff that deals with superstition and healing – juju that's...

Who else can you say you admired – you were talking about this fellow here – who else, within the, say, the American arts community?

Well – the vodka’s hitting me –what’s his name? Felix Gonzalez-Torres. [Pause] Keith Haring, yeah...

Did you know Keith?

I’ve met him but I didn’t know him personally...but [pause] who else? Mapple – no Mapplethorpe – we had the same nurse. [Both laughs] But [pause] who? You mean what AIDS artists – what was the question?

Well, my first question was what kinds of AIDS artworks and artists have affected you so that it’s made you think differently about the epidemic or differently about the...

Not differently about the – nothing, it just makes me see things. It’s nice to see someone do something nice with the subject that’s not corny.

Yeah, that’s not corny and sentimental.

Yeah. And I have seen a lot of that. Yeah. But I like Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s work a lot.

I was in Chicago a couple of days ago and they’ve got a couple of his pieces in the Art Institute there, and still you could see people just stopping at the light bulbs with the lines and things like that – people would stop and think about it. If you know anything about his background, those light bulbs slowly dimming out, it is a really poignant piece.

David Wojnarowicz: that’s another one. I’m thinking of people that I think are really [pause] good – where their work is about AIDS but it’s about more than AIDS. I mean, it can’t just be about AIDS, its...

All those people you’ve named were all working and died, I think, in the 1980s, as well. So, is that a statement to say...

It gives my age away. [Both laugh] [Pause] I don’t know, most of my – people of my age are dead. I mean, and the young people don’t really [understand] it now, but all the people from my period are gone. I mean, when I was going dating, I mean, they were either real young or real old – there was nobody around...

Well, you’ve got a lot of tiles there. [Each tile, collected in a bowl, represents a friend who died from AIDS]

Well these are all my friends, yeah, [pause] so what do I do? I go find a kid. [Both laugh]

Ah, show him the ropes. Ok, I’ve got two more questions, two major ones that I want on tape anyway. What do you think has been the long term influence of activist groups like ACT UP and Grand Fury and the images that they created? Do you think they had an impact on the art that either you’ve created or that other people have created?

Oh, I think it's great. I love the – I like political posters, you know, like even the stuff from the Czechs and all the stuff they did against the [Communist] government – I'm very interested in that. I loved some of the Happenings – my friend Sean was with ACT UP and he went on the roof of Jesse Helm's house and put a huge condom over his chimney.

Really?

And got arrested [Paul laughs]. I mean, I've gone to a couple – I'm kind of a home body but I've gone to a couple of ACT UP things. I remember one – I went with Sean – it was freezing and we went down to Wall Street to demonstrate against the high cost of drugs and they slapped a sign on me that said 'Agouron [Pharmaceuticals] is ripping us off' and I thought, 'Shit, I'm on [this stuff] – they're giving me the medicines for free!' and I'm walking with this sign. [Both laugh]

Is that because you were on the trial?

I was on a trial. So, they [ACT UP] had a mask that said 'Wall Street fat guys' and I said, 'Give me one of those' [Paul laughs]. So I put the mask on and we're walking down and all the police were like this [Barton gestures] and Sean says, 'So are you gonna get arrested?' and I said, 'I don't think so' and he says, 'Well, I am' and I said, 'Well, I'll see you later'. Then I went up to the cop – I was so cold – I had an appointment at the hospital – I said 'How do I get to' – I was down Wall Street – I said 'How do I get to Fourteenth Street and Seventh Avenue?' – wearing this mask – and he says, 'Go down there' and he gave me the – he was being a bastard – he gave me the wrong subway. So I finally got to the hospital – it was a psychiatrist I was seeing at the hospital – and I said 'I decided not to get arrested and come here' and he said 'Well, you're getting better' [Both laughs]. But no – I think ACT UP is fantastic. [Pause] I mean, I came a little bit after ACT UP, I was a little older than that group. But I'm very interested in [them] – I appreciate what they've done. And Grand Fury, I knew people from Grand Fury.

That's Don Moffatt and Marlene McCartney, I think?

One guy I knew, well, he died, what was his name? We were friends, I can't – I'm hopeless at this stuff.

That's all right.

It doesn't matter.

Have you made a Quilt panel for somebody? And have you ever viewed the Quilt?

I have – I actually hated the Quilt when it first [came] – I hated it because of the whole thing, it was sentimental and some of those things were soooooo corny, but you know, when you see it [pause] – it doesn't matter that it's corny – it's like real raw emotion. I was bawling when I saw it. My boyfriend said he didn't want to be a panel so I didn't make him a panel [both laugh]. But a friend of mine wanted to be – a friend of mine said she wanted me to make a panel for a friend called Jerry, so she says 'I'll give you Sean

Penn's suit that he wore in *Colours* if you make a panel' [Paul laughs]. So I cut out Sean Penn's fly from the suit and glued it on a piece...

Great!

...and I made a panel – I made one panel for the Quilt. But [pause] it's pretty powerful, I mean, as much as I put it down, it is [pause] – you can not walk through that Quilt without – no matter how hard you are or whatever, how jaded you are, you can't. And I'll never forget Bush, when the Quilt was in Washington D.C., and he never – it was right there – and he never went out to look at it and I thought 'I hate this man!' I didn't think I could hate anyone more than him until – his son is the President. [Both laugh] What an awful – and then Reagan – that son of a bitch – I blame him for the spread of the disease. I think he didn't do anything, he didn't say the word ['AIDS' or 'condoms'] and we didn't know about it. If that word would have gotten out about safe sex and stuff, a lot of this would've been different – but then he didn't allow foetal research for Alzheimer's either so I thought, 'Well, fuck you! Suffer!' [Both laugh]

You recently had the television series here, didn't you, called 'The Reagans' and there was controversy because they depicted him as this person who ignored AIDS...

Yeah, he did ignore AIDS, he did. He's a fucking asshole.

You'd be very interested then in Australia's response – and this is what I wrote the book about. I mean, our epidemic sort of started 18 months after yours and we had a chance to have a look at what was happening in America and do things as opposite, I suppose, as we possibly could. But we also had a very enlightened health minister, we had – our prime minister, who's sort of like your President – was a beer drinking...

The one who's there now?

No, no, he's not there now, he was out by 1992, but in the 1980s, when he was developing AIDS policy, he was a womanising, big heterosexual, beer-drinking sort of guy but he had this health minister in whom he bestowed an awful lot of trust, a guy called Neal Blewett, who had some homosexuals within his staff – he's since identified as a homosexual himself, he didn't at the time, he had a wife and a couple of kids – and they developed very enlightened AIDS policy. We had condoms promoted on television at 7:30 at night, you know, in 1987, mass media sort of stuff. They funded community-based organizations of gay men, sex workers, drug users to go and do education within their communities; needle syringe exchange programs by 1987...

I love it how they say sex workers now. I mean everything's so – it used to be whores.

Whores, hoes... [Both laugh]

No, no, it's fine; it's just, now it's transgender... [Both laugh]

Well, I went down a couple of years ago, I went and interviewed some people at the Prostitute's Collective of Victoria and before we started the interview I got a ten minute lecture about how it's *sex work* and it's not prostitution and it's not this and it's not that, so it got drummed into me. So anyway, I know a bit about Reagan and what happened over here and it's, it is, it's an indictment...

It's – and he's – yeah, he's a creep. Major creep. I do blame him and I think – I think he's got his due.

He's got what he deserved. All right, I suppose my last thing is – we talked a little bit before about feedback that you've got about your work – I just wonder if anyone's ever – if you've ever collected any visitor's comments books from exhibitions that you've staged?

Yeah, I actually – when I had a show, that show in England they sent me all the – people wrote in the book – they sent me all the – I could send it to you, 'cause I have to dig for it.

I would absolutely love you to; that would be great.

But I have all the comments that people wrote about the...

Do you ever get letters from people, commenting about your art?

Yeah, all the time. I get – but it's usually people who – most of the time it's very positive; I don't get a lot of negative stuff. Some religious nuts now and then. I had a show at Hope College, it was a show about AIDS and I had a crown of thorns made out of someone's ashes and some crazy religious lady wrote me this letter, I don't know what the hell she was talking about it, it was like 'Get on your knees and repent.' [Both laugh] But, you know, I get...



Barton Lidice Beneš, *Crown of Thorns*, cast cremated remains of John Fuson, 1999.

What did you expect? If you're making a crown of thorns out of – this is the symbol that was put on Jesus' head as he's taken off to the crucifixion...

It's funny you know, I just make – I live in a very – my world is a very [pause] insulated, is that the right word? I just don't know. I just do what I please and I sometimes – and then I think, 'Oh my God, someone's shocked by this?' But none of – my circle of friends are really open minded and pretty cool so I'm always amazed when [people get upset with my art]. I know it [i.e. narrow-mindedness] is out there, I know they're all crazy. I feel fortunate living where I do in New York and in this building, but when you leave Manhattan, it's scary lands, it's really scary lands.

[Laughs] Ok, can you think of any other AIDS related pieces that you've done that we haven't talked about that we should probably talk about – I've got a – I had some pictures here...

Oh let me just – I have some of those pieces in the back, I have a lot of pill stuff.

That's from the...

One of Madonna's panties? [Laughs at picture – Barton has used Madonna's panties in one of his 'Museums']

Oh, I just had those 'cause I thought, yeah, that's a great find.

[Sound of ruffling pages]

That's *The Pacifier*.

This – you know – when I had to get the lawyer in Sweden to represent me in court – I couldn't afford a lawyer at that time – so I said 'Can I give – how can I pay you?' and she said 'Just pay me with your blood'. So I gave her this bottle of blood. I paid a lawyer with a bottle of my blood. That's that piece actually.

Oh my God! Now, what sort of bottle is that?

A holy water bottle.

It's a holy water bottle, yeah. [Both laugh]

And, you know, Sweden's so clean and neat, and there she had it in this neat and clean living room, right over the fireplace, this blood. [Both laugh]

So you've exhibited a few times in Sweden...

A lot.

So what, North Dakota and Sweden, you've got this...

Oh, I show in Finland...

Cold places.

Switzerland, Portugal – I have galleries that show me around the world. For some reason I make a better living overseas – I mean, I sell my art here, but I sell much better in Europe because there's not that – people are interested in art – here, a lot of them are interested in fashion. I had a great show – I had a show in Switzerland and it was fantastic. [More ruffling pages – Paul and Barton looking through images of his work] And this one I sold – she has my blood in there.

Yeah - what we're looking at here is the shrine picture...

She's made out of dollars

Made out of dollars.



Barton Lidice Beneš, *Shrine*, mixed media with US dollars and HIV+ blood, 1994.

I have colour slides of all these things if you ever need them. I put a bottle of my blood in there and there's that thing in Naples where they bring the blood out and if it's liquid it's gonna be a good year and if it's dry it's not. Anyhow, I sold this piece – you know Carroll O'Connor, *Archie Bunker*, the TV show? You don't get that?

No.

Oh, his wife bought it. But anyhow, she's a dollar.

It looks like – I've written there – it looks like a condom, the...

This is a glass – a glass dome – what looks like a condom?

This little thing here, like the outside rim of one.

Oh...

An unrolled one, yeah. [Laughs]

It's actually a gold frame with a little, a little bottle inside. These things are actually Egyptian, they're actually old Egyptian mummy beads, then I used AZT – I did a whole bunch of these things.

So the mummy – the idea being that trying to ward off evil spirits, infection and...

Yeah. It's a talisman.

Talisman, yeah

If you ever need pictures, I've got pictures of a lot of AIDS images.

Thank you.

I could get those to you. Just give me your address and I can mail you those things from the – from the things that people said.

That would be really brilliant because...

And the newspaper articles. Jesus! I mean – shocking! I mean, the tabloids in England. And then Boy George opened the show and the paper in Australia actually wrote about that – the paper in Australia – I forget which paper it was – it says, 'This time Boy George goes too far'. [Laughs]

This time? [Laughs]

But, yeah. The blood got a lot of – a lot of – and it freaked me out, I was nervous and what was happening – of course it actually did good for me and made my work sell and everything but I was scared. I was freaking out.

What could've happened to you?

I don't know. I mean, the customs people decided not to press charges – lying on customs forms – I don't know what they could've done but I hadn't told my family about my health status and it was all over the place – it was on CNN – so I decided I gotta go

down and tell my – tell them the whole business, which was actually very good, I had to do it and it was the time. So it was a catalyst for that but...

And this is 1994?

Yeah. Can you imagine I waited that long?

Jesus, yeah, that's seven years.

I remember the doctors said to me, she said, 'What does she [your mother] think Howard had?' she says, 'What'd she think, you were roommates?' [Both laugh] And I said, 'Yeah', I said...

What, you hadn't told them that you...

I hadn't told them anything.

Really? So you hadn't told that you're gay or...

Nothing. Not that they didn't know. I mean, they knew it when I told them. My brother said they knew all along, but I didn't know that they knew.

And so you're worried with the scandal in Sweden that it would've been taken out of your control?

When I told my mother, you know, she's an old lady, I thought, 'Shit, she's gonna have a heart attack' and I said, 'Sit down' and I told her and first thing she said, she says, 'Well, what symptoms do you have?' It blew me away; like, she was that smart. And then she said, 'Howard had AIDS, didn't he?' – Howard was my boyfriend – and I said, 'Yeah, how did you know?' and she says, 'You know, I'm not stupid' so it's...[Both laugh]

You said she was 80 – 85?

At that time – now she's 93 so she was whatever she was back then.

And Howard was your boyfriend for 30 years?

Yeah.

You mentioned Sean before. Who was Sean?

He's the publisher of *Poz* magazine. Do you know *Poz* magazine?

I do, yeah.

He's a...

So he's a friend of yours?

Oh yeah, he's a very good friend of mine, yeah. When did I mention Sean, what did I – how'd I mention him?

[Pause] I can't remember, but he's mentioned a few times. [Sean was mentioned during the discussion of the ACT UP demonstration.]

He's a good friend. Look, maybe he's someone you should talk to but you're probably all...

I'm pretty booked up but if anything, sort of, comes up in the schedule then I can...

I'll give you his email. He lives in Pennsylvania but he also comes to New York a lot, he has a place here, so he's back and forth and he'd be good to talk to. He's probably going to be on the board at Visual AIDS, I gave his name and so they'll probably take him.

Yeah. Well, have you had much contact with people like Tom Sokolowski or Robert Atkins or...

I've met [Tom Sokolowski] – he's written about me – he actually put me in a show – he used to be at NYU before he went to the Warhol museum. Yeah [pause] I know who he is.

I'm hopefully going to speak with him as well.

He's a good person.

I'm meeting Robert Atkins in...

Robert Atkins, how come I know...?

He started Visual AIDS with Tom and two other fellows, Bill Oleander and another fellow.

I don't know him.

And he writes – he writes about AIDS related art. I think he was editor of 'Artery', which is an internet 'AIDS art' forum.

But it sounds like you've got every – you've got pretty much – everything pretty covered – the people you're gonna be meeting.

Yeah, I hope so. I mean, as I said, I can't come back and do follow-ups so I have to try and cover...

You can do follow-ups on email.

Yeah, a question or two on the email. It would be absolutely terrific though if, like I said, that feedback that you've received about your work – if I could get copies of that...

Let me go, let me go have another pee then I'll see if I can go dig it out.

And I'll turn this off as well. Thanks.

[End of interview]

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