



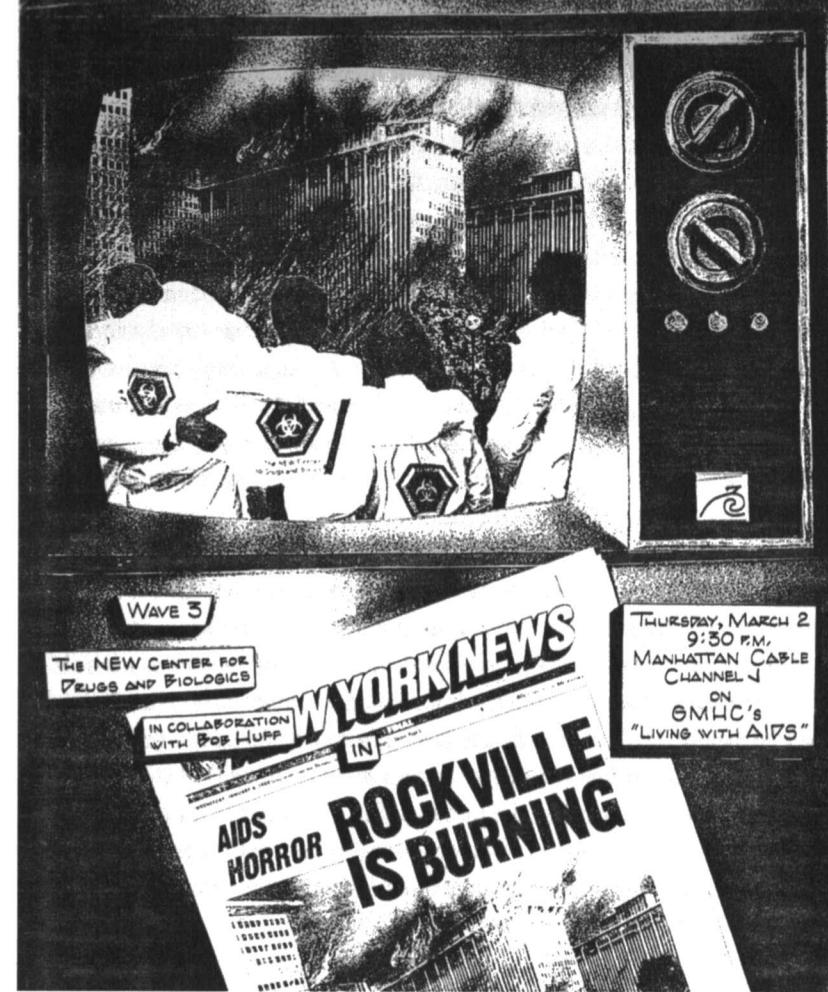
## CHAPTER TWO

The Embodied Immediacy  
of Direct Action:  
Space and Movement in  
AIDS Video Activism

On 22 January 1991, the writer and AIDS activist John Weir jumped in front of the camera at the beginning of the CBS Evening News, shouting “AIDS is news. Fight AIDS, not Arabs!” (figure 16). As Weir’s head was yanked from the frame by studio security, a surprised but generally unflappable Dan Rather immediately cut to a commercial break. Rather apologized dourly after the break for the “rude people” who had interrupted the beginning of the program and promised to return to the network’s coverage of the Gulf War. That night, the eve of ACT UP’s Day of Desperation, a massive nationwide demonstration against the continued neglect of the AIDS crisis, fourteen of the group’s members were arrested as they tried to disrupt the broadcast of the news programs of CBS, NBC, and PBS.<sup>1</sup>



16. Frame capture from *Voices from the Front* (Testing the Limits, 1991).



17. Photocopied flyer for *Rockville Is Burning* (Bob Huff and Wave 3, 1989). Phil Zwickler Collection, no. 7464. Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

The commitment to interrogate and challenge the discursive operations of broadcast news runs through AIDS activist video production from the 1980s and 1990s. Understanding the considerable ideological power of television news in shaping the representation of the AIDS epidemic, video activists created diverse means to appropriate, parody, and analyze the mechanisms of television news, particularly its reliance on the talking head. In their radical transformation of the discursive space in which activists and people with HIV/AIDS could speak, videos produced in the culture of ACT UP smashed the liberal pieties of “giving a face” and “giving a voice” to the person with HIV/AIDS. In fact, they often demonstrated how such seemingly affirmative

goals were undoubtedly implicated in keeping people in their ideologically predetermined roles. In this chapter I examine how AIDS activist video production in ACT UP/New York sought to transform discursive space along two simultaneous lines.<sup>3</sup> Like the action at CBS Evening News, one part pursued an intervention in the dominant media representation of the epidemic, while the other part, like *Rockville Is Burning*, aimed to participate in the lesbian and gay counterpublic and the networks that supported the social movement of

AIDS activism.<sup>4</sup> A number of videos, including Robert Hilferty's *Stop the Church* (1990) and *Voices from the Front* (1992) by the video collective Testing the Limits, were produced and distributed with both lines of interventions in mind. Yet all of them grappled with the challenge of reconfiguring the possibilities of the talking head as the means to forge a discursive space in which effective political testimony could be enacted.

Nowhere is the contrast between the honorific and the repressive functions of the talking head, which I outlined in the previous chapter, more apparent than in news broadcasting, which has arguably been the most important medium for shaping the dominant public perception of AIDS in the United States. News anchors sit at the apex of a discursive hierarchy; they are, in Robert Stam's words, "symbolic figures who will keep us from going adrift on a stormy sea of significations."<sup>5</sup> Speaking straight into the camera, the news anchor performs the pseudointimacy of television's direct address, which simulates face-to-face communication. This invocation of the face-to-face situation in the discursive address of television news lends it both authority and intimacy. Television news frames its anchor within a set of reality effects that simulate both the temporal and the spatial sense of presence necessary for a simulated face-to-face encounter. "The telecaster is not here," explains Margaret Morse, "but the impression of presence is created through the construction of a shared space, the impression of shared time, and signs that the speaking subject is speaking for himself, sincerely."<sup>6</sup> Using the teleprompter, the anchor reads the news as if it were not read, as if it were the spontaneous utterance of a speaker in conversation, which produces a sense of the broadcast's liveness and an impression of the anchor's discursive authority.

The anchor, most often male, plays a sovereign role in the discursive construction of the news as he seemingly summons the heterogeneous elements of the news program: on-site correspondents, interviews, and news footage. With a glance to the side that frequently precedes a correspondent's report, the anchor sutures the shift in discourse as though he were in spatial proximity to the reporter, yet also paradoxically invoking a movement in perspective to the correspondent in the world "out there." In fact, broadcast news relies on the discursive construction of a studio-bound "here" (correlated with a predominantly home-bound viewer) and a world out "there."<sup>7</sup> As a talking head, the anchor has his discursive sovereignty rest in his ability to situate the other talking heads that make up the news program, marshaling them as evidence in his narration of significant events. The correspondents are necessarily situated in the particular geographical or social location of

the news event, but ultimately their enunciation is not defined by that situateness. They will stand outside that location to speak (in at least part of the report) either through voice-over narration or the convention of the stand-up. The stand-up situates them in front of the particular location—away from it while simultaneously borrowing from its indexical presence—but speaking in direct address to the camera and thus affecting a pseudoconversation with the anchor.<sup>8</sup>

#### Containing "Them" out "There"

The history of AIDS representation in broadcast news demonstrates the pervasiveness of these spatialized power relations around the talking head, and nowhere was this more apparent than in the U.S. television coverage of the epidemic in its first decade. Unlike newspapers that picked up on the initial Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report in June 1981 of a rare pneumonia affecting gay men, television news media did not begin to cover AIDS until a full year later. Television's attention to AIDS reflected neither the empirical indicators of the epidemic's development nor the professional concern with AIDS.<sup>9</sup> Compared to the steady rise in AIDS cases reported by the CDC throughout the 1980s and the simultaneous growth of medi-

cal literature on AIDS, television news coverage remained unstable, peaking sporadically in 1983, 1985, and 1987, during periods of public alarm over the potential threat of AIDS to the so-called general population. Moreover, news media proved highly reticent in the early years of the epidemic in reporting a subject that mixed references to blood, semen, sex and death, which might offend the norms of taste for its presumed audience: the middle-class family. Gay men were deemed outside this all-important category. Thus the news media tended either to ignore AIDS stories or present them in the reassuring terms of a threat contained in several highly marginalized groups (including homosexuals, Haitians, intravenous drug users, and hemophiliacs). Such containment involved the discursive delineation of boundaries, in which the normative healthy center of the general population is maintained through the separation and abjection of an infected margin. In his explanation of this spatialized othering process, Simon Watney contends that the discourses of containment in mainstream news media during the 1980s participated in the neoconservative project of reducing the social to the scale of the family, which would subsequently function as its "monolithic and legally binding category."<sup>10</sup> By understanding the social solely in terms of the family, governments could ignore the needs of gay men who, like other affected groups, were considered outside the social.

But containment always carries the feared risk of leakage and even collapse. These fears are precisely what fueled the three principal periods of media hysteria over AIDS: the initial "epidemic of fear" in 1983, the disclosure of Rock Hudson's illness in 1985, and the panic over "heterosexual AIDS" in 1987. In 1983 news media began to report on an "epidemic of fear" around AIDS, covering stories of the potential threat caused by AIDS to social institutions such as prisons, schools, and hospitals. In what would set a precedent for future periods of intense media attention to AIDS, reports adopted the common "alarm and reassurance pattern" used by news media to cover ongoing crises. News reports would provoke alarm by focusing on the spreading fear, often including interviews with "ordinary" citizens who frequently offered misleading information about the risks around AIDS. The reporter would then offer reassurance, often in the tag line, that the threat of contamination from the abjected margins was still contained. Rather than mitigate and dispel fear and ignorance about AIDS, such television news reports actually increased them.

The disclosure of Hudson's AIDS-related illness in 1985 led to the second period of media hysteria around the epidemic. His illness proved a pivotal moment in AIDS media representation, but not for its presumed effect on his

friend, President Ronald Reagan, who would not utter the "A-word" in public for another two years. Since Hudson's image had long been a staple of rugged but clean-cut American masculinity, his star persona after the disclosure of his illness was haunted by a doubling effect as he came to embody the dangers to the normal body posed by the contagion of homosexuality, rendering it an abnormal and sick "anti-body."<sup>11</sup> The long discursive history of homosexuality as itself a contagion, continually haunting and threatening the healthy social body, resurfaced with a vengeance during the months following Hudson's hospitalization in Paris. The inert weight of his star persona produced, however, a complex set of contradictions around the reporting on his illness. Even the most lurid and sensational tabloid coverage was marked by a defensive mixture of sympathy and fear. The event of Hudson's illness finally lent AIDS a certain legitimacy as a newsworthy issue. For a brief period around Hudson's illness, gay men living with AIDS and lesbian and gay activists were given opportunities in interviews, albeit limited ones, to speak their concerns and articulate perspectives outside the heteronormative general population.

The third and most intense period of media hysteria erupted in 1987 when rising infection rates among nonmarginalized groups became unavoidably visible in the monthly figures produced by the CDC. An inadvertent comment by Rather during a CBS News Special entitled "AIDS Hits Home" and broadcast on 22 October 1986 explicitly demonstrates the subtext of media discourse that would explode in the following year: "The scary reality is that gays are no longer the only ones getting it." The epidemic of fear returned as file footage of gay men was replaced by footage of the general population, whose prophylactic normality had now been penetrated by its diseased margins. Although these new visual discourses swirled around the fear of an unseen heterosexual threat, such invisibility was haunted by the shadow archive of the diseased antibody, figured in the dying homosexual in his hospital bed and the prostitute soliciting on the street at night. The intense media coverage finally pushed Reagan to make his first public statement on AIDS in April 1987. As both political and media elites began to address AIDS in that year, it finally gained a regular place on the public policy agenda.

Although the following decade saw the diversification of AIDS representation into other areas of television programming, broadcast news continued to maintain the binaries established in the first decade of the AIDS epidemic.<sup>12</sup> Kevin B. Wright's analysis of AIDS coverage on *Nightline* (ABC) and *The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour* (PBS) from 1992–94 demonstrates how these agenda-setting news elites persisted in excluding or marginalizing those people and communities most affected by AIDS.<sup>13</sup> The shadow archive that

distinguished body from antibody continued to be produced in the studio forums that these media programs favor. Inscribed by an ideology of “balance” rooted in the liberal construction of the public sphere, studio forums become the valorized space of public discussion, lending credibility to the discourse of their guests. Wright points to a tendency to exclude community activists and people with AIDS from the studio discussions altogether, or, if they were invited, to restrict their opportunity to speak. Frequently, when activists or PWAs were included in the program, they were shown in video footage speaking at demonstrations. At best, such inclusion in debate positioned their perspectives as out there (on the street), outside the “true” public sphere for “rational” debate (in the television studio); at worst, this footage continued to position gay men and people with AIDS as a dangerous (and highly politicized) volatile mass threatening public order. Such protracted exclusion from the dominant media discussion of the epidemic would prove a decisive incentive for the production of alternative AIDS media.

#### The Alternative Space of Direct-Action Video

Responses to the mainstream representation of AIDS began to emerge in the mid-1980s as community organizations involved in AIDS prevention and support services for people with AIDS began to organize the production of alternative media for their specific pedagogic functions. For these videos to successfully fulfill their intent of imparting vital information about prevention and caregiving, they were first compelled to unpack many of the ideological assumptions about AIDS produced by the dominant media. They needed to present affirmative counterimages of people with AIDS, whose lives and identities were neither to be reduced to pathology nor to be confined merely to the context of their illness. Independent queer film- and videomakers followed suit in the subsequent years with a mixture of portrait pieces documenting the courageous struggle of people with AIDS—such as Chuck Solomon: *Coming of Age* (Mark Huestis and Wendy Dallas, 1986), *Living with AIDS* (Tina DiFeliciantonio, 1986), and *Hero of My Own Life* (Tom Brook, 1986)—and experimental works aimed at deconstructing the discourses of AIDS in the mainstream media, including Stuart Marshall’s *Bright Eyes*, Emjay Wilson’s *A Plague Has Swept My City* (1985), and Barbara Hammer’s *Snow Job: The Media Hysteria of AIDS* (1986), and Bob Huff’s *AIDS News: A Demonstration* (1988).<sup>14</sup>

In March 1987, at the height of the third wave of media hysteria around AIDS and amid the anger generated among lesbian and gay communities

by the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Bowers vs. Hardwick* to uphold state sodomy statutes, the establishment of ACT UP in New York triggered a major transformation in alternative AIDS media.<sup>15</sup> The group defined itself as “a diverse, non-partisan group united in anger and committed to direct action to end the AIDS crisis.”<sup>16</sup> By shifting from the mobilization of public demonstrations to the practice of direct action, in which specific institutional bodies were directly confronted to demand change, ACT UP radicalized and widened AIDS activism from its initial base in PWA groups, who had begun to stage marches, candlelight vigils, and other public memorials as early as 1983. Following Cindy Patton’s account of AIDS politics in the early 1980s, David Román argues that it is vitally important that early AIDS activism not be forgotten or dismissed by revisionist historical analysis that privileges the establishment of ACT UP as the “real” beginning of AIDS activism. While I concur with Román and Patton on this point, this chapter will address the activism around ACT UP, since it marks the first major convergence of direct action and video activism in the context of AIDS.<sup>17</sup>

Like so many other grass-roots AIDS organizations, ACT UP was formed and organized predominantly by gay men and lesbians. However, in its desire to forge a broad-based inclusive movement, the group often oscillated in its negotiation of the complex connections between AIDS and homosexuality. As the sociologist Josh Gamson notes in his analysis of ACT UP/San Francisco’s activities, “AIDS activists find themselves simultaneously attempting to dispel the notion that AIDS is a gay disease (which it is not) while, through their activity and leadership, treating AIDS as a gay problem (which, among other things, it is).”<sup>18</sup> Many ACT UPers came to AIDS activism from lesbian and gay politics and thus saw ACT UP as an urgent and necessary development of lesbian and gay activism, whereas others, especially women, came also from the context of reproductive rights and women’s health movements, leading them to understand AIDS politics within a larger framework of healthcare issues, which eventually brought many of them into conflict with the gay male activists focused primarily on treatment access.<sup>19</sup> Influenced by the media expertise of an initial core membership that included artists, designers, and media professionals, ACT UP adopted an activist practice grounded in the exploitation of media spectacle and graphic publicity.<sup>20</sup> The group was not only professionally but also theoretically informed as its practice drew from various intellectual sources, ranging from popular culture to situationism and postmodernism.<sup>21</sup>

AIDS activist video practice emerged from the need felt by a number of individuals and newly formed video collectives, namely Testing the Limits

and DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activists), to document and disseminate the explosion in AIDS activism through alternative forms of media production and circulation.<sup>22</sup> Like other affinity groups in ACT UP, these video collectives operated relatively autonomously within the movement. They insisted on maintaining a fluid, process-oriented method of production that balanced the freedom of individual videomakers to choose how they shot their footage with the collective decision making of the editing process.<sup>23</sup> Despite some initial resistance and skepticism from fellow ACT UP members who were most concerned with getting attention from the mainstream media, video activists like Gregg Bordowitz firmly understood their practice as a form of direct action itself. Bordowitz and David Meieran saw themselves as the “Dziga Vertovs of our revolution,” videomakers whose media production formed part of the revolutionary process, not merely of its post facto representation.<sup>24</sup> Bordowitz has argued that “it became clear that the production of documentary overlaps with the efforts of political organizing. In order to tear down the structures that house the ‘public discussion’ of AIDS, we have to build alternative structures.”<sup>25</sup>

The video activism around ACT UP was influenced by a wide range of developments in politically engaged media over the previous thirty years. In summarizing these influences, Alexandra Juhasz argues that they all revolved around an opposition to dominant media production and circulation, stressing “the significance of self-expression, the politics of self-definition, the power of speaking ‘in our own voices.’”<sup>26</sup> The major influences on AIDS video activism included the decolonizing culture of Third Cinema, the community circulation of the American Underground Cinema, the reflexive turn in recent ethnographic film, the identity politics of feminist and lesbian and gay film, and the developing infrastructure of alternative television. Technological innovation in film and video have of course contributed significantly to all these movements, but the major developments in video technology in the 1980s with the so-called camcorder revolution played a particularly crucial role in facilitating new movements of media activism. The increased access to media production and circulation provided by the cheap technologies of the camcorder and the VCR revitalized alternative television practices after the waning fortunes of guerilla television during the late 1970s.<sup>27</sup> AIDS video activists also found creative ways of accessing production resources, from exploiting the professional media facilities available to a number of them at their jobs to buying expensive new cameras, shooting protests, and then returning the cameras for a refund. Veteran videomakers like Dee Dee Halleck, an important member of the influential Paper Tiger media collective, also

provided the experiential bridge to the younger generation of video activists, urging them to constitute their intervention through the production of videos for targeted audiences and with specific purposes in mind. This type of intervention thus required using alternative modes of circulation, rather than aspiring to break into the distribution structure of dominant media (207).

The videomakers involved in Testing the Limits and DIVA TV understood their practice in terms of three primary functions: to produce their own news service that could distribute coverage of actions within activist communities and to progressive independent media outlets; to generate their own archive so that communities affected by the epidemic would not need to rely on commercial news services to write their own history in the future; and to serve as a video witness whose presence might guard against any police misconduct or abuse.<sup>28</sup> These functions articulate three different manifestations of bearing witness: to facilitate the testimony of the internal witness addressed to others affected for the purpose of affirmation and empowerment; to generate testimony and evidence dedicated to future collective memory; and to serve as an eyewitness or external witness in the juridical sense.

Since alternative AIDS media engendered a set of practices as diverse as AIDS activism itself, an examination of the video practices connected to ACT UP requires a more specific term than AIDS activist video, which appropriately encompasses a wide range of media production, including works dedicated to HIV prevention, civil rights advocacy, community outreach, and self-health promotion. I have therefore chosen to name the body of videos analyzed in this chapter “direct-action videos,” as they are all engaged in some form of representational practice around the direct-action practices of ACT UP. Moreover, their makers understood such video production as itself a form of direct action, not merely as its audiovisual documentation. Although each of the direct-action videos bears its own specific visual and rhetorical logic, all of them demonstrate a sustained critical engagement with the media convention of the talking head. Most significantly, these videos adopt a striking proliferation of talking heads. They introduce many more speaking subjects than are commonly employed in contemporary documentary practice. We see a great variety of speakers in terms of sex, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, and profession speaking in a wide array of registers and framed in a number of different situations (e.g., interviews in offices and at demonstrations, discussions at the Monday night meeting of ACT UP/New York, and speeches and addresses recorded at public events and actions).

On a general level, this multiplication of voices produced two effects crucial to the project of AIDS activism. First, it decentered authority and dis-

persed it among the numerous speaking subjects. This decentering of authority is also reflected in the collective authorship of many of the works. Embodying the radical democratic and anarchist ethos of ACT UP and its organization, direct-action video resisted the hierarchical structures of broadcast news and television documentary, which use anchors, presenters, reporters, and omniscient off-screen narrators to structure and frame the speech and events recorded by the camera. It also rejected the more subtle use of talking heads as “part characters, part presenters,” which John Corner sees as a major strategy of discursive organization in contemporary documentary practice, where the film or program continually returns to a particular set of interviewees who gradually become both characters and presenters.<sup>29</sup> Second, the very proliferation of subjects given the opportunity to articulate their perspectives, expertise, and opinions constructed an image of emergent community that remained vitally important as a counterimage to the phobic iconography of dominant representation, which consistently framed PWAs in isolation and outside their social contexts (either alone in hospital beds or returned to the fold of the nuclear family). Moreover, these videos offered the opportunity for people affected by the epidemic to recognize their relation to others also affected. *Testing the Limits*, for instance, produced its very first video called *Testing the Limits: NYC* (1987) precisely to connect disparate groups and constituencies affected by AIDS. As Bordowitz declared: “Video puts into play the means of recognizing one’s place within the movement in relation to that of others in the movement. . . . The most significant challenge to the movement is coalition building, because the AIDS epidemic has engendered a community of people who cannot afford not to recognize themselves as a community and to act as one.”<sup>30</sup> To ensure the collectivism of their first project, *Testing the Limits* determined each edit of the video through a consensus decision among the group.

In their emphasis on community building and the articulation of empowering relations between people directly affected by AIDS, these videos refused the structures of address that the dominant representation of AIDS, particularly in broadcast news, had maintained, where the audience is constructed as an exclusionary general population. The activists who constitute the vast majority of speakers in direct-action video are invariably presented in such a way that their speech can be understood as a direct address to those most affected by the epidemic. Activists are therefore framed in two predominant speaking positions. Much of the footage captures their speech in the context of a group meeting or action where they are seen addressing other activists and people assembled in public spaces. The camera frequently



18. Frame capture from *Voices from the Front* (*Testing the Limits*, 1991).

cuts from this observational mode to a more interactive mode where activists speak directly to the camera, often right in the middle of an action, demonstration, or meeting (figure 18). Patricia Zimmermann argues that this latter mode of framing activist speech is not interactive in the traditional documentary sense that can be traced back to *cinéma vérité* and the ethos of Jean Rouch’s *Chronicle of a Summer* (1960). Rather than privilege the camera as the epicenter of action, out of which political confrontation and articulation are produced, “these works figure cameras and representations as social and political actors together with the subject.”<sup>31</sup> In direct-action videos, the camera is seen to work alongside politicized subjects who clearly need neither the provocation of the camera’s presence nor the inquiry of a media reporter to enable and generate their testimony.

Many of the activists interviewed in these tapes speak directly into the camera lens, which differentiates their testimony from the structures of address normally used in media interviews, in which the speaker’s address is mediated through his or her implied conversation with an interviewer who stands alongside the camera. Compelling the speaker’s line of vision to be directed either slightly to the left or to the right of the camera, such indirect address to a media audience facilitates the containment of minority speech through the regulated discursive space of conventional documentary and news forms. In other words, the subject’s speech is mediated through his or her discursive and spatial relations to a reporter, interviewer, or news anchor. However, the presentation of many speakers in direct address to the

camera in direct-action video occurs, I would argue, for two reasons. First, most activists interviewed adhere to their media training in ACT UP, which stressed the need to bypass or neutralize the mediation of the mass media machine as much as possible. As the activist and former network television producer Ann Northrop is heard reiterating at one point in *Stop the Church*: "Not to the media, but through the media!" Direct address was understood in ACT UP and its video collectives as itself a manifestation of the direct-action ethos. The second reason for this prominent use of direct address would seem to stem from more practical considerations. Videomakers recording demonstrations frequently found themselves to be the ones holding the camera and asking the questions of the activists they encountered, thus creating a speaking situation in which direct address was virtually inevitable.<sup>32</sup>

This construction of an imagined spatial relation of copresence between speaker and viewer in direct-address testimony points to the significance of space in AIDS activist video. As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, television news and documentary forms construct spatialized power relations in which a hegemonic "here" is pitted against a threatening "there." In the context of AIDS, this binary has all too often been played out as the white heteronormative general population, embodied by the presumed normality shared by the newscaster in his (or sometimes her) studio and the viewer at home, needing to protect itself from contamination by an abject abnormality, out "there" in the inner city (the locus for infectious urban queerness, dangerous femininity, and threatening blackness) or in Africa (the imagined cradle of the epidemic).<sup>33</sup> The various textual mediations of television reporting allow that threatening otherness to be kept at bay from the general population and contained "out there." Direct-action video, on the other hand, explicitly rebukes such spatialization by insisting that the construction of a textual "here" be grounded in a public space that the activists defiantly occupy, whether it be St. Patrick's Cathedral, Wall Street, or the National Institutes of Health (these were three of ACT UP's major actions). By making a spectacle of their speech in public space, AIDS activists testified against the reduction of the social by neoconservative politics, which continues to push for the privatization of not only culture but also social provision.

Through its use of hand-held cameras that function as fellow social actors in the activist body, direct-action video produces its own particular form of mimesis, which I will call its effect of "embodied immediacy." Such a sense of immediacy in the here and now of ACT UP's occupation of symbolically and institutionally powerful public spaces demonstrates a liberating resistance to the discourse of containment.



19. Frame capture from *Voices from the Front* (*Testing the Limits*, 1991).

#### Recording the Action

Although both DIVA TV and Testing the Limits grounded their practice in a combination of direct-address testimony and political mimesis, their completed works demonstrate noticeably divergent applications of such strategies. Their differences attest to the various means by which magnitude could be articulated. Like Helferty's *Stop the Church*, DIVA TV's videos showed a greater propensity to replicate ACT UP's irreverent attitude and boundary crossing, whereas Testing the Limits, though far from conventional in its documentary practice, tended to rely more heavily on what Bill Nichols has called documentary's "discourses of sobriety."<sup>38</sup> Both *Stop the Church* and *Like a Prayer* (DIVA TV, 1991) examine AIDS and abortion rights activists' massive demonstration against New York's Cardinal John O'Connor and the Catholic

Church at St. Patrick's Cathedral on 10 December 1989. The videos' use of camp, parody, and black humor effectively imitates the tone of many strategies used in the actual demonstration. More than forty-five hundred people showed up at St. Patrick's for the action carrying signs rich in appropriative word play: "Stop This Man, Curb Your Dogma!" "Danger, Narrow-Minded Church Ahead!" and "Public Health Menace: Cardinal O'Connor." Inside the cathedral, activists disguised as regular Catholic churchgoers staged a "die-in" in the main aisle during O'Connor's sermon, and several of them yelled out their protests and blew whistles as they were carried out by the police. O'Connor responded by handing out printed copies of the sermon. Forty-three activists were arrested inside the cathedral and sixty-eight in the streets. Acting on his own decision, one activist (and former seminarian) broke the consecrated communion wafer and threw it on the floor. In what would become an overwhelmingly negative media reaction, reporters made most of this last protest, turning it into a desecration of the host by legions of "homosexual activists."<sup>39</sup>

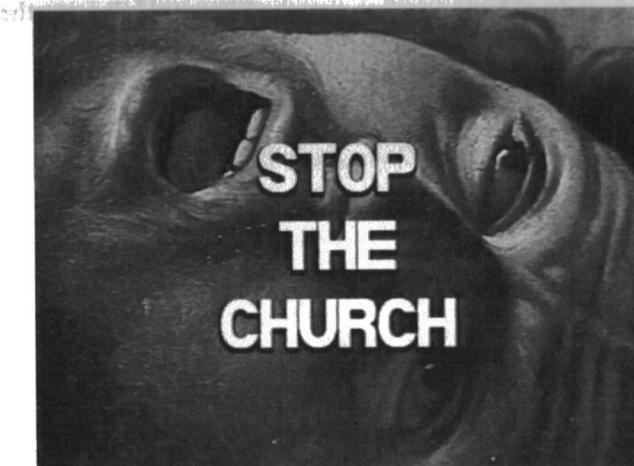
The seven separate sections of *Like a Prayer* were each made by a different member of the collective and addressed a different "deadly sin" committed by the Catholic Church in the AIDS crisis. The video's diverse parts are woven together by Madonna's song "Like a Prayer," interviews with Catholic members of ACT UP, and the DIVA member Ray Navarro's reporting from the scene in Jesus Christ drag. The video appropriates and resignifies both the music video form and the discourse of broadcast news as its principal structuring devices. Navarro performs as Jesus Christ, a news reporter for FBN (Fire and Brimstone Network), positioned with his microphone in front of the crowd outside the cathedral, parodically invoking the authority of the field reporter: "This is Jesus Christ. I'm in front of St. Patrick's on Sunday. We're here reporting on a major AIDS activist and abortion rights demonstration." When he ends his report with the comment, "We're here to say, we want to go to heaven too," he is not just being sarcastic. This tongue-in-cheek remark produces a shift in the use of "we" from the conventional address to a news audience (outside the events) at the beginning of his report to an inclusive assertion of his participation in the demonstration at the end. This subtle play in address points to a major issue raised by the demonstration—whether activists themselves were speaking out within the Catholic Church (as Roman Catholics) or outside it (as activists criticizing an institution and its policies).<sup>40</sup> In the actual demonstration this metaphorically spatialized debate becomes mapped onto the real spatial dynamics of inside versus outside the cathedral, which *Like a Prayer* emphasizes. The appropriation of the

Madonna song worked in a similar fashion, invoking a figure who had herself been performing a comparable critique of the Catholic Church from the position of someone also within it.

Hilferty's *Stop the Church* similarly makes much of the inside/outside distinction, both thematically and visually. While there is plenty of campy humor in the video about ACT UP's pseudomilitary planning, including a strategy session focused on the cathedral's blueprints, *Stop the Church* devotes much of its time to the debate within the group about how the demonstration should be positioned rhetorically in the public sphere. The video opens with a montage of paintings depicting pain and suffering by Masaccio, Caravaggio, and others, then cuts to a forceful soundtrack that mixes the "Dies Irae" section of Hector Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* with whispering voices muttering the question, "What is the Catholic Church?"<sup>41</sup> (figure 20). A number of different talking heads follow, each offering their own answers, which mostly express alienation and bitterness at the church.<sup>42</sup> When Hilferty inserts one response from an "ordinary" parishioner outside the cathedral, who says, "It's a communion, a oneness, all across the world," it serves less as an attempt to institute so-called media balance and more as a reminder, when placed in relation to the other responses, of the failure of the church to actually foster an inclusive communion. The montage of talking heads becomes far more dialectical when the focus shifts to the actual debates held during ACT UP meetings in early December 1989 as the action was being planned. In further moments of embodied immediacy, the camera cuts between various speakers debating the rhetorical position from which ACT UP should speak out in protest (figure 21). The name of the action, *Stop the Church*, raised the question of what constituted the church. The debate recorded by Hilferty indicates how the issue had become far more complex than the initial talking heads in the video implied.

The arguments heard in the video testify to the explicit spatialization of the discussion as activists debated whether they could speak as insiders or outsiders in relation to the church, if they should verbally protest inside the cathedral, and even where one might locate the church as a body. As one female activist argues: "Either the church is alive and well in this room, or it doesn't exist at all." Although Hilferty's own position seems clear elsewhere in the video (e.g., in his satirical musical sendups of Cardinal O'Connor using Tom Lehrer's "The Vatican Rag"), he does retain a dialectical structure to this sequence of talking heads in debate, mirroring ACT UP's policy of free and open debate at meetings. We hear, for instance, one male activist argue against disruptive verbal protest during the service in St. Patrick's on the

inside/outside distinction

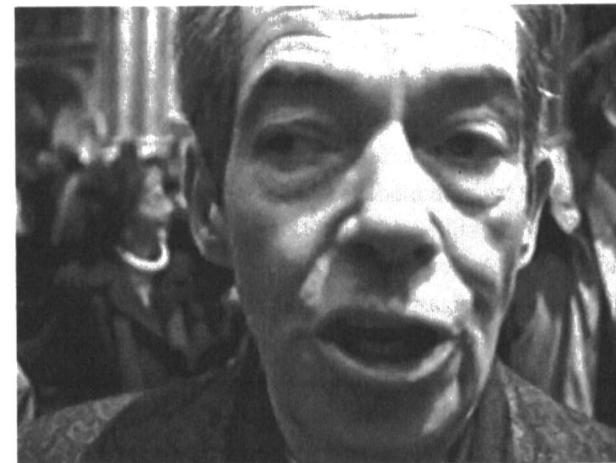


20–21. Frame captures from *Stop the Church* (Robert Hilferty, 1990).

grounds of honoring free speech: “We wouldn’t want them bursting into an ACT UP meeting and celebrating mass.” This is countered a little later by another male activist who argues that the cardinal has already politicized the space of the cathedral, treating it as his personal power base: “O’Connor, try keeping my life out of your church!” Stop the Church clearly figures the ACT UP demonstration as a secularized form of the type of Christian witnessing that extends back to the public protestation of individual conscience and faith against the institutional power of the established church during the Reformation.

In comparison to the coverage the video gives to the preparation and internal debate leading up to the action, the demonstration itself is covered quite swiftly. A fast moving montage sequence edited to the “Hallelujah” chorus of G. F. Händel’s Messiah produces a strong sense of “political mimesis” in its depiction of the mass mobilization outside the cathedral as thousands of people gathered in protest, barely able to be contained by the police (figure 22). The visual register shifts abruptly as the tape switches to cover the actions within the cathedral. The jerky movements of the hand-held camera, the low-level light, and the rough, directly recorded sound all contribute to the effect of embodied immediacy in the sequence. While the camera certainly implicates the viewer in the here and now of the demonstration, it constructs an ambivalent position in the pews from which the protest is witnessed. It is with both the activists and the churchgoers, prioritizing neither spatially. The camera records bewildered and upset churchgoers as much as it does angry and solemn protesters. Since the actions inside the cathedral prompted the substantial number of political and media responses following the demonstration, the address and identificatory structures of this sequence remain deliberately ambivalent, forcing the viewer to momentarily examine the ethical stakes in the situation. As the congregation leaves the cathedral after the mass, Hiltferty interviews churchgoers offering counter testimony, which he edits so that its rhetoric gradually increases in vehemence and homophobia, from the simple comment, “Blasphemous!” to the snide suggestion, “You’d think if they behaved themselves, they wouldn’t get into this mess,” and culminating in the explicit condemnation by an old man proclaiming that “sodomy and abortion are evil” (figure 23). Since Hiltferty was misrecognized in the cathedral as a cameraman doing police surveillance, he was able to elicit candid vitriol from these churchgoers and subsequently use the camera to bear witness on another level—to the pervasive manifestations of institutionally sanctioned homophobia and intolerance.<sup>43</sup> But Hiltferty refuses nevertheless to completely homogenize the attitudes of the congregation by

Figure 22-23



22–23. Frame captures from Stop the Church (Robert Hiltferty, 1990).

including one final talking head of a young man as he leaves the cathedral who, when asked what he thought of the demonstration, responds with a wry smile and the bemused endorsement, "Oh, it was pretty good."

*Stop the Church* skillfully develops various functions for its use of the talking head, which include establishing the affective and political investment of its subjects, fostering a dialectical engagement with the issues faced by the activists, and providing the counterwitnessing of the very attitudes that necessitate such intervention and protest. These functions would indicate a high degree of use value for the tape as a mobilizing and organizing tool. In fact, like several other direct-action videos, it was widely distributed in ACT UP groups. Shown in group meetings and passed around informally, it supported the continuing discussion of activist tactics and assisted in sustaining the momentum and morale of the group by providing a crucial affirmation of direct action, which proved critically important when mainstream media reporting of AIDS activism was negative and misleading. The video's circulation beyond AIDS activist networks involved the common exhibition sites for queer independent media in the 1990s: museums, galleries, college classrooms, and film festivals. The discussion and criticism around the tape on the alternative media circuit generated sufficient interest that a recently established public television series, *P.O.V.*, arranged to air it on PBS and its affiliates in August 1991. PBS pulled the broadcast at the last minute, citing the video's "pervasive tone of ridicule," despite *P.O.V.* having been specifically commissioned to create a venue for committed documentary practice outside the ideology of media balance, which still continues to stifle distribution opportunities for socially critical media.<sup>44</sup> While an analysis of the ensuing controversy around the broadcast and its cancellation is beyond the scope of this chapter and has been well covered by other scholars, I would like to briefly consider the question of the tape's effectiveness in generating discourse.<sup>45</sup> Although I would agree with Adam Knee's conclusion that the controversy did bring the video and ACT UP "far more into the public eye," it is also important to acknowledge that the controversy displaced issues, shifting focus from the Catholic Church's policies on AIDS and abortion to the question of censorship and the politics of public television.<sup>46</sup> Such a shift may in fact have been inevitable, since many of those protesting from the Right viewed these battles of the "culture wars" in the early 1990s as opportunities to weaken institutions of public culture such as public television. Hiltferty did, however, make consistent efforts to exhibit the tape in the context of a public discussion of the issues and appeared in person to discuss the video at numerous screenings.

Direct-action video consistently worked to break down the regulatory binaries governing dominant AIDS representation, such as here/there, honorific/repressive, normal/abnormal, expert/victim, innocence/guilt, and general population/risk group. Accomplishing this end entailed not only challenging concrete instances of dominant AIDS representation from broadcast media but also reconfiguring the discursive space within which one could speak of AIDS. Direct-action videos achieved this through a complex reworking of rhetorical conventions, including the powerful combination of direct address and the political mimesis of demonstration footage. When that discursive space was mapped onto the physical spaces of distribution and exhibition, the possible limits of such reconfiguration became more apparent. Video-makers fought hard to screen their work in both mainstream and alternative contexts, yet they found far greater success in reaching the latter. Ultimately, most direct-action videos functioned more effectively in building and sustaining activism in communities already most affected by the epidemic than in directly influencing the discursive space of mainstream media in the United States. The latter consistently rejected any reconfigured discursive space as unreadable within its own signifying system—the work supposedly lacked the ideologically charged requirements of broadcast standard production values, media balance, and authoritative sources.

The usefulness of direct-action video for AIDS activists themselves increasingly became a focus of debate as the structures of feeling in the movement shifted from the optimism of the late 1980s to the despair of the early 1990s. In a 1994 speech entitled “De-moralizing Representations of AIDS,” Douglas Crimp criticized *Voices from the Front* for what he saw to be its continued reliance on a discourse of heroic militancy at a time when it had be-

come imperative to acknowledge the psychic toll of sustaining optimism in the face of an epidemic by then recognized as permanent, at least for his generation’s lifetime. In valorizing Gregg Bordowitz’s autobiographical video *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993) for its “self-representation of our demoralization,” Crimp noted that “the rhetorics we employ must be faithful to our situation at this moment rather than what seemed true and useful last time we set to work.”<sup>50</sup> The practices of direct-action video had in fact waned by the mid-1990s as chapters of ACT UP across the United States fractured under the stress of multiple loss, activist burnout, and the rising conflicts between professionalized treatment activists, universal healthcare advocates, and HIV dissidents.<sup>51</sup> However, the direct-action strategies of ACT UP and its video collectives did influence the burgeoning social movements for global equity that came together most visibly in the 1999 Seattle protests.<sup>52</sup> While global activist video productions like *The Fourth World War* (Big Noise Films, 2003) borrowed many of the formal strategies developed by AIDS activist video collectives, the Independent Media Center (Indymedia) exploited both the media convergence and the participatory networks of the Internet to revolutionize the nonconventional forms of media distribution used by AIDS video collectives.<sup>53</sup> Direct-action videos specifically focused on AIDS would eventually reappear after the turn of the millennium as part of a new global movement of AIDS treatment activism that connected activists across the global North/South divide in the fight for equitable access to effective antiretroviral therapies.