AAHP

AIDS Activist History Project

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Interviewee:	Anne Golden
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Persons present: Anne Golden – AG
Alexis Shotwell – AS
Gary Kinsman – GK

[START OF TRANSCRIPT]

AS: It's February 5th, 2016, and we're talking to Anne Golden in Montreal.

GK: Where we start interviews with people just to get some sort of reference point is, do you remember when you first heard about AIDS or HIV and what you might have heard?

AG: I've thought about that long and hard since I read the question last week. It was like, "Whoa! When did I know?" I suspect it was around '85, '84-'85, which in the grand scheme of things is kind of late, since already in '81 kind of alarms were going up. And probably it was because friends of friends were starting to talk about something that was going on health wise. I'm bad with timelines, but also when Klaus Nomi passed away, I kind of went "Okay," because I remember very clearly he was the first celebrity that I knew of that I read a newspaper article on him and went, "Okay! Now, here we go!" So yeah, I'm going to say '84 perhaps '85.

AS: And you were living here in Montreal?

AG: I was living here in Montreal, yes.

GK: What sort of information would you have been getting around AIDS and HIV? Just the mainstream media or where would it have come from?

AG: I think the first information I got was probably from a friend of a friend, who said that he knew some guys in New York who were very sick. And when he was talking about it it was no longer mysterious, but there was a whole bunch of infections and weird things that were happening to them health wise and that they weren't alone. So, it was kind of that information where I was going, "What is going on here?" So, that would have been the first thing. And soon after, just because of my own interest, I started thinking about asking kind of harder questions of those friends. And then, of course, the news media was pretty sensationalistic. At the time I don't think I thought it was sensationalistic, it just kind of came in. Only later did I go, "Wow! What a horror narrative," but I'll talk about that later. Kind of like a horror film narrative, which is very classic in that kind of discourse.

GK: For sure. So, initially obviously AIDS and HIV infection are a big health emergency, but do you remember when you became aware perhaps it was also something that people were organizing around politically and doing stuff around beyond the medical and health frameworks?

AG: Yes. I was working in the mid to late eighties at the LGBT film festival here, which still exists, called IMAGE+NATION. At the time it was all community-run in the sense that no one had a salary. We were just a bunch of volunteers together curating and organizing, and we started to show the films and videos that were coming out. And the first ones that I saw were what have now been called the AIDS activist videos, mostly from New York – *Doctors, Liars, Women: Women Activists Say No To Cosmo*; GMHC (Gay Men's Health Crisis) videos; Testing the limits videos; those kind of things. So, we were showing them and I was getting information from those videos. I was learning as we were going. And I was also kind of learning about how to make an activist video at the same time, so I think one of the primary sources for me was videos that were coming in, mostly from the States, but also from England. Yes.

AS: From England? You're the first person I've heard talk about that.

AG: Well, as I said, my recall is probably not very scientific, but I remember seeing some of the work that was coming out of a trust in London that was called The Terrence Higgins Trust. And they were also making AIDS activist videos, but very specific as everybody was trying to figure out what was for their community, and getting rid of all that fear mongering and kind of just concentrating on good, hard information. So, Britain was also doing that. Canada was doing it too, but that, for me, came just a little later, I think, in '87, '88.

AS: I can't remember when John Greyson was doing a TV series. I don't remember what year that was.

GK: *The ADS Epidemic*. It's earlier; I can't remember.

AG: Yes, it's earlier. I'm going to say '87 or '88.

GK: I think you're right.

AG: I think I actually saw *The ADS Epidemic* later than I saw the pieces that were…

AS: Well, there's this way that New York is closer to Montreal than Toronto is, you know. [laughter]

AG: In some ways.

GK: So, you were involved in film and video, and were you involved in any sort of activism or notion of what activist video was?

AG: No. At the time, I wasn't. I was somebody who was—I had studied film at Concordia. I had a Film Studies bachelor degree. I became a programmer for the women's film and video festival, and simultaneously I think a year later I started IMAGE+NATION, so I was coming at it as somebody who kind of programs – at the time we said programmer but now we say curator – but selected films. And then soon after that, I started working at GIV (Groupe Intervention Vidéo) in '89 and I've been at GIV off and on since then, so I was seeing work that was being submitted to either one of those festivals – the women's festival or the queer festival – but also works that were coming to

GIV to be included either in distribution or for other projects. So, for me, it was very much about watching videos. And my own activism, I think I learned it from watching New York style AIDS activist videos, quite frankly.

AS: And can you say something about why it mattered that some of these political things were coming out in that form, and what the form was? Either in terms of how it was a shift in how people did filmmaking or what it meant to you as someone who was programming or curating?

AG: Well, yeah, there's always been a tradition especially since I'd say the early 60s of, you know, not making videos from the outside, but making them from the inside. And I was a big fan of the whole NFB (National Film Board) Challenge for Change initiative – in French, Societé Nouvelle. I loved those documentaries, and loved that idea that you didn't just parachute in to a situation, make a work and do a voice of God narration and then leave, but rather, you were making a work because you were in it. And I think HIV/AIDS activism really answered that call in many ways because many of the people who were talking about it had either friends or lovers who were ill, they themselves were ill, or they were contending with a variety of health issues. They wanted to help. It was a way of helping. It was a way of getting information out. And those activist videos they did many things very well, which was they showed protests and/or demonstrations, so they were taken in the street live as people were being arrested or harassed by the police. There was usually something about safe sex or about keeping yourself safe or about having sex if you were positive and finding interesting ways to do that. And then there was a whole series usually of information – a piece of information – about medical resources or financial, other types of government resources that you could access. And I loved that, you know? In 28 minutes you would basically get a big small picture of your neighborhood or your community. And the big criticism that still exists too is that government campaigns were so general; they're so general that they leave huge sections of the population out. So yes, and I loved those works because they were a reaction against a certain type of filmmaking. And I think it was almost born for that, you know? In the sense that anybody could pick up a video camera and very often did pick up a video camera not really knowing how to frame or edit, and yet it didn't matter. It still made for a compelling, interesting really important, pertinent take, but it was formally all over the place. I didn't care. I thought, you know, Wow! This is great. And I loved that kind of aesthetic, you know, that kind of "we're doing it ourselves" aesthetic. What's important is getting this information out, not how it looks.

AS: So, that possibility for making films like that, making videos like that, really comes with that medium, right?

AG: I'm going to say yes. I'm sure people would argue with me, but I think, because video is so immediate. You can tape something and you can watch it right away. And that sense, that kind of revolutionary feeling about the first generation of video practitioners had where they could actually shoot and watch it immediately which was, you know, instead of developing your super 8 film in your bathtub or sending it away, was I think a huge change. But, I really think that when HIV/AIDS arrived on the scene it's like, all these people who probably never thought they were going to make some kind of video, so then they turned around and did make them. Thankfully.

GK: When did you move from just watching videos to wanting to make something? If you could maybe tell us about that.

AG: Yes. I think, when I started at GIV in '89. I never thought that I would. I don't know. I don't actually remember when… I don't know if I thought I was going to make a work or something, but in 1990 Petunia Alves and I wrote a grant through GIV. And at the time – I don't think the grant exists anymore – it was basically an employment grant allowing us to do research on women with HIV and AIDS, but specifically in Montreal. Like, discussing the issues around women and HIV, which was not very discussed at the time in Montreal, or really anywhere pretty much. Anyhow, we did the research and we also thought that it would be good to make a video and we talked about how we wanted to do it. I was very keen on reproducing some of the lessons I learned from some of the works that I've mentioned, so we set about interviewing people in their own environments and also in kind of non-institutional non-governmental environments where people were actually active in the community. So, a curator, who did *Revoir Le SIDA*, Allan Klusacek, whose in Toronto now; two women from GAP-SIDA; Charlie Boudreau, who was in the work as a woman talking about safe sex specifically; two young girls finding out what they've heard, if anything, about HIV/AIDS and if they had any fears around it.

So, the idea was to give a very brief snapshot of what Montreal looked like in terms of AIDS activism in 1991, and for sure tons of people were left out, you know. We didn't speak to ACT UP simply because we wanted to make something short and were already at 31 minutes. Also, we wanted to kind of talk to individuals as well. That was the impetus there to kind of do something that was Montreal-based information. Also, reacting to some of the headlines that people would see regularly in French or English. Headlines that were usually kind of horrific or over the top or manipulative, and getting beyond the headlines and actually talking to people and asking them precise questions about how they felt. So, that's what we set out to do. And yes, it turns out it kind of, for me – and I've said this before elsewhere – it's also a video about going to people's apartments at that time, where people lived in 1991, and bars that we could use to set one of dialogues between three women – the places that no longer exist. The bar that we used was L'Exit, which was a lesbian bar in St-Denis, now closed. So, for me, it's also now since a lot of time has passed, it kind of reminds me of what Montreal looked like and what we all looked like, and what those times were like as well. It's picked up that meaning for me now.

AS: It was just organically part of the milieu.

AG: At the time I wasn't thinking of…

AS: Documenting 1991! [laughter]

AG: No!

AS: As you were saying, there was just starting to be consciousness that women and HIV, or women and AIDS, was something to talk about. Do you remember how it even came about to apply for the grant?

AG: Well, because GIV – Groupe Intervention Vidéo – is an artist-run centre that distributes and produces works by women, so we were thinking about how HIV/AIDS was impacting everybody around us in some way. And so naturally we were interested in how women were impacted, but also how they felt about it. How they were analyzing it. What they were being told, whether they were straight or gay or bisexual or however they identified. How they were being told by the government to protect themselves and how most of them found the information so general. Because, it had nothing to do with life, how people live lives, and how people navigate all kinds of different things or states of being. Women, because of GIV and it's focus on women artists, basically.

AS: And were any HIV-positive women involved in making the film or was that a vector of analysis that came into it?

AG: There were no women that I know of, at that time anyhow. I don't know think so, no. We didn't actually manage to find any HIV-positive women at that time. What we wanted to do though, was to provide information if you were HIV-positive and a woman and you were having sex with women what should you look for. I mean just actually even putting out the idea that some of your symptoms would be very different from what men were experiencing as often happens with any disease, you know, men or women. So, just putting that information out there, and saying, "Okay. It's possible that you might have recurring yeast infections that you need to look at. And it might not be lung based as much as it is with men," or something like that. That was important to us, so we tried to include that information -- that kind of women-centered information.

AS: Yes, which would have been so important because, as you say, that wasn't the way that things were being talked about.

AG: No.

AS: Yes. How did you even come to understand that?

AG: Gosh. I don't think I understood. … I mean I understood because I was having conversations, especially with Charlie and Petunia and a couple of other friends. You know, smart people, who were saying, "Women's bodies are being left out of HIV/AIDS." It's not that we want to put their bodies in it, but we have to get to closer to understanding what's going on exactly. So, I think that people who were much more in the know and smarter than me informed me, so I don't know that I was super-aware we were doing that. But, what we tried to do when we were making the video is that Petunia and I were constantly talking to each other. And we did everything together – the shooting, the editing, the interviewing, the structuring of it, all decisions. It wasn't just a one-person thing, and that was a way of getting priorities straightened, making sure that major things weren't being left out. Of course, tons of stuff was left out.

GK: Thinking back on it, can you think about some of the things you remember learning from doing either the research or the film?

AG: Just that fact that women, their symptoms would present very differently often, because of *Doctors, Liars, Women*, which I think is '88 or '89. I'm not 100% sure, but it's close to that. The idea

that women were also being given bad information. "Don't bother using a condom," or just terrifying stuff now if you think about it. So, I remember that and just remember learning about services that were available in Montreal like, GAP-SIDA. And I knew of the existence of a Haitian organization, but met the two women, who were in the video, and that was really great and interesting. And they brought a whole different perspective as well. Their whole reading of Haitian machismo and trying to get a guy to wear a condom, especially if it was going to be a long-term relationship, was, I guess, eye opening. As queer woman, I was like, "Right. Negotiation." For sure, I think I learned a lot and the learning curve was really steep. It kind of went constantly. Also, it just happened to be a time when there were a lot of protests and demonstrations in Montreal, so we tried to be at all of them – either Petunia or I, or simultaneously both of us. And sometimes we were in the demo and taping at the same time, which I think back now and I'm like, "Wow. Okay, I guess I could do two things at once," [laughter] But yes, we were activists first I think, and then video artists second.

GK: So, those would have been ACT UP demonstrations or…?

AG: They were ACT UP demonstrations even though I was not officially very involved. I was a member but I didn't really go. I went to a few meetings, but I never became that involved. But yes, ACT UP demonstrations. And probably, I think, we also taped during the Queer Pride Divers/Cité march at some point.

GK: So, just coming back to the discussion you had with Haitian women, was it difficult to make contact with them?

AG: No. Well, we phoned them. No, actually, we sent them a letter first and then we phoned. We did a follow up phone call … It was summer and it was beautiful out. We'd like to do the interview in a park. Given that the park setting would probably be pretty chaotic. It's Parc La Fontaine, so there are tons of people all the time – not a lot of control. But, we wanted it to be outside and not in the confines of an office, or "Here, you're a specialist," even though both of them were community specialists in that way. And they had a series of things that they wanted to say, and in the video one of them has a paper with her answers on it to our questions, and I didn't have a problem with that. Petunia and I thought they had a message to get specifically about how HIV/AIDS was impacting the Haitian community and we were there to provide that forum, that venue. And it fit well with everything we were trying to do, so it wasn't that difficult. It was just a letter and a phone call, basically, and a quick pre-interview.

GK: That's good. I was one of the first three employees for the AIDS Committee of Toronto and one of my responsibilities was trying to develop liaison with the Haitian community in Toronto, which was difficult to do. I finally got one of the main organizers of the Haitian group there, which was largely organizing against the Red Cross because they were banning Haitian blood at that point in time. I finally get him to a board meeting of the AIDS Committee of Toronto and all of the medical professionals there denounce him for not understanding epidemiology. It was just horrific. It was actually really hard. That was one of the reasons why I was asking that question.

So, when the film comes out, what is the type of response that you get to it? Where does it get shown?

AG: Well, it gets shown here in Montreal. I believe we did a launch at the old NFB Theatre in Complexe Guy-Favreau, which is now shut down. And it gets shown during IMAGE+NATION, which I feel a bit weird about because I'm a programmer and I made a film, but anyway… The reaction is pretty good. I mean the minute we finished it I'm like, "It's 31 minutes. What were we thinking?" Twenty-eight minutes, 29 minutes, 30 minutes… But, we were learning as we were going. Literally. You can see that in the video, I think. It's not very perfect, so it didn't really get shown a lot outside of Montreal. It didn't travel that much. It didn't really get shown in a lot of queer festivals – some, but not too many. So yeah, it didn't have a very big distribution career.

AS: Was it in French?

AG: French and English, but there are subtitles to either the English or the French, depending on the audience.

AS: Yeah, so the language then wasn't the reason…

AG: Oh, it was definitely a reason that people couldn't program. Actually, I think, especially in the beginning, we didn't at first have sub-titles. That came a little later, so it was in French and English. People chose their language, which is the way Montreal is. So, I think that was probably an issue of why it didn't really travel that much.

GK: So, what did you do after this that might have related to AIDS activism, video, film, stuff? You were mentioning something about the Banff school, but maybe there's something in between.

AG: No, there was actually nothing in between apart from continuing to work at IMAGE+NATION as a curator, and just looking actively along with other people for HIV/AIDS related works, either fiction films or documentaries. We saw that one of our major roles was to always provide several programs of work that dealt with many different issues around HIV. In 1993, along with I thinking it was about ten artists, we went to the Banff Centre, and Michael Balser was the project director and the idea was to make AIDS PSAs that would ultimately be broadcast. Great idea! Brilliant idea! But broadcasting is a really weird animal as everybody knows now [laughter] and not very open. I think a couple of the works that emerged from the residency did get shown either on Much Music or other venues. I'm saying there was ten of us, but I think ultimately about 12 works were made through this project. And they ranged from things that were 30 seconds long to longer. So, James MacSwain from Halifax made a hilarious piece for younger people, which was based on a board game. And kids would be answering the questions like monopoly like you'd flip over a card, and you'd read a card and it's like, which group is most at risk for HIV, and it was their age group which is like between 16 and 21. I made a fake detergent commercial called *Safe Soap*. Charlie Boudreau shot in the Banff Springs Hotel this really elaborate 1930s party sequence about two women kind of flirting with each other and ultimately leaving together. Michael Balser did a piece. Andy Fabo did a piece. Zachary Longboy did something. He's a First Nations artist from Vancouver, so he did work about ideas around tribe. His was called *Tree of life*. It was this huge group of

people and we all represented different demographics, so it wasn't just, you know, white men or just queer women. There was a series of us. That was a three-month residency, and that process was really interesting and great.

Those are my two forays into specific work around HIV. Later on, other things are integrated, but those are my two looks at that. Also, I realized I think soon after making these Les Autres that I'm not really a documentary filmmaker. It's not my first impulse when I think I want to make a new tape, that's not it. So, with that realization I thought, "Okay, there's others ways."

AS: Yes, it's a particular cadence and orientation. So, one thing I'd like - we're trying to map a kind of picture of what the activist space around AIDS and HIV here was like. As someone who went to demonstrations, is there anything that you remember about that time that you could describe?

AG: I'm just thinking that the demos, the actions were not huge, but they weren't small. They weren't like, a dozen people, but people were very committed. And there seemed – at least in the demos that I went to in my memory – to be as many men as women. There were slightly more men, but women were very committed, too. Two friends, both of who are in *Les Autres* - Paula Sypnowich and Charlie Boudreau – actually worked on a pamphlet about women and AIDS that they put together, which at the time was recent information, medical information and other types of information that were specifically designed for women, and that was interesting to me too. A lot of what I remember is seeing the same kind of a community feeling, because often I would always see the same faces, and they were the faces that were coming to IMAGE+NATION, attending the film screenings, being in demos, and being really, pretty media savvy. People who were spokespeople for what used to be called the gay community, which is now called lots of different things.

I just remember the spaces that we met in. There used to be on St-Catherine Street, there used to be what was kind of a lesbian gay community centre at that time, which is now closed. I believe there was a fire many years later, but at the time ACT UP would meet there, because it was free. And for a while IMAGE+NATION had an office literally in a closet under the stairs. The closet was bigger than you imagine. It was a reasonably sized closet … But, no one had any money so it was great, right? But I do remember that I spent a lot of time there, between IMAGE+NATION and other types of meetings. I spent a lot of time in that community space on St-Catherine Street. And when it was gone I kind of missed it, even though I hated that closet.

AS: Was there lots of cross-socializing among people who identified as lesbians and people who would identify as gay men, or were there more separate social spheres?

AG: I think it was starting. Back in those days, in the late '80s, even programming for a queer festival was, I think, very different from what it is now. Obviously, there wasn't as much work as there is now, but also there was a different take on what people would appreciate in a screening. So, there was sometimes, Quebec having a history here of specifically women-only events, there would be women-only screenings, because the filmmakers wanted that. And there were films and videos for lesbians and films and videos for gay men, and very rarely did we mix it up. But later on,

it was possible to do that, because audiences were much less separated, I guess, by gender or notions of associated interests, but I think it was starting back then.

From my own experience working at IMAGE+NATION, it was basically split between men and women and, in my personal experience, I always got along really well with the men who were doing the gay programming at the time – I was responsible for the women's programming with a committee – and it was never an issue. It just was. It was how we were doing things. It was the way to do things, basically.

GK: We're moving towards the end of the interview. Are there things that have popped into your head, either in terms of thinking about these questions or just as we've been talking here that you haven't had an opportunity to talk about. This is your chance! [laughter]

AG: Well, I guess, one thing is that, even though I've never literally made a video about HIV/AIDS again, in a work I did in 2007 there is a set about the founding of the fictional video centre kind of based on GIV, but not quite. And there's a whole section where they talk about HIV activism videos and how they're going to designate all their resources to making those kinds of videos until the crisis is resolved, and it's a very kind of high-minded thing. So, I was just thinking that even though I never made something that was specifically about the issue, it keeps coming back. You know, I keep thinking about it and talking about it. As I said before, when I returned to do a Master's degree, it's like, every research project I did had that at its core and I would look at it from different angles. I mean we talked earlier about the horror discourse… I teach horror film at CEGEP now, and I love horror films, but I was looking at the whole idea of the horror narratives especially in especially AIDS PSAs. You know, the "Death goes bowling" PSA from Australia where he knocks over people. Or, the tombstones, there was a tombstone one in Quebec, which was not that long ago, about 2008, where there was a series of ads with tombstones – men, women. And I was like, "Wow! We haven't abandoned that narrative at all." So yes, the interest is there and it's still a focus of the kind of work I do.

GK: Do you have any comments to make about how the popular culture representation of AIDS might have evolved since the time you were more directly involved in doing things? You were talking about some of the public service ads. I'm just wondering if you had any thoughts.

AG: Well, things have definitely gotten better, for sure. It's terrible to say – I don't even want to mention his name – but the fact that Donald Trump was talking about having segregation areas for Muslims in the States, I just thought back to the AIDS camps, keeping people separate from the general population, and how that was, of course, immediately roundly discredited by everybody. And there were no AIDS carriers and there were no AIDS victims, and there wasn't one discourse and there wasn't one narrative to find. I think that things have been complicated over the years, which is good in terms of understanding all of those kinds of ideas. I do think there has been so many great books on the sociological stuff of how AIDS appeared in the press and in people's minds – from conspiracy theories to aliens from outer space. You know, all of that stuff, so it's great. But, I do think the appearance of the cocktail took the pressure off some of those narratives. Because now that people can lead pretty good lives if they respond well to the drugs, it's kind of amazing. I think a lot of that weird discourse around craziness just kind of evaporated, but we

have to be careful because there's people who still spout misinformation. I was just thinking too it's really hard to talk to like, if I have younger friends, they just have no understanding of what we were so up in arms about. About some of the stuff that was coming out in government educational campaigns and stuff. They just don't get it. It's not relevant. It doesn't mean anything to them.

GK: So, a couple of final questions we usually ask. I'm not sure this one's relevant to you, but we're also trying to remember people who are no longer with us. If there was anyone you knew during that period of time, who might have been involved in AIDS activism in a broad sense who might have passed away.

AG: Well, there are a couple of people. He wasn't a friend of mine, but he was an acquaintance – Douglas Buckley-Couvrett, who was one of the main movers of ACT UP. He was a very good communicator, so he was often in front of a microphone. But, you know, I saw him around for many, many, many years doing all kinds of things and then he was gone. But, closer to home, Michael Balser, who was a good friend of mine – at least I like to think he was a good friend of mine. Yes, he had a lot of health issues, and he passed away after having made several works that were specifically about HIV/AIDS, which were really great. And I think in retrospect people realize how good his work was and at the time it just – it didn't connect with people, but now I think people can really see how good it was. Yeah, I miss Michael. And there's also a woman. She wasn't a close friend, but Esther Valiquette, who was a great filmmaker. She made three brilliant pieces. She was HIV-positive. She died in '94, I believe.

AS: Just before combination therapy was available.

AG: Yes, absolutely. Just before, on the cusp. It's so tragic. Her work is among my favorite, I think, in terms of a work that's very personal, but at the same time very smart about the issues around HIV.

AS: Her name was Estelle?

AG: Esther Valiquette. She made one work that's distributed by Vidéographe. No, two by Vidéographe, but she also made a work called *Le Singe Bleu* – *The Blue Monkey* – from the NFB. She was interested in the scientific stuff around HIV, but obviously she was also speaking about her own personal experiences, too. Those are just a few people. There's many more. Some people whose names I don't know or don't remember. I just know that they're not here anymore. I feel – you know how you feel sometimes when you see work over many years and you love that work and you think, "I know that person!" but you don't know them. So, all the artists that I associate with work that I found very formative – either from New York or San Francisco or London – who are gone now as well. It's a weird relationship, because, of course, they don't know me, but I feel like in some ways that I lost them too, right?

GK: Thank you very much for this.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]