Elliott Linwood interviewed by Paul Sendziuk

San Francisco, USA, 21 May 2004

This is a complete transcript of a recorded interview. It should be noted that when engaging in spoken conversation, people do not phrase their thoughts in grammatically correct sentences. These imperfections have been retained in this transcript. Elliott kindly provided additional information and approved the transcript on 12 September 2011.

Paul Sendziuk: Ok, so this is an interview with Elliott Linwood on the 21st of May 2004 and the time is a quarter past ten. We're in Pat's Café in San Francisco. Elliott, I might just get you to briefly recount the way that you came to be making art, mentioning in particular where you studied and the kind degrees that you've done. I think you started off in anthropology in New York and ended up doing something in the school of law here in San Francisco. So maybe if you could tell the story of how you got here.

Elliott Linwood: Sure. I grew up in Massachusetts, a suburb of Boston. I was born in Lowell, which was an old mill town, the only town that had a hospital at the time. When I was 18, I went to New York and started working there in the financial printing business as a computer operator. Then, shortly after that, I realised I should go to school after I realised I could take care of myself financially. So I went to NYU, which was on the other side of Washington Square, from where I lived, received a scholarship, and got a bachelor's degree in anthropology and a bachelor's degree in philosophy as a double BA. And then after New York I went to graduate school at University of Chicago. Again, I was continuing with ethno-psychiatry, which was kind of my specialty. I wanted to study indigenous perspectives on mental health, specific to Oceania, so it was mostly the Maori [of New Zealand] and Hawaiians. During that period Reagan had just been elected – a very conservative, Republican president for the US – and all the funding dried up for anthropologists, so I realised that – in tandem with the realisation I'd have to take a statistics class to actually write my thesis – I got in my car and I drove to California; I actually dropped out from a prestigious school. But it really gave me a lot of discipline which I hadn't had before because it was such a good school. So I got to San Francisco, went back to work again in computers and printing and publishing, and eventually began collecting photography and took a few classes at San Francisco State University and was, sort of, cordoned into an inter-arts program, Interdisciplinary Arts, and met Christine Tamblyn, who was my mentor.

How do you spell Tamblyn?

T-A-M-B-L-Y-N. I think it's a Welsh name. And she was this wild performance artist and theorist. There were a bunch of feminists in San Francisco that were doing stand-up – I coined the phrase 'stand-up theory' when I wrote about it in art criticism for magazines [such as *High Performance*]. So Christine turned me into an artist, unexpectedly. During that period, this was in the early 90s, I left work and became an artist and started exhibiting and writing art criticism. My work at that time – it shifted from black and white photography, street photography specifically, to sculpture and installation, just because I was starting to register the proximity and the scale of the body, everything

that I was doing was body related, whether the installation had to do with missing bodies or the size of the body, projections of shadows of bodies…

Why do you think that was?

Oh, because at that time I was dealing with my diagnosis with HIV and an AIDS disability actually. There was such a replete and rich history of Body Art performed by feminists, that this was a very logical relationship [for me to make]. It had an interesting diaristic quality to it, plus the added performance codes of narrative fiction. So you could really bundle a lot of ideas and half-truths into a pretty thickly coded performance. The installations were kind of performance based – most of the installations that I did at the time had performance artists show up and do work that were [either] riffs or related directly to the installations.

That's an interesting point as well because some of the artists that I've been speaking to, they, again, were taking up the themes of the body in the early 90s and some art historians have come out and said it's because of AIDS and this is why we're so interested in the body and all that. But I'm sort of thinking "No, not really" because feminists and performance artists have been working with the body since the 1970s and it was the critique of feminism and femininity that this comes out of.

Absolutely. Well, the feminists entering academia really cracked open notions of multiculturalism, although there are still race issues that are very heavily debated within feminism. The interesting thing is all of the discussion was around essentialism, which was body-specific. [For example,] how could you be a feminist if you had [male] outdoor plumbing on your body? So, interesting performances from the time were perhaps Annie Sprinkles' very famous speculum [Body Art work], where she invited the audience up to come and look inside her body. Another idea that was very theoretical was the idea of insidious replication of theory, like [viral] infection, and it was during the period in the US when the Left and the Right wing were really being polarised before essentialism kind of developed as a political agenda. But – it was a way to talk about cultural transmission and subversion at the same time, and it came directly, at least from me, out of feminist analysis.

Ok, so you were talking about some of your installations, which – and I like that term 'riffing' – which performance artists would echo as they came into the space. You were showing me some of those images before; are they the sorts of installations you were doing at that time? The bee-related ones?

Would you like me to describe them?

Yes, describe those again.

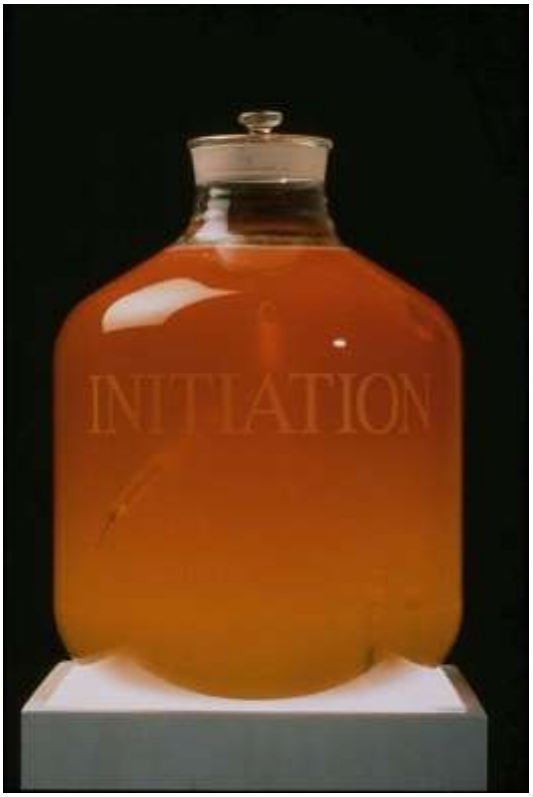
Well, I did an installation that travelled from San Diego to Los Angeles, parts of it went to Houston and New York, and of course San Francisco where it originated. In New York it was shown – parts of it were shown – at Artist's Space in an exhibition called 'Living Testament to the Blood Fairies' – so, again you get notions of [pause] viral replication and subversion. You [also] get a lot of agenda in such a coded [exhibition] title, but the

pieces themselves that I made were from an installation of sculptures that were approximately body-sized, made out of bees and venom, wax comb and honey. For instance, one of the pieces was 2 by 2 by 2 foot apothecary jar of honey, suspended in which were large syringes – I floated them [in this medium] – and the theory behind the piece came from Deleuze and Guattari's 'How to Make a Body Without Organs' from their book *A Thousand Plateaus.* It was basically an exercise in how do you make a codification that's so replete that it's multi-vocal? It can speak to anybody at any depth of art appreciation.

For instance, the strategy in that piece was to seduce the audience, because if you could resolve all the aspects of that particular sculpture from a distance, you didn't need to engage with it anymore – so, it was a Performance [Art] strategy, where you seduce – you tell the audience what you're gonna do, you tell the audience you're doing it, you tell the audience you've done it, and you tell the audience that you're done. Basically the jar – the honey magnifies the contents and the jar – was on a pedestal which lit the honey from beneath and – it was approximately where your heart would be, and where your head would be – that's how high the jar was. From a distance, you could see the contents of the jar, but not completely clearly 'cause the honey was magnifying it – as you walked around the jar, the contents shifted because of the magnification of the viscous contents, and so it really had a heart beat to it because it just glowed with this amber beauty. As you got closer to it, the mosquito-like syringes floating in it then generated a rupture in consciousness. It had seduced you and kind of encased you, much like honey does, much like Egyptians who embalmed the hearts, actually, desiccated and preserved hearts. By the time you got within a few feet of the jar you would read the one word [on the surface of the glass], which was "INITIATION". So it had seduced the audience; it bought them close enough to create this jump cut and rupture. So it wasn't really about metaphor as much as metonym, where there were different levels, like [earthquake] plate tectonics in California, that just rub against each other in different styles of story telling. After the rupture occurred, after the seduction, capture and rupture occurred… then was the release [stage], where you could walk away, but insidiously it had planted the seed of this very beautiful but disturbing image that then people actually described as having an after image of for several days, like a good horror movie. So that was one piece from the show.

And what kind of audience response did you receive?

Well, some of the questions [that arose during the performances for the exhibition] asked, "what do you mean by initiation?" Another piece was called *Swarm*, which was the titular piece, and one was *Opportunity* which was a piece of Carrera marble lying on the floor with the word 'opportunity' chiselled on it, as a riff on new age, [pause] or, new age republicanism victim blaming which kind of asked, "Do, we deserve our destinies?" And above that piece of marble was an IV pole with venom in the jar for the drip with fish hooks in the end of the tube. So it was all the sort of thing. The most effectively interactive piece was actually a brood of live bees, a cage of bees at the entrance that could smell the pheromones of the audience as they walked in. There was a microphone amplifying their sound, which would increase every time somebody new walked in, because the bees would recognise them [pause]. So everything was made out of bee by-products.



Elliott Linwood, *Initiation*, glass jar, honey and syringes, 24" x 24" x 24", 1993.

Ok, the way I should have described it – and again I haven't seen the actual thing otherwise I would've thought it was two metres high – it's 200 pounds of honey, I think you said before, which is a lot of honey, [pause] and the word 'INITIATION' printed on the jar. I'm reading this as a drug metaphor and the seductiveness and the seductiveness of drug use, and the warm fuzziness of it. The attraction, as you said, makes people walk towards the jar and then once you're there you have this choice, you know: do I use the needles or don't I use the needles? And within that seduction there's a really dangerous element and that's the drug use. That's the way I sort of read it.

A lot of people saw it as a drug piece. As a matter of fact it was in a show in Chicago called 'Better Living Through Chemistry,' so [pause] drug use [pause] and drug abuse and habit seemed to parallel the drug cocktail that most people – that had substance abuse histories – who then had parallel experiences once they had to take drugs for HIV infection. Although the drugs weren't recreational, because there was no buzz [to them] anymore, still there was this very thick [coding of] memory of how you ended up in that situation. So, I think, [pause] that every piece had one-word [titles]. I was trying to pair things down so they were heavily codified pieces, and talk about the experience of having to take, you know, 50 pills a day, relative to the seductions of sex, while not be too heavy handed about [pause] certain forms of sex – were very generative and wonderful experiences. I tried to really court the idea that sex was not poison, but it had riddles.

Ok – I've got these as images, so we might just go through them and you can tell me again a little bit about each of them. This one's the bed and the surveillance

mirror above the bed and a television set with, I think, a swarm of buzzing bees on the video being replayed.

For that one, I rigged some lights to the metal bed frame so that the mattress was lit from beneath. The mattress was made of wax comb, which was very beautiful to look down at because, again, it glowed. Most of the work that I've done – what's kind of surprising is – they really have a lot to do with illumination, or light shows.

Elliott Linwood, *Swarm,* metal bed, waxcomb, felt, semen, mirror, and video, 48" x 96" x 120", 1993.

Is that an aesthetic that you like or does that have a point?

I hadn't realised until kind of recently that that really is a kind of codon or stylistic issue that seems to attract me. On the mattress was a [fabric] felt outline, kind of like a crime scene outline, except that it was felt and you couldn't read it just from looking down at it, because it kind of blended a bit with the wax comb mattress. So the way to resolve the image was looking in the surveillance mirror that was suspended over the bed and then you could see that it was an outline of spooning figures in bed. To me, spooning really is a very typical outline of affection. So the piece itself - in terms of theory and what I was attempting to resolve internally, was the distinction between a modernist and post-modern form of control. For instance, surveillance would function much like a warden would survey prisoners, whereas the projection from the TV screen would be more like a *Blade Runner* projectionist post-modern form of control, which was basically going on, in that the US was just bombing Baghdad on the first major go-round with the Bush oil dynasty. I was playing with both forms of theory to distinguish how they both work and to make an image and a sculpture that the viewer could place themselves within. Again, it was body-scale.

So you've got the surveillance mirror being that modernist form of surveillance and then the television set, which is actually beaming information, or misinformation and directing thoughts, and thus being the post-modern form of surveillance, or post-modern form of control.

Much like *Blade Runner*. And you know, the monitor, the swarming hive projected on the monitor, was just incredibly beautiful and so, again, about seduction.

Now, there's some words printed on the surveillance mirror. What are the words?

Well, it's the word 'swarm' that's broken up so you have 'warm', you have 'SW', you have, kind of, a 'swastika', 'arm', and it's just to break up the – it was the titular piece of the show, so I wanted to just scramble things a little bit, so it wasn't immediately obvious. It kind of encouraged the viewer to think, "Well, this is a puzzle – this is a puzzle to solve."

And the swarm of bees thing being projected, is that because that's a symbol of danger? That, you know, to be attacked by swarm of bees means you're in a lot of trouble?

Well, during the period, really – the whole language behind the science of bee keeping at the time – was that this Africanised stream was entering the US, which was a very militant and aggressive and dangerous form of bees; which was kind of hysterical when you thought of the vignettes that were profiled where these sort of Africanised strains would attack people riding motorised lawnmowers – they just hated the sound of machinery, which was really funny. But it was actually, you know, to think of the bee as an [essentialist] code. There's a Salt Lake [Mormon] contingent that sees it [the bee] as a symbol of industry, human industry. Again, it was theoretical decision because at the time there was the movement called socio-biology that had started in Harvard with the essentialist notion that we're all hard-wired to accomplish our destinies, regardless of what we imbue with cultural signification. For instance, as a gay man who has some recognition of having been born with a predisposition, I couldn't… and one, with an anthropological background that values [pause] how culture is codified – I really keep attempting to resolve issues of race and essentialism in the work. Come to find out, since this piece has been done, the [human] genome has been mapped and a lot of behaviour has been correlated to genetic information. So again, there are many challenges to thinking through the minefield of essentialism. As a gay man, I just kept thinking, well, you know, whatever gay means to me is [due to] my particular situation in history as an American, you know. So, again, [pause] it really is trying to think – it's a thought riddle about essentialism, ultimately.

You – I think you were exhibited in a show called 'Nature Nurture' and so are you trying to say there that you're coming down on the side of *nature* in that dichotomy?

Absolutely not.

Absolutely not? [Both laugh] I think you would've said the same if...

That's not subversive enough. Why – if everything's predestined, then [pause] why bother? It's just not that interesting to me.

Ok, third piece, this is my favourite, I have to say, and the way you described it before made it make more sense. This is a piece called *Resistance* with the Perspex shield shielding a beehive and in front of it is a whole bunch of dead bees and I think you said some AZT mixed in there as well. And beside the beehive there's a bucket full of red flowers.

Yeah.

Elliott Linwood, *Resistance*, dead bees, AZT, bee hive, strobe light, perspex, bucket and flowers, 1993.

I thought it was red paint. And you were saying it was because bees can't see the colour red, and if they had, they could've got to the bucket and got their way around the Perspex sheet which is blocking their path to the hive. And that's the cause of them dying, I imagine, because they can't get to the hive and feed or – I'm not sure. I don't know a lot about bees, I don't know what they do, I thought they made honey in the hive. But have I described that image right? And do you want to add something to that?

Well, it's another diagrammatic theory piece, and again it's body-scaled. For instance, the sheet of plate glass is about 5 feet high and I'm about 5' 6". Therefore, everything's – since I'm short – everything's kind of my size. The word 'Resistance' is spot lit so it casts its shadow on the white hive behind the glass. If you look at the glass, in the installations in which it occurred, you'd see that the bees have crashed and smudged into the glass, like a windshield. 'Resistance' obviously was talking about viral resistance, resistance to drugs, resistance of the government to provide leverage into the epidemic early on, and resistance to generating a discussion and a vocabulary for something that was unfolding, and, in fact, re-inserting a [pause] a class of citizens that were [pause and laugh as a baby cries loudly in the background]…

For anyone listening to the tape, it was just a baby crying, it wasn't me. [laughs]

Right… the mixed capsules with [the antiviral drug] AZT and all of the dead bees – there were thousands and hundreds of thousands of bees that were dead at the foot of the glass structure – spread out on butcher paper for examination. They really represented my friends who had all passed for no clear reason. And the conundrum, of course, is survivor guilt. How do you wrap your mind around the fact that you're still alive when most people you've admired have dropped [dead]? And again it was a diagrammatic thing where the red flowers, if they – if the approach had been shifted, then there would've been a very different outcome.

So the red flowers represented the other options such as Reagan taking control of this thing, you know, in the 1980s, spending more money more on education and being more explicit about education and maybe directing a quick release of drug treatments, more experimentation with drugs?

But I was thinking also – I'm a by-product of having moved to New York City when I was 18 during the '70s; I mean, in 1978 there was a blackout in New York and it was the height of the sexual revolution. So, during that evening, which happened to fall on my birthday, there were candles everywhere, which was kind of funny. But what struck me was that around Christopher Street in the West Village, people were fucking in the back of vehicles, you know, with such open abandon – it was quite a precious moment in time. And had we realised there were different options to fill out our toolkit of sexual expression, we also would have had different outcomes. Although, again, you know, I [want to] keep indicating that I'm pro sex in a very generative way. People didn't have a consciousness of what was about to happen to us, so…

Isn't that the difference though? In 1978, you have no idea what's going to happen. Reagan, in 1986, should have a clear idea of what's happening and yet, as I said, didn't do anything.

Well, I imagine this would be a really popular piece. Out of those ones we've talked about so far, which one tends to draw the crowd?

I think this one [pause] – like a moth to a flame – really attracted audience participants because there was a strobe light inside the hive that flickered, so the thing just had a

beacon quality to it. However, I think the most popular image was the *Initiation* piece, rather than *Resistance*.

What did the strobe light represent, do you think? Was that disco? Is that…?

Yeah.

The life you could be having.

And, surveillance again. You know, it, [my work] always has this beauty-creepy kind of quality to it.

Ok. I don't know if this one is from the same series: this is the triangle, sorry, the pyramid piece made out of, I think, human hair. Actually, before we talk about this, people want to know this: where did you get all the bees and the bee paraphernalia from – the honey, the wax and…?

I found out that I needed honey that wouldn't crystallise swiftly, so I found out that, besides Egypt, there are a couple of other forms of honey. One comes from the Pacific crest here in California, not far away, so the honey came from – some of these bee keepers have generations in the business and they were impacted by the Africanised strain that was coming in plus new diseases of bees – so the industry was shifting just as I was accumulating the materials for the project and the research. So the honey was specific to the area. The materials, like the glass apothecary jar was made through the wine industry, by glass makers that service that industry, and the bees came from nearby San Francisco. I wanted them to be from here, so I established some nice relationships with beekeepers.

Ok. The pyramid of human hair, this speaks to me of the Holocaust: we have the triangle symbol, which was worn by homosexuals within the concentration camps, pink triangles, and then the human hair, if you've been to Auschwitz you would see the big masses of rooms filled with human hair and glass, you know, eye glasses and teeth and things like that. That is what I see when I look at this piece. But what was your intention and how do you think it was, sort of, received?

Well, again, the theoretical conceit was how do you make something that's very, very ephemeral, so ephemeral that a breeze could destroy it? I remember reading this funny story about somebody that made sculptures out of Styrofoam. So when the gallery opened the doors for the first day, the complete installation was destroyed by a breeze. Anyway, I wanted something that was so ephemeral but again, that addressed the issue of essentialism, so basically this was the residue of the performance of accumulating the material. And I had to wear a mask to stack this hair – it had to be piled in a certain way to hold its shape – it's a four foot pyramid of hair so it had to be fluffed and orchestrated in such a way that it would hold the shape of the pyramid. But, more significantly, collecting the hair really was what the piece was about for me. I collected the hair from salons in San Francisco where I was living at the time and it was very interesting just to [keep a] log of who gave the hair, who thought what about the project [aims]. It was consistent that the salons in the gay neighbourhood absolutely refused to provide any of the raw material because they thought it was distasteful, insidiously repulsive. And I

kept thinking about the tendency towards the gay ghetto of wanting to mainstream so badly that they would, sort of, be very pejorative about essential by-products of our community. So this was the most interesting aspect and, to me, that really was the sub-text behind the piece, which wasn't obvious to the audience. I think when the audience walked up, they didn't see so much the disease – the disease issue – and who forfeited their opportunity of contributing to the piece – they didn't see any of that – they saw, perhaps, I think, the level of labour that went into constructing the piece. It's very labour intensive to…

How tall is the pyramid?

Four feet high.

Four feet high? My God.

So it's four by four by four. The other community that did not contribute were black salons, and they were – I went to a lot of black barbers in town and there was a whole voodoo issue that came up.

Elliott Linwood, *Lock*, human hair, 48" x 48", 1993.

That's amazing. How do you deal with the rejections when someone is telling you "No, that's wrong, that's morbid, I'm not going to give you hair"?

Well, I just logged it. That was the – see, the training that I got through Christine [Tamblyn] at San Francisco State [University] was Life Art training, which has a rich history in California – University of California at San Diego [pause] has a history of this movement. The perspective is to show an aesthetic awareness toward everyday life. And it was the collection that was the performance, it was the daily activity of logging everyone's reactions that was the piece.

So you were ready enough for that and you were going to take it on the chin?

Well, for instance, where the very expensive high end hair salons are down near Union Square, they understood an "art piece," they understood commodification fully, they wanted to use the image for product identity. You know, it was very interesting just to keep track of the different class and race issues.

Was this exhibited by itself or would it be exhibited with the other bee pieces?

No, this was in a show in Houston, Texas, called 'Without'. This was also in a show at Intersection for the Arts here in San Francisco called, I think it was 'Isolated Incidents' – no, it was [called] 'Endurance'. Some of the hair pieces were also shown in Hartford, Connecticut [in an exhibition] called 'Isolated Incidents'. So the one in San Francisco was – there was a show of all sculptures made out of hair – other people were working with the medium at the time – I'm thinking of David Hammond, who worked with hair at the time.

Ok.

But generally, this piece was in a group show. I think this was in 'Surface' – 'Life, Death and Surface' which was in Santa Monica, and funnily enough that was during the Loma Prieta earthquake, no, the Northridge earthquake that destroyed Route 10 in L.A., which is this ten lane highway going from Santa Monica all the way, I think, to Miami. It goes all the way across country. The section of the freeway was destroyed by the earthquake when the show was up, and the piece – most of the pieces fell off the wall because it was such a significantly large earthquake – but this piece, of course, just withstood the impact.

[Laughs] Despite that fact it's meant to be ephemeral – blowing in the wind. How do you store it?

In garbage bags.

And then you put it together new every time?

Well, you know, the thing about this, since it's a performance piece, it's like a score for a piece of music, and so I just send the medium plus the instructions to each site and have people – I've since thrown the medium away – but you know, it's an easy thing to replicate.

It reminds me a little bit of the Felix Gonzalez-Torres [piles of candy] piece as well.

Absolutely.

They're obviously more free-formed things.

You know, the piles of candy obviously are more playful. This is – this had, you know, just the tonality of the colours, had a dark quality to it.

Ok, let's maybe talk a little bit more about this piece here. This is a photograph – two photographs – one of a fella who's, sort of, bound up, I'm not sure with what, and another one where the head and the hands are emerging from some kind of liquid.

Arthur Tress, *The Deliquescence of Elliott* (left), *The Invisible Man* (right), silver gelatin prints, 1995.

Yeah, my friend Arthur Tress is a pretty well known photographer, in the gay canon actually, and we were talking about the notion of gay bodies as people died or were starting to show symptoms of disease progression, such as facial wasting and buffalo hump – the lipodystrophy after-effects of both HIV progression plus the side effects from the cocktails. Most of the books that were circulating at the time were about the body beautiful, or the 'Herb Ritz' [fashion photographer] body. And Arthur and I talked a lot – when we made the water image, for instance, I visited him. He lives down on the California central coast, right on the ocean. We went to a hot tub that day and we were talking about how the actual body of people's experience on the ground – in an un-idealised experience – is actually a lot more liquid because it's so amorphous and it keeps shifting the longer people survive on drug regiments. They're really turning into science fiction characters, where if you walked through The Castro [in San Francisco] and looked through the book store windows at all the coffee table books of beautiful bodies – people were doing so on canes, hobbling down the street as science fiction experiments by the pharmaceutical companies. So there was a real disconnect in what a gay body looked like and how the body was starting to become, kind of, missing; there were shadows of bodies, there were memories of bodies we used to have, because our bodies were changing so dramatically. So that was the discussion during the day in which the liquid image [was composed]– I'm coming up through the steam of a hot tub. That image is now in the Whitney Museum in New York. And, [for the other image] he did a home visit at the apartment where I lived in San Francisco at the time, and, he wanted to find out what was in my house that kind of, epitomised what he thought of me. So I had all these books…

That's a dangerous exercise.

Yeah. So he rifled through the whole apartment and he noticed that all my underwear were completely, neatly folded in concentric stacks, so he really touched the pulse of my compulsive organisation tendencies and he just rode that idea. He took all of the underwear and just wrapped me up in it, [pause] and that's where you get the mummification, the kind of bound – the S & M bed image – again, with the eye glasses that carried over [from the other image]. When I saw the whole bunch of these images that we made from that year, they started to look like the Invisible Man which was another turn of the century, kind of, [pause] story about industrialisation and the shift in the sense of body and sense of control. So I just, kind of, liked the idea of the missing person – and that the person that we could see was about to evaporate which was ourselves. The series functioned like the documentation of a Performance Art piece.

Is this harking back also to the novel *Invisible Man* by, I think, Ralph Ellison?

Yeah, I think that's the author. There was just this paralysing fear of gone missing – of having no physical – no visible – presence. And to me it's having no voice, no political clout – which is not the case in San Francisco. I mean, we have quite a bit of clout here and that's probably what helped me generate most of my work 'cause I felt I never had a doubt about speaking my voice and finding out what my voice was here.

I've just been in Arizona; maybe they have a different experience of things there.

Ok, these last two images that I want to look at are the two you entered for the CMV Retinitis ['Share Your Vision'] Competition, *Floaters* and *Blue Yonder*, which came first, won the competition, and are images that I just love.[1] The CMV competition asked artists to imagine what it might be like to lose your sight or to in some way have your sight distorted by the disease that happens to your eyes as a part of the immune system breaking down with HIV infection. But I imagine also that you're saying some other things in these pieces as well, particularly *Blue Yonder* which has – it sort of looks like a bar scene – it's a crowd scene – anyway it's got something to do with people.

Those [images] were taken on the day that Bush Jr. started the bombing, round two. [Pause] And, for me, it looks like, again, missing bodies – American consciousness of projected images of war are only starting to enter our vocabulary at this point with the atrocities that are happening in the [secret] prison systems, because [pause] the press was embedded in the military – and to me, they were in bed with the military, up until fairly recently where the press is starting to reassume and reassert its subversive capability and responsibility. So to me, this was [pause] – if you look at the blurred images it just looks like there was a detonation of something significant and, you know, there are silhouettes that are pointing heavenward – [like] images I've seen of planes flying over war-torn landscapes [pause]. The day that it was taken, I was informed by

[1] Over 200 artists submitted work to the *Share Your Vision* competition, which was launched by Visual AIDS and sponsored by Roche to raise awareness about the impact of the debilitating eye condition cytomegalovirus (CMV) retinitis on the lives of people with HIV/AIDS. The jury included Yona Backer, Program Officer, The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts; Ellen Birenbaum M.D., Medical Director of The Robert Mapplethorpe Residential Treatment Facility at Beth Israel Medical Center; Moukhtar Kocache, Director of Visual & Media Arts, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council; Ernesto Pujol, artist; and Debra Singer, Assistant Curator of Contemporary Art, Whitney Museum of American Art.

the news that we woke up with. So I was screwing around with my digital camera to find what it was capable of, and – unlike an optical camera – it offers a completely different mechanical vision. So I was just trying to see what that new camera would yield, and I was sitting there and toggling the camera to get a blur and very much interested, again, in the illumination, the backlighting; it has a video quality to me. The most replete and significant image from recent American history has been the [burning World Trade Centre] towers before the sound bites were edited down to a collective few "manageable" images – the image of people jumping from the towers. It was absolutely mind-blowing and I suspect it has as much resonance as when people witnessed a monk setting himself on fire – relative to other wars. So it has that quality to it also for me. It's the indiscriminate character of the military complex, which also, kind of, picks up on the blur. The witness – the aspect of witnessing something as a group – and the silhouettes are different scales.

Anyway, it was shot at a big tank at the Monterey aquarium. I was there with my niece and my partner and his brother. My brother-in-law, came because my niece had just been gifted a, I think it was a present of a digital camera, so I was showing her, you know, "Don't take pictures of things. Capture light – cameras capture light, they don't take pictures of things". So I was showing her how to screw around with that and we took the – she helped me pick the images from that day. Later I was very impressed with her parents for bringing her to the show in New York to show her the outcome of that day.

Elliott Linwood, *Blue Yonder*, Fuji Crystal archival photographic prints on plexiglass, 48" x 48", 2003.

She's never going to take a straight picture again, you realise! [Laughs] There will be no more Christmas snaps around the dinner table; it will all be "Let's illuminate the turkey".

[Laughs] So, *Blue Yonder* – this [and *Floaters*], they're really images of submersion. This is a giant aquarium that people are standing in front of. But blue seems to be my colour lately, whether it's the sky or the water.

Is it maybe a John Dugdale influence as well with his weird tinted photographs?

I actually submitted a statement acknowledging Dugdale and Jarmusch, er, what was the, Derek… [pause] I can't remember.

Oh, Derek Jarman the British guy who did the blue film, yeah.

Yeah, I always confuse that name with Jarmusch, who is the American filmmaker.

Jim, yeah.

Derek Jarman was very influential also because I went to see, at the Castro theatre, his blue illuminated screen that you sit through and you just listen to the narrator, which places the audience in an eavesdropping capacity, and when you leave the theatre you see blue for a long time, or yellow – the opposite of blue – it just keeps registering [as a visual after-effect]. So it was about the process of going blind. For instance, *Floaters* – I didn't realise 'til I heard word about the selection for the show that they really do look like the pupils of someone's eyes from a distance. I blew them up so they're a 3 by 5 foot diptych, because again, I wanted to viewer to stand in front of the work and cast a shadow that would register about the same size as the silhouette – so it shifted from a two dimensional to a three dimensional issue. Again, it was a sculptural consideration having to do with body consciousness.

The challenge, for me, of the show was that I really hate all the politics of becoming a poster boy or calendar boy for the pharmaceutical firms. But conceptually, the project really captured my imagination about how to create an image that could work as well described to somebody who had lost their sight to an audience that could visually perceive it. So that was why I submitted those pieces, because it was just much more interesting to me. It was about things lessening or becoming absent. [See image overleaf.]

Have you had any responsibilities towards the sponsors of the show after winning?

The most significant aspect of the show was there was a matching grant. Roche provided half of the award but Visual AIDS provided a matching grant to a non-profit of my choice so I was able to insert my political activism by donating it to an AIDS project, providing direct services. For instance, I used the grant to create a volunteer position for myself at the Marin AIDS Project, near where I was living at the time, after attending law school when my art mentor, Christine, passed away.

Elliott Linwood, *Floaters*, Fuji Crystal archival photographic prints on plexiglass, 48" x 48", 2003.

I know from speaking with the Visual AIDS people that they're very ambivalent about the idea of sponsorship. Former Executive Director Barbara Hunt's not; she's actually quite prepared to say, "Well, God, they're taking our money off us, the AIDS community, I have no qualms in taking it back off them and then using it to support artist's work and, you know, getting the message out there", and that's probably the way I think on this issue as well.

Well, I had a more direct approach about this particular issue. For instance, since I'm a visual artist predominately, although I live in my mind, I think. My worst fear and neurosis was of losing my vision, and a by-product of that was matching up with organisations like Lighthouse for the Blind, where I read for an 80 year old woman. I read her the Communist newspaper every week.

[Laughs] Was that your choice or her choice?

[Laughs] No, it was hers! Because she was a teenager when Communism was informing labour politics in the United States. I also read to people who have lost their vision through CMV retinitis. So my perspective was, if there was something that could alleviate that, drug-wise or delivery-wise, then I was behind it.

At this point, a bit of factual information that might be required. When did you get your HIV diagnosis?

The HIV came in '87; I suspect I was exposed in '78. I'd actually been tested just before I left New York in '82 and GRID at the time – Gay Related Immune Disorder… whatever it was called at the time – it was a brand new consciousness and medical awareness, and then my test was in '87 at the request of a partner who was sero-negative. Anyway, before the virus was identified, my lymph system was completely out of wack when monitored from very early on as friends fell sick and started to die. I actually landed in an AIDS disability status in '93 –1993.

Ok. You're on treatments at the moment?

Yeah.

It's working for you?

[Pause] Yeah, so far. But, you know, it's kind of dicey because there are these other side effects in people that are very close to me who are developing cancers not inherently HIV or meds-related, but which appear more as collateral conditions regarding the level of cell regeneration. So there are now all these other related cancers and diseases now.

Geez.

Yeah.

Not good. Do you want to take a break for a little while? We can stop talking and maybe grab another drink?

Sure.

[The interview is momentarily suspended.]

Ok, so this is the second part of my interview with Elliott Linwood, same day, same place. You were talking a little bit before about remembering seeing Derek Jarman's film *Blue*. I want you, if you can, to try and reflect back on some of the AIDS related work that you've seen, be it visual arts, film, television, theatre, etc., and I want you to tell me what sort of impact those pieces or performances had on you. Can you remember if it changed your view of the epidemic, your place in it, your responsibilities, the responsibilities of your friends, any way that might have altered your consciousness about the epidemic? It's a big question, I know.

Well I'm, you know, I'm trying to sort through, actually, it's – it's a pretty tight canon in my mind, actually. I remember being impressed by Gran Fury, obviously. Locally there was Nayland Blake who's a considerable artist who moved to New York, he was the director at New Langton Arts, had just won the SF Museum of Modern Art's SECA Award, and I interviewed him for the gay newspapers here. And there were gay shows at the Museum of Modern Art like 'Facing the Finish' that included quite a few neo-conceptualist artists from California like Millie Wilson.

Sorry, is that 'Nelly' Wilson?

Millie Wilson, who did a series of work called *The Museum of Lesbian Dreams*. Nayland and Millie, I think, came out of the tradition of minimalism which was, kind of, the bedfellow of the disco period that I experienced in terms of having a consciousness when I came out in New York. I moved to New York in '76 and came out shortly thereafter. [Pause] And so, I remember going to 12 West a lot, and disco rising, the bath houses opening, a lot of sexual revolution going on in every facet of the culture. But I think aesthetically, the consciousness that I was exposed to, that I still embrace a lot, and you can see it in the fastidiousness of control and finish fetish in my work, is

informed from the minimalist aesthetic that was kind of more ambient. [Pause] So, Nayland and Millie, kind of, typified that and they – although their work has changed since then – they were local and accessible to me.

What about in terms of, as I said, personal politics, specific themes of artworks or, again, films, writing, things like that? Some people will talk about, "Oh, I remember the day I saw *Philadelphia* and I thought this way or that way" and some people say, "Oh I remember the day I saw *Philadelphia* and I almost slit my wrists, it's bloody awful". Can you think more along those lines? Particular themes, particular messages within these artworks?

No, I'm drawing a blank for the moment. I think I'm just cycling through a lot of…

That's all right. As things come to you, just feel free to, sort of, drop them in.

You know, Martin Kippenberger was really… I absolutely loved his stuff. In terms of popular culture it was – what impressed me at the time was a dominant culture averse to gay sub-culture – which then became kitschified enough to be embraced by American populace through the AIDS Quilt. I mean, this is so homespun, it's like makeshift memorials where you see stuffed animals taped to trees, where either Fluffy got run over by the car or – and it's a particular kitschification that's so inherently American and horrendous to look at; it makes my skin crawl. But it was the only vehicle that – for instance, Elizabeth Taylor, a great film actress became white trash as soon as she started showing up on TV in different sitcoms like *Will & Grace* or whatever she was on promoting her perfume. I think she was on three different shows one night promoting her new line of perfume. So you can see the American tendency towards decompressing great codifications into something more normative and lowest common denominator, and the magic of what Elizabeth Taylor was able to accomplish was this kitschification thing – trend – that was going on.

And you see it in Mike Kelly's stuffed animals, where you see so much substantive value [pause] – where the polyester pot holder that Nanna crocheted goes far beyond [any sense of] economic value, which is unitary and fungible and can be assigned to a random variable – along the lines that a Coca Cola equals a dollar – whereas luxury or home-made goods possess something else, tendencies of more personal value. For example, when you have substantive value – I think that's why kitsch is so big in the US – you can just see that quirky, home-spun value is palpable. So people like Elizabeth Taylor realised that the only way to get funding and consciousness, and, a vocabulary in an American consciousness, was to kitschify issues to make them presentable.

The difference in my experience of the early epidemic was watching the shift from Liberace and Rock Hudson disclosures, to people hearing news about anal penetration and anal intercourse during their supper hour while they were watching the evening news. And so the whole vocabulary shifted. But then at the same time came the Springer-fication of American culture where you see, you know, hillbilly scenarios, often seemingly well orchestrated and rehearsed, unfold as another vernacular. Anyway, for all the atrocities that the gay culture has been through in recent history, at least there is some discourse that was missing originally. People didn't know how to describe their experience, you know, American gay identity is riddled with so many problematics that

it just belies the fact that the language and the discourse about the experience certainly doesn't flesh it out. So the language in this discourse has so many contradictions, but at least through the kitsch factor, it gets broadcast enormously.

[*Postscript added by Elliott*: What I mean to say, is that the nature of human interest stories and various forms of media in which they are circulated, often have a specific sense of scale – such as, you know, the rugged individual who either overcomes or succumbs to various circumstances. After all, it's hard to avert one's gaze from the scene of a particularly spectacular train wreck. However, the bigger picture or issues of a more systematic or environmental scale… seem to get lost or intentionally left out of the process of developing a new vocabulary… by reducing things to sound bites oriented around the branding of products. For instance, "Pride" is the new trademark or name of gay parades in the US, and these activities are heavily sponsored by corporations these days. That tag seems to have more to do with mainstreaming the subculture than how things functioned in the old days – when it seemed a time for people to get their freak on in more inventive forms of demonstration. In terms of substantive versus economic value, one seems very intimate, personal and labour intensive and, interestingly, only open to barter; whereas the other feels unity, static and yields mostly to market forces. But, you know, since there are so many more ways in which to be queer or embody gayness these days, I still have faith that our vocabularies and self descriptions eventually do play an interesting game of catch up with our actual lived experiences. It's just that, for me, there are these funny tugs and inversions between minimalist and maximalist tropes in American pop culture – where you might, say, get some severe couture garments that almost appear woven from Nana's hand-made potholders, for instance.]

And you would put the AIDS Quilt in with that process?

You know, it's gripped my mind – since my jewelled objects involve finish fetish and the minimal, and, you know, making objects that you just want to lick 'cause they're just seductive. And this is the opposite; and I think a lot of people really did capture that. I think Mike Kelly started making bird houses – as his graduate project at Cal Arts in Valencia, California. All his stuffed animals that then followed and all the large photos of little dolls [pause]. And yeah, I would certainly add the Quilt to this kind of grouping. But, you know, again, it's about substantive versus economic value; the finish is less significant than the scrambled affect that people actually live and feel on the ground – and I think the Quilt project – I think it just triggers such deep emotions when you're standing and staring at acres and acres of panels that are casket-sized, hand sewn by-products of attempting to grapple with grief. You know, the kitsch factor really does offer an incredible vehicle for discourse – for developing discourse.

You're speaking about that in a way that's much more positive than I've seen some writers talk about the kitschification of AIDS as if it's the worst thing that could ever happen, and that the Red Ribbon is the worst thing that could ever happen and things like that.

Well, it really does gag me stylistically. But frankly, think about the potential for broadcasting and accomplishing an agenda. It's unbeatable.

I agree. Have you made a Quilt panel yourself?

No. I think the bee work with the spooning felt figures – that was basically in there.

Ok, that was part of that process. Have you noticed, say, over the last 10 or 15 years – and you're a long time observer of the art world and probably of AIDS related themes within the art world as well – can you periodise artistic responses to the epidemic? Are we still making the same kind of work we were making 10 years ago? If not, what are the new themes that you've seen emerge?

Well, there's a lot more, thankfully… a lot more ambiguity. It's like an art student, if they've had Catholic school background, then you see crucifixes riddled throughout their work. So I think, similarly, that people's responses to loss of life, and the body, and the shift towards having to deal with death showed up in a lot of 'pill art', and what I called 'bottle art'. I'm certainly guilty of making a lot of bottle art [pause] that dealt with blood big time. Andres Serrano, specifically, and the whole NEA fiasco – it was militant, predictably and appropriately. However, some people did survive, and so, there was a second tier that appeared where people realised, "Well, I've grappled with and tried to resolve some of the issues related to mortality – but, you know, now I'm going to actually live, so I have to start rebuilding a consciousness that deals with that". And so, I'm finding the work a lot more poly-valent, multi-vocal, [pause] since it doesn't clobber you over the head so succinctly.

I think one of my favourite artists from the [early] period was David Wojnarowicz; it's just this rant and it felt appropriate to the time. And it just feels that that pitch is missing, on the other hand, the consciousness – political consciousness in the US at least – is so polarised between the Left and the Right that – and people have been minding their verbiage under what looks like a very McCarthy-istic trajectory since 9-11. What's troubling about 9-11 and all the images and sound bites from that experience is how they have become so sacrosanct. The government was able to codify that event without trying to examine the underbelly of what was involved and what the government may or may not have been able to prevent, or know, or orchestrate. So, I think as a result, things are a little bit – [pause] things are in an upswing because we're faced with such a conservative agenda right now, and I'm finding that I'm attracted more to work, specifically within the same parameters that I find some of the work that I made – had to adhere to performance formula – where, if you could resolve it from reading the theatre unfolding, or from the title of the work, or you could see fallacies in the work from 20 feet away, then you could resolve it and not have to engage with the work. But if the work was seductive enough and ambiguous enough to let me impose my own narrativity and discovery, then there is much more going on, much more audience access – I'm finding things are a little more seductive in a way that I think allows people the leverage to create their own discourse.

Do you think sculpture allows you to do that more than, say, photography does?

[Long pause] Well, I certainly thought sculpture addressed the visceral dimensionality of the body because of the way it occupies space and your relationship to it. But I think that similar things can be accomplished conceptually, and that's the vein I'm working in now. But it's also, frankly, a stamina issue for me. Some of the work I made was so

cumbersome and heavy and I physically can't coordinate orchestrating it, much less moving it around, so it's just more convenient to see if I can pull off the same feat through this vehicle.

There's a big theme there that you might go on to explore; you might start making pieces out of Styrofoam and things like that to talk about that idea of, you know, the body losing energy and how you make art once your body loses energy and things like that.

Well, I think I'm already faced with that. I mean, the work that I'm now doing is not performed in real time, although it talks about the passage of time. Some of my fields of preoccupation is time lapse, but I think real time web-casts are much more relevant to the development of art, whatever it is, than what I'm doing to it. But this is what I'm doing because it's manageable.

I like the way you were talking about the kind of self-censorship that has gone on since 9-11 and that people don't want to ruffle too many feathers and definitely don't want to expose themselves in speaking out about something. I wonder if that might account for the relative absence in talking about the recent sero-conversions, the rise of new infections that we've seen in Australia in the last 2 or 3 years and maybe here a little bit longer – the fairly big spike in new infections – and I imagine that 10, 12 years ago artist's would've been onto this; there would've been a huge body of work and it would've been angry and there would've been a lot more discussion about why this is happening. Now I'm not seeing any art made about the rise of sero-conversions. How could you account for this, do you think?

[Pause]

I mean that's my observation as well.

Sure. You know, there's – I don't know if there's art made about it or not, but I suspect there is. [Pause] I think the spike – it's more useful to try and figure out what the spike did to you. I don't think people expected that they would have longevity – that they just didn't have an available [treatment] option before. And, again, it's the seduction – so some theorists say – that there's seduction to wanting to belong to a special club. [Pause] I suspect it's probably an uptake in drug use, that suspends judgement, perhaps. But I can't imagine… I mean, a blow-job is so low risk relative to so many other forms of sexual embellishment, that it just makes me wonder. I suspect that it might be, well, people have said that all of the body beautiful [pharmaceutical] ads make it a perfectly do-able transition [to being infected], when in fact it's the worst nightmare imaginable.

Vile and nasty. Yeah.

Yeah. But I do see people starting to talk about seduction again [pause] and, you know, I'm always concerned with it.

I'm just wondering, in terms of art being made whether it's – in Australia we have a conservative government at the moment, and here a very conservative government – and maybe people are a little bit worried about making themselves

targets. If you come out and say, "Listen, I'm really worried that we've got new infections", and "Are you guys stupid, we've had 15 years of education, why is this happening?" then maybe you'd be worried that the government will come out and say "Yes, we're really worried about this as well and we don't think that your AIDS organisations, your gay-based organisations, are working and we're going to cut funding off…"

Well, it's just occurring now. 40% of Ryan White money [for AIDS and People Living with HIV and AIDS services] has been cut to the counties in the San Francisco area; it's huge.

Really?

Yeah. So for instance a lot of AIDS organisations have been decimated or they've needed to curtail staff by 40%. I mean this is very real, in terms of the delivery of life sustaining services…

How did they justify the cut?

Well, there is an economic shift from the expansionist development of markets under the exploitation by the World Trade Organisation under Clinton, and the money had to have come from somewhere, in order for people to make incredible fortunes; the Dot-Commers of course are in a bust cycle now and so the State and Federal coffers are empty. And so, it's justifiable that there's nothing to fund these organisations with – except when you compare the figures to the huge outlay towards war expenditure. But there was a lot more money before this administration.

We were talking – I was trying to get you talking a little bit about the audience responses to your works before; I'm wondering if you've got any things like a visitor's comments book of any shows that you've done, where people might have recorded their responses, or letters maybe?

You know, I'm sure the venues have them, but I never collected them.

Does it interest you to know what they think?

[Pause] Yeah, because, like, art reviews, it really allows me to consider how things succeeded or failed in terms of what I set out to do. I think I'm perhaps guilty of having this be a Life Art experience, where I'm doing it because I need to do it for myself – so, unfortunately that forecloses a lot of interplay and cross-pollination of ideas. So, yeah, I am very interested to find out if – because often, you know, people will generate a response that I could never have anticipated, and it's just wonderful to bundle that in – it does inform how you develop, obviously.

I'm interested in that response because I'm interested in art in the service of public health and the way that artists can, in a way, become public health workers in either disseminating messages about the epidemic - on the most explicit level providing information and education about the epidemic - but also providing opportunities for people to grieve and work through, you know, their emotions of

the epidemic. I suppose that's what I was thinking about in asking for your responses to artworks that you've experienced and seen, and your experience with the Quilt and, you know, how it makes you respond. I'm interested in that.

Well, the Quilt, unlike a lot of works I've produced, has a different venue and I think the venue affords a different form of social work to occur. For instance, [pause] a lot of the work that I've done and a lot of the venues that I've had the work shown in – I've often thought was preaching to the converted. So to find a vehicle that broadcasts more broadly, I think, is much more effective if that's what the mission is.

Ok, great. That is pretty much all the questions I have for you. Do you have any additional things you might want to add to what we've talked about, or that you want to go back to?

[Pause]

I think we've got time.

[Pause] Even though I've had the chance to become an attorney through an Empowerment Grant, at New College in San Francisco, which has allowed me to perform direct services to people that need [pause] help with specific things, at the end of the day, I still do just retreat to my laptop and make peace; you know, it could take a night or a month to make specific artworks, but it's also such a source of personal solace for me to go there. I feel fortunate that so many forms of activism might fulfil such a variety of needs. I guess, that's about it.

Ok, I'll turn this off then. Thank you.

[End of interview]

[*Postscript added by Elliott*: In retrospect, *Floaters* ended up functioning as a memorial of sorts, since the silhouette in the diptych is actually that of my partner who passed away shortly after this interview, from an AIDS related illness.]

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