

“I am a bit fed up with AIDS, AIDS, AIDS!”¹: Stuart Marshall and AIDS Activist Video 1.0 + 2.0 (extract).

By Conal McStravick

The year 1989 was a frenetic year for Stuart Marshall (1949-1993), video artist, lecturer, curator and AIDS community activist, who in the early-to-mid 1980s innovated the AIDS video activist form.

In March that year, Marshall took four weeks out of his teaching schedule at Chelsea College of Art to undertake a four-week residency with Video In, Vancouver. During the residency, Marshall would curate video programmes and talks, including his recently debuted Channel 4 “OUT” documentary *Desire* (1989) and *Screen Memories*, a public lecture on video art and psychoanalysis. But most significantly, he would begin work on a new video commission, *Robert Marshall* (1991). By contrast, Marshall’s AIDS ennui in the opening quote, disguised complex personal motives and an increasing political urgency before travelling to Canada². In unforeseen ways, 1989 would become more frantic still for Marshall. And yet, this would inspire his next approach to AIDS video.

Video In was one of Canada’s founding and most influential media centres. In 1983, Marshall had represented Great Britain during screenings at Video In for the touring International Festival of Video Art. He was invited, in part, as co-founder of London Video Arts (founded 1976, now LUX), the UK’s foremost video arts organisation³. On the Vancouver leg of the tour, Marshall appeared on *Gayblevision*⁴ a lesbian and gay cable TV series to discuss “Gay T.V. in England”. In footage, recovered in the last decade, Marshall discusses a dearth of U.K. gay and lesbian TV and his new AIDS video work *Kaposi’s Sarcoma (A Plague and Its Symptoms)*, being screened at the festival.

In this interview, a unique insight into AIDS video at its founding moment, Marshall offered a pointed critique of the UK media response to AIDS, which he described as no more than “a sophisticated form of queer bashing.”⁵ Marshall shared an impassioned commentary on the early gay community response to AIDS in the UK with the Vancouver audience. A city like so many others, just coming to grips with its own community response to the burgeoning crisis⁶. After touring Canada, *Kaposi’s Sarcoma* was shown once in the UK at the *Sexual Meditations* event at The 33, Luton⁷, shortly after Marshall’s return. It was then lost to the archive for over 40 years.

(...)

Fast forward to April 2024, when I finally relocated *Kaposi’s Sarcoma*, Marshall’s missing AIDS video work, during doctoral research at Saw Gallery, Ottawa.

Immediately, it was possible to see insights into Marshall’s foundational, intertextual and intersectional AIDS video — that resonated with the later *Robert Marshall*. I located an autofiction sensibility in Marshall’s social justice, AIDS video activism 1.0; even more present in the autobiographical and alternative health-themed *Robert Marshall*, Marshall’s AIDS video activism 2.0. In *Kaposi’s Sarcoma*, Marshall reads from a medical journal article. The article, “Kaposi’s Sarcoma in Homosexual Men— A Report of Eight Cases” from *The Lancet* was the UK’s first medical report on AIDS, published in 1981. Its title cites the name of a soft tissue cancer, one of the first visible signs of the newly observed immune disease impacting gay men in urban centres of the United States. The subtitle quotes the early queer theorist and AIDS activist Guy Hocquenghem (which in turn cites Artaud): “Syphilis is not just a virus but an ideology too; it forms a phantasy whole, like the plague and its symptoms.”⁸

Equally, Marshall’s video text narrative taps *Living with Kaposi’s Sarcoma and AIDS*, a 1982 article by Canadian AIDS activist Michael Lynch. Wherein Lynch saw in the AIDS response—chiefly, the

¹ Stuart Marshall quoted in a letter to Karen Knights at Video In, July 31st, 1988.

² See David Curtis, *A History of Artists’ Film and Video in Britain, 1897-2004*, BFI, 2006, p.274.

³ The Saw Gallery International Festival of Video Art toured Ottawa, Toronto, Winnipeg and Vancouver in April/May 1983.

⁴ *Gayblevision* (1980-1986), was a lesbian and gay magazine series on Cable 10 West End TV in Vancouver.

⁵ Stuart Marshall, “Gay T.V. in England”, *Gayblevision* (Episode 37), TX: 4th and 18th July 1983.

⁶ The first AIDS Information Forum in Vancouver was on March 12th, 1983, two months previously.

⁷ *Sexual Meditations* was organised by Yve Lomax, Stuart Marshall and Steve Dwoskin, Saturday 28th April 1983 at The 33, Luton.

⁸ Guy Hocquenghem, *Homosexual Desire*, 1978, p.70.

re-medicalisation and re-pathologisation of gay men—a complete set-back to gay liberation itself.⁹ Marshall enhances this view, turning the tables on a medical consultation-cum-ethical debate with an AIDS clinician, the clone-ish, sparkling Richard Wells. The action takes place in a gay bar, crossing the cruising “look” with the “gaze” of surveillance. The microscope lens of the medical gaze focuses the tyranny of idealised nature, previously seen in images of TV nature docs, wherein medically examined gay men are deemed to be “unnatural” and are ultimately left for dead. The piece concludes with a vivid, nocturnal reflection on what it feels like to live through the first, violent waves of AIDS homophobia.

In *Robert Marshall*, produced between 1989-1991, Marshall took time during his Video-In residency to visit family on Vancouver Island. A motive for his trip is revealed as Marshall watches home movies of his conventional 1950s childhood in Stockport; including images of his deceased father, Robert, for whom the video is named. We are told that Stuart Marshall has “no memory” of his father. A fact explained as he summons the vivid and traumatic scene of his father’s death, which he witnessed as a child. The action switches to a domestic kitchen. Marshall reveals that he has been HIV antibody positive since 1986. He juxtaposes his alternative healthcare routine of herbs and acupuncture treatment with a telephone consultation with a San Francisco MD. They discuss the pros and cons of the then controversial AIDS medication, AZT, which Marshall declined as an anti-AZT activist. During his Vancouver trip, Marshall became mired in a public dispute between Positively Healthy, his alternative AIDS healthcare support group, and investigative journalist Duncan Campbell for *New Statesman*. Campbell claimed that Positively Healthy were promoting quack medicine¹⁰. A counter defence played out in LGBTQ+ newspaper, The Pink Paper, that led to litigation between the two papers¹¹ and divided the community.

In 1988, Stuart Marshall was jokingly “fed up with AIDS”; no doubt a consequence of the nauseating culture wars of *Section 28* and AIDS stigma spurred by the doom-laden “Don’t Die of Ignorance” adverts of the UK government’s moralising AIDS response. By 1989, whether fighting for his medical rights, or against environmental harm and ecocide,¹² Marshall and the wider LGBTQ+ and AIDS activist community had found new zeal and deeper solidarity. He stated: ‘I will decide the route that I follow. I refuse anyone, be they pharmaceutical, industry, doctor, political spokesman, or journalist to tell me how to live. I will live and die on my own terms.’¹³

Stuart Marshall died in 1993, aged 44, from AIDS complications. When he fell ill, he was travelling in California and Mexico, researching for a new TV commission titled *Keep Taking the Medicine*, on increasing treatment choices for people with AIDS. Seen together for the first time, *Kaposi’s Sarcoma* and *Robert Marshall* illustrate a developing ethics and poetics of collective and “holistic” community resistance, that Marshall located through adversity. These are works that, beyond his lifetime, compel Marshall’s audiences to forge new solidarities and recollectivise LGBTQIA+ and AIDS activism.

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⁹ Michael Lynch, “Living with Kaposi’s Sarcoma and AIDS”, *The Body Politic*, No. 88, November 1982.

¹⁰ See Duncan Campbell, “Positively Unhealthy”, *New Statesman*, September 29th, 1989.

Further 1989 *New Statesman* articles by Duncan Campbell titled “Sharp Practice”, “Let Them Eat Shit” and “Pretty Poison”, expand upon the initial accusations.

¹¹ Marshall eloquently summed up his feelings in the *Positively Healthy News* article “Don’t Blame Me— Reflections on guilt and responsibility”, Issue 2, *Positively Healthy News*, March 1989.

¹² Stuart Marshall, *ibid*.

¹³ Stuart Marshall speaking at the OXAIDS “Promoting Our Health Conference”, September 11th, 1989, quoted in “Witch Hunt”, *The Pink Paper*, September 16th, 1989.