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Testing the Limits Records
1987-1995
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Summary

- Main entry:** Testing The Limits (Organization)
- Title:** Testing the Limits Records, 1987-1995
- Size:** 7 linear feet (16 boxes and 2197 videotapes)
- Source:** Donated by Testing the Limits, 1998
- Abstract:** Testing the Limits was a video collective formed in New York in 1987 to document AIDS activism. The collective produced a short work, *Testing the Limits: NYC*, in 1987 and a feature-length documentary *Voices from the Front* in 1991. The collective's final production was a four-part documentary *The Question of Equality* which chronicled the gay and lesbian struggle for civil rights. The Testing the Limits Records consist of both organizational records and video footage shot by the collective. Of the over two thousand videos in the collection, 127 videos are currently available for viewing.
- Access:** Advance notice required. Apply at <http://www.nypl.org/mssref>. Video not listed in this guide is unavailable for use pending preservation transfer.
- Copyright information:** No duplication can be made of videotapes without prior written consent from the videographers.
- Preferred citation:** Testing the Limits Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.
- Special formats** Photographs, Video recordings.

Related materials note

AIDS Activist Videotape Collection. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

People With AIDS Coalition Records. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

ACT UP New York Records. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

ACT UP Oral History Project Videotapes. Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library.

Historical note

Testing the Limits was initially formed when Gregg Bordowitz met David Meieran while filming ACT UP's 1987 demonstration on Wall Street. Through the Whitney Museum's independent study program Bordowitz and Meieran met other video artists involved with AIDS activism and founded Testing the Limits as a collective. Joining Bordowitz and Meieran were Sandra Elgear, Robyn Hutt and Hilery Joy Kipnis, who were joined shortly thereafter by Jean Carlomusto. Within the first year of its existence the collective produced its seminal work *Testing the Limits: NYC* as well as videos for the Gay Men's Health Crisis.

After the completion of *Testing the Limits: NYC*, Bordowitz and Carlomusto left the collective due to philosophical differences with the remaining members who sought to transform the collective into a fundable production company. Bordowitz and Carlomusto wanted to continue making low cost and quickly produced videos that could serve as a feedback loop to the activist community. Bordowitz later joined Carlomusto as a producer of the Gay Men's Health Crisis cable television series "Living with AIDS." (see the AIDS Activists Videotape Collection (<<http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/spe/rbk/faids/aidsvideo.pdf>>))

From 1988 through 1991 the collective, led by Meieran, Elgear and Hutt as producers, continued work on what became a feature-length documentary, *Voices from the Front*. With ACT UP's actions as a central force and backdrop, *Voices from the Front* documented many of the grass roots organizations that developed in order to provide the many services and therapies needed by people with AIDS that both the government and the pharmaceutical industry seemed willfully negligent in providing. These include the People With AIDS Coalition, the People With AIDS Health Group, the Community Research Initiative, and People with Immune System Disorders. Activists are shown demonstrating for the principles ACT UP stood for, including the development of new drug therapies, inclusion of women and minorities in clinical trials, and nationalized health care. The video includes interviews with many leaders in the struggle: Vito Russo, Maxine Wolfe, Keith Cylar and Aldyn McKean, among many others. Like its predecessor, *Voices from the Front* garnered critical praise on the film festival and art house circuit and was eventually broadcast on the Showtime cable television channel.

The brutal killing of openly gay teenager Julio Rivera in his Jackson Heights neighborhood inspired the collective's next project, *Under Attack*, a documentary on the homophobic violence faced by gay men, lesbians and transsexuals throughout America. Initially, the collective focused on the community-based organizing that led to the arrest and conviction of Rivera's murderers and on Measure 9, an anti-gay ballot initiative in Oregon. With funding secured with grants from the Independent Television Service and the UK's Channel 4, the project's scope was widened to become a four-part television series, *The Question of Equality*, which examined the entire spectrum of lesbian and gay civil rights issues in America. The series was shown on PBS stations in America and on Channel Four in the U.K. in 1995.

After the completion of *The Question of Equality*, Testing the Limits developed other ideas for documentaries, but the collective dissolved before these progressed beyond the development stage.

Scope and content note

The Testing the Limits records consist of both organizational records and video footage shot by the collective. Of the over two thousand videos in the collection, 127 videos are currently available for viewing. These videos consist of camera originals documenting AIDS activism, chiefly demonstrations by ACT UP New York. Some of the footage available in the collection was edited into the collective's *Testing the Limits: NYC* and *Voices from the Front* productions. The collection includes new transfers of the broadcast masters of both of these works. There are no videos currently available from the collective's four-part series *The Question of Equality*. However, transcriptions of many of the interviews done for the series are available .

Arrangement note

The Testing the Limits Records are organized in the following series:

- I. AIDS Activism, 1987-1991
- II. *The Question of Equality*, 1990-1995

Series descriptions and container list

I. AIDS Activism, 1987-1991

Beginning at ACT UP's 1987 demonstration on Wall Street, Testing the Limits documented all aspects of the struggle for health care and civil rights that faced people with AIDS. By shooting voluminous amount of footage and editing as collective entity, the group was able to produce its short format documentary *Testing the Limits: NYC in 1987* and *Voices from the Front* in 1991. *Testing the Limits: NYC* documents early AIDS activism in New York in the wake of the mobilization of ACT UP. The documentary explored the many political, social and economic dilemmas caused by the spread of the AIDS virus in New York City. *Voices from the Front* expands on many of the ideas presented in the collective's earlier work.

I.A. Administrative Records, 1987-1990

<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
1	1	Budgets
	2	Correspondence
	3	Distribution Contracts
	4	Invoices
	5	Photographs
	6	Press kit
	7	Reviews
	8	Screening information
	9	Synopsis
	10	Tax documents
	11-13	Video logs

I.B. Camera original videotapes, 1987-1990

The camera originals consist of unedited footage shot by members of Testing the Limits on ¾ inch U-matic stock.

I.B1. ACT UP actions

Descriptions of the following actions where available are from the ACT UP time capsule (<http://www.actupny.org/documents/capsule-home.html>)

<u>Unit ID</u>	
1713, 1717	ACT NOW AIDS Vigil, 1988 Jun 24 (2 tapes)
1704-1705	ACT NOW Kiss-in, 1988 Feb 14 (2 tapes)
1834-1836	Cosmopolitan Magazine, 1988 Jan 15 (3 tapes) ACT UP NY's Women's Caucus organized the first ACT UP action focused on women and HIV. Five hundred people protested an article telling heterosexual women that unprotected vaginal intercourse with an HIV+ man is safe. A documentary about the action, "Doctors, Liars, and Women: AIDS Activists Say NO to Cosmo," produced by two Women's Caucus members, is later shown around the country, winning awards and placed in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art and is available in the New York Public Library's AIDS Activist Videotape Collection
1722-1725	Department of Health and Human Services, 1988 Oct 10 (4 tapes)
1719-1721	Food and Drug Administration, 1988 Oct 8 (3 tapes)
1726-1730	Food and Drug Administration, 1988 Oct 11 (5 tapes)

<u>Unit ID</u>	
1715-1717	Joseph, Dr. Stephen C., 1988 Jul 28 (3 tapes) Dr. Stephen C. Joseph was Health Commissioner of New York City from 1986-1989. Joseph became a target of ACT UP for not having recognized the extent of the AIDS problem soon enough and failing to take sufficient action.
1702-1703, 1836	MetLife, 1988 Feb 18 (3 tapes)
1767-1768	Myers, Dr. Woodrow, 1990 Jan 18 (2 tapes) ACT UP spearheads an investigation into newly-elected New York City Mayor David Dinkins' selection of Dr. Woodrow Myers for Commissioner of Health. It finds out that as Indiana State Health Commissioner, Myers endorsed and attempted to implement mandatory HIV testing, partner tracing and quarantine. After ACT UP protests at City Hall, Dinkins states that these policies will not be tolerated in New York City.
1772-1776, 1815-1816	National Institutes of Health, 1990 May 21 (7 tapes) ACT UP/NY organized a national action to "Storm the NIH (National Institutes of Health)." One thousand protesters demanded more AIDS treatments, especially for the opportunistic infections that kill PWAs, an end to the severe underrepresentation of women and people of color in clinical trials and the formation of a Women's Health Committee in the AIDS Clinical Trial System at the NIH.
1699-1701	New Hampshire, 1992 Jan 10 (3 tapes)
1695-1698	New York University Hospital, 1988 Jan 25 (3 tapes)
1747-1755	St. Patrick's Cathedral, 1989 Dec 10 (9 tapes) ACT UP and WHAM! (Women's Health Action and Mobilization) co-sponsor the first "Stop the Church" demonstration. 4,500 protesters gather outside St. Patrick's Cathedral to decry the Church's opposition to safer sex education, violent homophobia and its attempts to block access to safe and legal abortions. 111 people are arrested. The news media choose to focus on, and distort, a single Catholic demonstrator's personal protest involving a communion wafer.
1825, 1829	San Francisco International AIDS Conference 1990, Jul 16-23 (2 tapes) Members of ACT UP/NY join AIDS activists from around the world at the Sixth International Conference on AIDS in San Francisco (see also: Shouting-down Louis Sullivan). Demonstrations throughout the conference highlight issues of importance to the AIDS community. ACT UP/NY's Treatment and Data Committee issues its 1990 Treatment Agenda which outlines the direction the AIDS research community should be taking in the coming year which becomes one of the most talked-about documents at the conference. The PISD (People with Immune System Disorders) caucus introduces the San Francisco Plan, which outlines the civil and medical rights of people with immune system disorders
1682-1683	Sloan-Kettering Cancer Institute, 1987 Jul 21, 24-25 (2 tapes)
DV003	Wall Street, 1988 Mar 24 To celebrate its first anniversary, ACT UP returns to Wall Street. More than 100 activists are arrested; ACT UP receives major media coverage and issues central to the AIDS crisis are reported. The concept of "AIDS activism" gains credibility
1685	White House, 1991 Sep 30 (1 tape) ACT UP targets President George H.W. Bush at the White House, declaring that, with over 120,000 Americans dead from AIDS, the President is getting away with murder. In a loud and angry march to the White House, activists demanded that the President stop his deliberate policy of neglect. Eighty-four people were arrested in acts of civil disobedience that included chaining themselves to the gates of the White House and to each other. President Bush spent the day in Disney World.

I.B2. ACT UP meetings

Videos contained in this series document ACT UP in its various stages of planning its actions.

<u>Unit ID</u>	
1765-1766, 1681	ACT UP meetings, undated (3 tapes)
1679, 1680	NIH Meet and Greet, 1990 Apr 10 (2 tapes)
1771, 1831, 1832	NIH Pre-action Meeting, 1990 May 5 (3 tapes)
1690-1693	Town Meeting (New York City), 1987 Sep 22 (4 tapes)

I.B3. Interviews

1737	Barr, David
1818	Canbulo, Dr. Michael / Michael Petrellis
1780-82	Cylar, Keith (3 tapes)
1760	Davis, Iris (Dr.)
1761	Davis, Dr. Iris / Derek Hodel
1824	Eggan, Fred and Jon Greenberg
1779	Ferraro, Joe / Bob Lederer
1822	Franke-Ruta, Garance / Bob Lederer
1763	Franke-Ruta, Garance / Mark Harrington / Ray Navarro
1757	Garcia, Robert
1823	Greenberg, John
1828	Harrington, Mark
1764	Johnson, Ron
1745	Lederer, Bob / Robert Vasquez
1779	Lederer, Bob
1830	Maggenti, Maria
1819-20	McKean, Aldyn (2 tapes)
1764	Navarro, Ray / Ron Johnson
1758	Nesline, Michael
1756	Palmer, Marvin / Charles Stow
1821	Ritter, Kathryn / Garance Franke-Ruta
1841-1842	Russo, Vito
1746	Smith, Rebecca / Natasha
1688	Sonnabend, Dr. Joseph / Michael Callen
1762	Staley, Peter / Mark Harrington
1706-07	Thomas, Kendall (2 tapes)
1743, 1826, 1827	Wolfe, Maxine (3 tapes)

I.B4. People With AIDS Health Group / Coalition

The People With AIDS Coalition (PWA Coalition / PWAC), a non-profit organization incorporated in New York State, was founded in New York City in 1985 by a group of some nine persons all of whom had contracted AIDS. They hoped to combat the atmosphere of ignorance, fear, and hostility which attended the development of the disease from its onset. They adopted the acronyms "PWA(s)" for Person(s) with AIDS and PWARC(s) for Person(s) with AIDS Related Complex, to replace what they regarded as pejorative stereotypes ("victims", "sufferers", "patients") commonly employed by the mass media when referring to persons living with AIDS or HIV.

See the People with AIDS Coalition Records, Manuscripts and Archives Division, The New York Public Library
(<http://www.nypl.org/research/chss/spe/rbk/faids/pwac.pdf>)

PWAC was one of the organizations documented in detail for *Voices from the Front*.

<u>Unit ID</u>	
1708-12, 1738-39	PWAC Forum (7 tapes)
	Press conferences (8 tapes)
1678	tape 1
1679	tape 2
1689	tape 3
1731	tape 4
1732	tape 5
1733	tape 6
1740	tape 7
1742	tape 8
1676-1677	RU-486 meetings (2 tapes)
	Miscellaneous footage
1680	Ports, Suki
1737	PWA Cutaways

I.C. Broadcast video

Finalized broadcast versions of *Testing the Limits: NYC* and *Voices from the Front*.

<u>Unit ID</u>	
DV001	<i>Testing the Limits: NYC</i>
DV002	<i>Voices from the Front</i>

II. *The Question of Equality*, 1990-1995

Upon completion of *Voices from the Front* the collective began work on what would become its largest project. Initially, the collective developed what was to be feature-length film to be titled "Under Attack". However, after receiving a major grant from the Independent Television Service, the collective transformed itself into a full-fledged production company and expanded the project into a four-part television series about the struggle for gay and lesbian equality in America, entitled *The Question of Equality*. To accomplish this the company, with Meieran as executive producer, split into four units that would each produce a show for the series. The shows were entitled: "OutRage '69", directed by Arthur Dong; "Culture Wars," directed by Tina di Feliciano; "Hollow Liberty," directed by Robyn Hutt; and "Generation Q," directed by Robert Byrd.

Currently only the organizational records concerning the production of *The Question of Equality* are available. These include transcriptions of many of the interviews done for the series. A list of the more than 1400 videos and 20 films that became *The Question of Equality* is available by request.

II.A. Administration

<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
2	1-6	Correspondence
		Licensing agreements
3	1-2	Music
	3-4	Visual material
	5	Video footage
	6	Invoices
4	1	Channel 4
	2	Independent Television Service
	3	Scribner's
	4	Miscellaneous contracts
		Permission requests
	5	Archive Films
	5	BBC
	5	Blackside
	5	CBC
	5	CBS
	5	CBS News
	5	CNN
	6	CSPAN
	6	Grindberg
	6	KRON
	6	MTV
	6	Multimedia Entertainment
	6	NBC
	7	NPR
	7	The Pentagon
	7	Petrified Films
	7	Wandering Star Productions
	7	William Morris
	7	Wolfson Center
	7	WNET
	8	Miscellaneous
5	1	Press releases

<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
II.B. Production		
5	2	Acquired media cue sheets
	3	Show 1
	4	Show 2
	5	Show 3
	6-7	Show 4
	8	EDL and automated reports
	9	Meeting Minutes
	10	Reports
		Poetry
		Scripts and treatments
6	1	Series concept and artistic approach
	2-4	Show 1
	5	Show 2
	6	Show 3
	7	Show 4
7	1	Shooting schedules
	2	Show credit lines
	3	Test reviews
	4	Video library inventories
	5-14	Video logs
8	1-12	Video logs
9	1-5	Video logs
		Visual Materials
	6-7	Graphics
	8	Stonewall '94
	9	Washington '94
	10-11	Miscellaneous
II.C. Research		
10	1-2	Interviews
		Research files
	3	research chronology
		persons and organizations
	4	Anchor, Cliff
	5	GLEMC
	6	McGreivy, Susan
	7	Miscellaneous (Bill Bahlman, Perry Brass, Marc Huestes)
	8	Huestes, Mark
	9	Norton Sound
	10	Red Wing, Donna
	11	Title Search
12	Screening Notes	
II.D. Video Transcriptions		
11	1	Anchor, Cliff
	2	Baehr, C. J.
	3	Baehr, Nina and Genora
	4	Ballard, Ronald
	5	Bar interviews
	6	Barbara, Tony and Michael Griffin

<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
11	7	Beach interviews
	8	Bettencourt family
	9	Bettencourt, Troix
	10	Bond, Jill
	11	Bower, Michael
	12	Boyce, Candace
	13	Boykins, Scotty
	14	Brock, Carole
	15	Denning, Pat and Carole
	16	Domi, Tanya
12	17	Dyer, Kate
	1-9	Eagle Center (Los Angeles)
	10	Ettlebrick, Paula
	11	Foley, Dan
	12-13	Foreman, Matthew
	14	Foster families
	13-15	Fouratt, Jim
13	16	Frank, Barney
	1	Freeman, Brian
	2	Frohnmayr, John
	3	The Gay Agenda
	4	Gay Rights / Special Rights
	5	Griffo, Michaela
	6	Harris, Alice
	7	Hay, Harry and John Burnside
	8	Hemphill, Essex
	9	Hughes, Ruth
	10	Jay, Karla
	11	Johnson, William
	12	Kame'eleihiwa, Lilikala
	13	King Elise
	14	Kohler, Bob
15	Kuromiyo, Kiyoshi	
14	1	Lomberg-Lew, Sarah and Marnie Givin
	2	Marks, Robert
	3	Maupin, Armistead
	4	McGreivy, Susan
	5	Meinhold, Keith
	6	Melillo, Joe and Pat Logan
	7	Minkowitz, Donna
	8	Mike
	9	Nestle, Joan
	10	Norman, Pat and Karen
15	11-14	Oregon (No on Nine)
	1	Oregon (No on Nine)
	2	Padilla, Virginia and Robert
	3	Perry, Troy
	4	Phelps, Johnny
	5	Red Wing, Donna
	6	Rivera, Peg
	7	Rivera, Sylvia
8	Rubin, Marc	

Testing the Limits Records
Series descriptions and box list
Series II. *The Questions of Equality*

<u>Box</u>	<u>Fol</u>	
15	9	Rushing, Byron
	10	Sadat, Kathleen
	11	Seibert, Scott
16	1	Shahar, Robin and Fran
	2	Shelley, Martha
	3	Street interviews
	4	Tavai, Val
	5	Tommy the Bartender
	6	Tongues Untied
	7	Underwood, Barbara
	8	Vasquez, Robert
	9	Vincent, Jack
	10	Wandel, Rick
	11	Wicker, Randy
	12	Wilde, Kathleen
	13	Miscellaneous edited transcripts