

**The New York Public Library
Humanities and Social Sciences Library
Manuscripts And Archives Division**

**Vito Russo
Papers, 1969-1990**

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SUMMARY

- Title:** Vito Russo Papers, 1969-1990
- Size:** 21 linear feet
- Source:** Gifts of Arnie Kantrowitz and Jed Mattes, 1995; Telling Pictures, 1998-1999
- Restrictions:** Under the terms of Russo's will, most correspondence is closed until November 7, 2015.
- Video and sound recordings unavailable until duplicated.
- Description:** The papers reflect Russo's personal life and career as a writer, lecturer, film historian, and gay rights and AIDS activist. They include correspondence, journals, appointment books, writings by and about Russo, floppy disks, photographs, videotapes, audio cassettes, vinyl records, ephemera, and posthumous material.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Vito Russo (1946-1990), a film historian, writer, and gay rights and AIDS activist, was born on July 11, 1946 in New York City, the son of Angelo and Angelina Russo. He was raised in New York City and completed his undergraduate work at Fairleigh Dickinson University. He received a master's degree in cinema from New York University in 1971 and worked as a film distributor for the Museum of Modern Art from 1971-73 and Cinema 5 Limited from 1973-75.

Russo became active in gay politics in 1970 when he joined New York's Gay Activist's Alliance (GAA). During the 1980s, Russo co-founded and became a frequent speaker at meetings, demonstrations, and fundraisers for AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT-UP). In 1985, Russo became one of the founding members of the Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), an organization which sought to counteract the negative effects of the media on gays, lesbians, and people with AIDS.

A freelance writer for most of his career, Russo was one of the first critics to bring a gay liberationist's view to popular culture, particularly film. In the mid-1970s, Russo and *Village Voice* columnist Arthur Bell co-wrote a column for *Gaysweek* that consisted primarily of transcripts of phone conversations between the two writers. He later wrote a regular column for *The Advocate* called "Russo on Film." Russo's essays, interviews, and reviews appeared in the gay and mainstream press, including *Rolling Stone*, *New York*, *Outweek*, *The Village Voice*, and *Esquire*. He also wrote material for several performers, including Lily Tomlin. He was granted awards by many foundations, including The Human Rights Campaign Fund, The Stonewall Foundation, The Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, The Alliance of Gay Artists in the Entertainment Industry, The Hetrick-Martin Institute, and the National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation.

In 1983, Russo wrote, produced, and co-hosted a series focusing on the gay community called "Our Time" for WNYC-TV and in 1985 he was the national publicity director for the Academy Award-winning documentary, "The Times of Harvey Milk." He achieved prominence on-screen as one of the subjects of "Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt," which won the 1990 Academy Award for best documentary. The film focused on Russo's loss of his lover, Jeffrey Sevcik, to AIDS in 1986.

Russo began giving film and lecture presentations in the mid-1970s about the treatment of gay characters in film. This ever-changing program called "The Celluloid Closet," which he presented at universities, museums and film festivals all over the United States, Europe, and Australia, eventually evolved into a book of the same name. *The Celluloid Closet* was published by Harper and Row in 1981 and revised in 1987. During the spring 1990 semester, Russo taught two courses at the University of California at Santa Cruz: "The Celluloid Closet" and "Documenting Gay Activism."

Russo learned he had AIDS in 1985 but was determined to continue his demanding speaking and teaching schedule despite his declining health. He persisted in fighting for increased AIDS research, access to new medications, and an end to discrimination against people with AIDS. He died of AIDS-related complications on November 7, 1990 at the age of forty-four.

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE

The Vito Russo Papers document Russo's life and career as a writer, lecturer, film historian, and gay rights and AIDS activist. His papers consist of correspondence, journals, appointment books, writings by and about Russo, floppy disks, photographs, videotapes, audio cassettes, vinyl records, ephemera, and posthumous material. These materials also document the gay rights movement from the late 1970's through 1990 and narrate how the AIDS epidemic mobilized and yet devastated the gay community.

The correspondence in the collection is both personal and professional. Although it is mostly incoming, the collection does include a number of outgoing letters of which Russo kept copies, as well as photocopies of correspondence to Arnie Kantrowitz (one of the collection's donors), which were added by Kantrowitz. Russo's personal journals chronicle his work, relationships, and fight against AIDS. The posthumous material was added by Arnie Kantrowitz and contains obituaries, articles remembering Russo, and programs for his memorial services.

The items relating to Russo's professional life include his writings, lectures, and notes for presentations. His writings consist mainly of articles on film and the gay rights movement. His lectures and speeches are from his "Celluloid Closet" presentations, his teaching at University of California Santa Cruz, and various gay events. Many of the printouts from the floppy disks are also related to his professional life. The gay and lesbian ephemera consists of items such as buttons, handbills, and flyers that demand gay rights or celebrate anniversaries of the Stonewall riots. It also includes a large number of programs from gay and lesbian film festivals from the 1980s.

Audiovisual material accounts for a large percentage of the collection. Video and audio tapes include recordings of Russo's interviews, gay events, and his "Celluloid Closet" lectures. Most of the photographs in the collection are snapshots or contact sheets of friends and various gay marches and events.

NOTE ON PROVENANCE

The Vito Russo Papers were donated to the Library by Arnie Kantrowitz, Russo's close friend, and additions were contributed by Russo's literary agent, Jed Mattes and by Telling Pictures (Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, producers of the film *The Celluloid Closet*). Kantrowitz supplemented the collection with photocopies of correspondence received from Russo and files of posthumous material pertaining to Russo's life and career.

NOTE ON ARRANGEMENT

The papers are arranged in ten series: I. Correspondence; II. Journals; III. Personal Miscellaneous; IV. Posthumous Material; V. Floppy Disks and Files Printed from Disks; VI. Professional Materials; VII. Gay and Lesbian Ephemera; VIII. Videotapes; IX. Audio Formats; X. Photographs. The series are described in sequence below.

SERIES DESCRIPTIONS

Series I. Correspondence, 1969-1990

(CONTAINERS #1-5A)

NOTE: In accordance with the terms of Russo's will, most correspondence (Boxes 1-5) is closed until November 7, 2015.

The bulk of the correspondence is organized chronologically and covers both personal and professional matters. Following the bulk of the general chronological and undated correspondence are six correspondence subseries which consist of: medical and legal, family, Jeffrey Sevcik, University of California at Santa Cruz, Vito Russo outgoing, and The Celluloid Closet. The material spans 1969 to 1990, though the bulk of the correspondence dates from 1980 to 1990. The correspondence is with personal friends, organizations requesting him to speak (or thanking him for speaking), activists in the gay liberation movement, politicians, researchers and writers working on topics related to The Celluloid Closet, and fans praising/responding to The Celluloid Closet, "Common Threads," his lectures, or articles.

Correspondents include Arthur Bell (approximately 10 items, 1976-1981), Ray Bradbury (1973, 1974), Rita Mae Brown (approximately 25 items, 1975-1988 and undated), Cyd Charisse (1988 and undated), Tom Duane (1988), Harvey Fierstein (1988), Jonathan Ned Katz (1989), Ed Koch (1984, 1988), Craig Lucas (1990), Janet Maslin (1988), Bette Midler (approx. 4 items, 1972-1981; see also the medical and legal file for letters pertaining to legal action taken by Midler to prevent Russo from showing rare footage of Midler performing at the Continental Baths in 1971), Paul Monette (1988), Randy Shilts (1976, 1989), Liz Smith (approximately 3 items, 1978 and 1984), Lily Tomlin (approx. 6 items, 1975, 1976, 1989, and undated), and John Waters (1988 and undated).

The medical and legal file consists of incoming and outgoing correspondence pertaining to Mr. Russo's AIDS treatment, as well as paperwork related to the medical and public assistance he received near the end of his life. The file also includes a letter notifying Mr. Russo of a sum of money left to him in Arthur Bell's will, as well as several letters regarding Bette Midler's attempt to stop Mr. Russo from showing rare footage of her performing at the Continental Baths in 1971.

The family file contains correspondence from Mr. Russo's parents, his brother Charles, and various aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews.

The Jeffrey Sevcik folder contains intimate correspondence from Sevcik, Russo's lover who died of AIDS in 1986.

The University of California at Santa Cruz folder contains correspondence pertaining to Russo's 2-week lectureship during the 1988-89 academic year, and the 2 courses he taught from January - March 1990, "The Celluloid Closet: Lesbians/Gay Men in Film" and "Documenting Gay Activism." The file contains paperwork confirming Russo's appointment but most of the material is from Russo's students, who continued to keep in touch with him after he left the campus.

The Russo outgoing folders contain both personal and professional correspondence, including letters to friends, thank you notes, responses to letters received, and letters to the editors of various papers in which he responded to articles promoting misconceptions about gays and lesbians and/or people with AIDS.

The Celluloid Closet folders contain incoming and outgoing materials pertaining to the research for and publication of the book (both the original and revised edition). Correspondents include screenwriters Nancy Dowd, Bryan Forbes, Michael Gordon, Gavin Lambert, Edmund Morris, Edmund H. North, Tom Rickman, Stewart Stern, Daniel Taradash, and Gore Vidal; actors Paul Newman and Christopher Reeve; and others in the film industry including Lindsay Anderson, Edward Dmytryk, Richard Levinson, and Michael Winner. Also included is correspondence from Jed Mattes, Mr. Russo's literary agent, and Mr. Russo's editors at Harper and Row, as well as material pertaining to requests for movie stills and permissions to reprint them.

Unrestricted Correspondence (Box 5A) consists of outgoing correspondence printed from computer files in 1996, correspondence between Russo and Arnie Kantrowitz added to the collection by Kantrowitz following Russo's death, and one letter from Russo contributed by the recipient in 1996.

The Arnie Kantrowitz folders contain incoming and outgoing correspondence (Mr. Kantrowitz added photocopies of correspondence received from Mr. Russo) and spans from the early 1970s to the late 1980s. Many of the items are addressed to "Sunny" or "Cher," Mr. Russo and Mr. Kantrowitz's nicknames for each other; "Sunny" refers to Mr. Russo, and "Cher" refers to Mr. Kantrowitz. The letters are largely anecdotal and include many letters and postcards to and from Mr. Russo as he traveled through the United States, Australia, and Europe.

Series II. Journals, 1978-1990 (Containers #6-7)

The journals, arranged chronologically, span the years of 1978 to 1990 and offer a chronicle of the New York gay community as it faced the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic. Russo discusses his personal life and relationships, his work on *The Celluloid Closet*, his travels through the U.S., Europe, and Australia, his feelings about gay liberation and AIDS activism, and his struggle with the AIDS virus. Most of the journals contain ticket stubs, photographs, and clippings glued inside.

The 12/14/78 - 9/25/80 journal contains entries pertaining to Russo's research for *The Celluloid Closet* as well as details of his personal life. During this period he traveled to, among other places, London, Amsterdam, Dublin, Stockholm, and Athens.

The 9/26/80 - 3/29/85 journal includes continued travel to Yugoslavia, Italy, France, Wales, London, and Berlin. It also chronicles his relationship with his longtime lover, Jeffrey Sevcik. Russo writes about how the publication of his book has thrust him into the public eye.

The 3/30/85 - 11/13/87 journal chronicles Jeffrey Sevcik's struggle with and death from AIDS, as well as Russo's own diagnosis. He travels to Australia, London, and Amsterdam.

The 11/14/87 - 6/2/89 journal chronicles Russo's continued struggle against AIDS and his difficulties coping with his family once they know of his illness. Russo also writes about his involvement with ACT UP. He travels to Australia and California.

The 6/3/89 - 8/22/90 journal shows Russo battling serious depression and loneliness. The journal covers his time at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Russo expresses his frustration with the lack of new gay activism as well as his disappointment with the medical profession, which he felt had not taken an activist role in fighting the AIDS virus.

An undated journal contains a short entry regarding Russo's continued disillusionment with the medical profession. A yellow pad labeled "Vito Russo's final week in hospital" contains illegible writing presumably by Russo, as well as notes made by others.

Russo's final journal (8/90 - 11/90) chronicles his last days.

Series III. Personal Miscellaneous, 1977-1990 (Containers #8-9)

This series contains appointment calendars, biographical information, and a folder of miscellaneous items. The calendars are arranged chronologically and span the years 1977 through 1990. They contain personal and professional appointments, and many list phone numbers in the back. The folder of biographical information includes brief summaries of Russo's life and career, his curriculum vitae, and professional references. The miscellaneous folder contains Russo's daily medication list, a removal permit for the cremated remains of Jeffrey Sevcik, a list of films, and numerous phone number lists.

Series IV. Posthumous Material, 1990

Added to the collection by Arnie Kantrowitz, the posthumous material contains obituaries for Russo and articles recounting his life and career. A program from his funeral service and invitations and programs from his memorial services in New York and San Francisco are also included.

Series V. Files Printed from Disks

The Vito Russo Papers include 17 5 1/4" floppy disks which were written on a Kaypro computer using the CP/M operating system and Wordstar software. Sixteen of the 17 disks are labeled and include revisions of *The Celluloid Closet*, film notes, and interview transcripts, speeches, personal and professional correspondence, articles, *The Advocate* columns, University of California at Santa Cruz files, and a list of Russo's videotape collection. These files were printed at The New York Public Library in May and June, 1996, using a borrowed Kaypro 2X computer. Original disks are not available for use.

Series VI. Professional Materials, 1975-1990

The items relating to Russo's professional life are teaching materials, speeches and lectures, writings, research information, and various awards. The teaching materials are from his two 1990 courses at University of California, Santa Cruz. They include class lectures, syllabi, lists of films for class, student papers, and articles for course reading. The series also contains Russo's public lectures and presentations. The speeches that are identified are from his "Celluloid Closet" lectures, AIDS rallies, film festivals, and various panel discussions. The writings are articles written about Russo as well as his own pieces in gay publications, such as *The Advocate*, and in more mainstream periodicals, such as *Moviegoer*. His writings discuss the gay rights movement, gays and lesbian portrayals on film, and the film industry in general. Included in the writings are several columns of the "Russo/Bell Connection" from the *New York Native* that chronicled the daily phone conversations of Russo and Arthur Bell. Two folders also contain several drafts of Russo's writings.

The series also contains information that Russo presumably used as background material for his writings, teaching, and lectures. These consist of clippings of articles regarding gay rights and gays in film, notebooks, lists of films, interviews and writings by others, the proposal for *The Celluloid Closet* to be made into a documentary, permission requests to use film clips, etc. The awards in the collection are certificates, plaques and statues. The awards do not provide much information on the honors other than the name of the award and the presenting organization.

Series VII. Gay and Lesbian Ephemera, 1971-1990

This series consists of ephemera relating to gay and lesbian rights and interests. These include pins and buttons, notices and flyers for protests and events, programs for gay and lesbian film festivals, the constitution and newsletter of the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA), and information relating to the AIDS Quilt. Many of the handbills calling for political action are signed by “The Red Queen.” The series also has ephemera celebrating anniversaries of the Stonewall Riots of 1969. One booklet from 1979, entitled *Stonewall Romances*, includes personal accounts of the night of the riots. Other ephemera includes gay magazines, information about the media arts organization Frameline, and a program from Finocchio’s female impersonator club in San Francisco.

Series VIII. Videotapes, 1982-1989

This series includes videotapes of gay activist events, the “The Celluloid Closet” lectures, film clips used for *The Celluloid Closet*, television specials of gay interest, and clips of interviews with Russo on news and television programs. See archivist for a complete listing of videotapes and for access to the films.

Series IX. Sound Recordings, 1973-1988

The audio formats include cassettes, vinyl singles, and vinyl albums. The vinyl records are music recordings by gays or of gay interest. The cassettes consist of recordings of events or of interviews with actors, actresses, or musicians for articles that Russo was writing. Some of people interviewed include David Bowie, Jessica Lange, Bette Midler, Michael Musto, Whoopi Goldberg, and Pedro Almodovar. See archivist for a complete listing as well as for access to the materials.

Series X. Photographs

The photographs consist of snapshots, contact sheets, and negatives of friends and gay and lesbian events. Included are gay marches, street fairs, vacations, stills from movies used in *The Celluloid Closet*, and portraits of famous women. Unfortunately, many of the events and people are unidentified.

CONTAINER LIST

I. CORRESPONDENCE

- | | | |
|---|---------|--|
| 1 | f.1 | 1969 |
| | f.2 | 1972 |
| | f.3 | 1973 |
| | f.4 | 1974 |
| | f.5 | 1975 |
| | f.6 | 1976 |
| | f.7 | 1977 |
| | f.8 | 1978 |
| | f.9 | 1979 |
| | f.10-11 | 1980 |
| 2 | f.1-3 | 1981 |
| | f.4-6 | 1982 |
| | f.7-8 | 1983 |
| | f.9 | 1984 |
| | f.10 | 1985 |
| | f.11-12 | 1986 |
| 3 | f.1-2 | 1987 |
| | f.3-5 | 1988 |
| | f.6-8 | 1989 |
| | f.10-11 | 1990 |
| 4 | f.1-5 | n.d. |
| | f.6 | Medical and Legal Correspondence |
| 5 | f.1 | Family Correspondence |
| | f.2 | Jeffrey Sevcik Correspondence |
| | f.3 | University of California - Santa Cruz Correspondence |
| | f.4-5 | Vito Russo Outgoing Correspondence |
| | f.6-10 | <i>The Celluloid Closet</i> Correspondence |

II. JOURNALS

- | | |
|---|---------------------------|
| 6 | 1978 Dec 14 – 1980 Sep 25 |
| | 1980 Sep 29 – 1985 Mar 29 |
| | 1985 Mar 30 – 1987 Nov 13 |
| | 1987 Nov 14 – 1989 Jun 2 |
| | 1989 Jun 3 – 1990 Aug 22 |

- 7 1990 Aug 23 – 1990 Nov 4
Undated Journal (ca. 1990)
"Vito Russo's final week in hospital" (notepad)

III. PERSONAL MISCELLANEOUS

- 8 Appointment calendars, 1977-1986
9 f.1-2 Appointment calendars, 1987-1990
 f.3 Biographical information (including resume and references)
 f. 4 Miscellaneous

IV. POSTHUMOUS MATERIAL

- 9 f.5-8 -Obituaries
 -Articles
 -Program for funeral service (11/9/90)
 -Invitation to NY memorial service (12/20/90)
 -Programs for NY and San Francisco memorial services

V. FILES PRINTED FROM FLOPPY DISKS

- 11 Correspondence, 1987-1990
Celluloid Closet revisions (2 folders)
Columns, Articles and Speeches
Course Notes and Related Material: "Celluloid Closet" and "Documenting Gay
 Activism"
Film notes
Personal and financial documents

VI. PROFESSIONAL MATERIALS

A. Teaching

- 12 f. 1-4 Lectures and course material
 f. 5-6 Student papers
 f.7-8 Course reading material for "The Celluloid Closet," at University of California,
 Santa Cruz, Vol. I & II, Winter 1990
13 f. 1-2 Course reading material for "Documenting Gay Activism," at University of
 California, Santa Cruz, Vol. I & II , Winter 1990

B. Public Appearances and Lectures

- f. 3 Announcements for Russo lectures
 f. 4-6 Lectures and Speeches

C. Writings

- 14 f. 1 Articles about Russo
 f.2-3 Russo articles from various publications

- f.4-7 Russo articles from The Advocate
- f.8 Russo articles from Film Comment
- f.9 Russo articles from London Gay News
- f.10 Russo articles from Moviegoer
- f.11 Russo articles from The New York Native
- f.12 Column "The Russo/Bell Connection" from The New York Native
- f.13 Russo articles from Newsday
- f.14 Russo articles from Soho Weekly News
- f.15 Russo articles from The Village Voice
- 15 f.1-2 Drafts of Writings
- f.3 Signed copy of the book, The Celluloid Closet

D. Research and background materials

- 15 f.4 Research notes in notebooks
- f.5-9 Articles on gay and lesbian rights from various publications
- 16 f.1 Articles and reviews on gay and lesbian films
- f.2 Articles and reviews on films of general interest
- f.3 Lists of films used for writings and lectures
- f.4 List of films of 1980's with portrayals of gays and lesbians
- f.5 Book cover for The Celluloid Closet
- f.6 Proposal for documentary film, The Celluloid Closet
- f.7 Correspondence regarding permission to use film clips
- f.8 Letter to Russo explaining Production Code
- f.9 Professional Contacts
- f.10 Agenda for meeting with New York Times
- f.11 Letters and materials claiming "cures" for AIDS
- f.12 Script for movie *The Silence of the Lambs*
- f.13 Letter to *Outweek* by Patrick Merla
- f.14 Paper by Patrick Horrigan on Barbra Streisand and her gay audience
- f.15 Story by Arnie Kantrowitz and interview with Arnie Kantrowitz
- f.16 Copied pages from *Publicity is Power: A Media Handbook for Energy Activists* by Diane MacEachern

E. Honors and Awards

- 17 Alliance for Gay Artists in the Entertainment Industry
- Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund
- The *Washington Blade* and the First Annual Washington, D.C. International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival (Oct. 14, 1984)
- Frameline Award, for outstanding contribution to lesbian and gay media arts, 1986
- Fairpac Media Award, 1990
- Emery S. Hetrick Award for providing an outstanding role model for gay and lesbian youth, 1988

- 18 1984 Arthur Bell Arts and Humanitarian Award
Unmarked award with Lambda symbol
- 18 Gay Advocacy Award from Gay Friends and Neighbors, Ltd., Brooklyn, 1986
- Bobby Campbell Public Awareness Award by National Lesbian and Gay Health Foundation, 1986

VII. GAY AND LESBIAN EPHEMERA

- 19 Buttons and pins relating to gay and lesbian rights
- 20 f.1 Flyers and announcements
- f.2 Ephemera relating to celebration of Stonewall riots
- f.3 Program, Constitution, and Publications from the Gay Activists Alliance (GAA)
- f.4 Information regarding the AIDS Quilt
- f.5-10 Programs for Gay and Lesbian Film Festivals, 1980-1990; n.d.
- 21 f.1 Gay magazines
- f.2-3 Miscellaneous

VIII. VIDEOTAPES

See archivist for listing and access to videotapes

IX. SOUND RECORDINGS

see archivist for complete listing and access to sound recordings

A. Vinyl Record Albums

“Hormones or Jeans” by the Gay Liberation Quire Goes Down on Vinyl (single)

Purple Heart by Michael Callen, (album)

“Johnny Are You Queer” by Josie Cotton (single)

Trouble in Paradise by Romanovsky & Philips (album)

Emotional Roller Coaster by Romanovsky & Philips (album)

B. Cassette Tapes *see archivist for complete listing*

X. PHOTOGRAPHS

- 38 f.1 “First Gay Demonstration” – protests in Washington D.C. (1965) and in Philadelphia
- f..2 Promotional photographs from films in 1990 New York International Festival of Lesbian and Gay Film
- f.3-4 Contact sheets and negatives of stills from *The Celluloid Closet*
- f.5 Contact sheets and/or negatives of Fire Island, 1979 March on Washington, 1979 Chelsea Street Fair, 1981 Gay Press Conference, and 1980 Stockholm Rally
- f.6 Contact sheets and/or negatives of vacations and friends, 1979-1980
- f.7 Portrait of Russo and contact sheet and/or negatives of unidentified friends
- f.8 Contact Sheets and/or negatives of vacation to Key West
- f.9 Portraits of Marlene Dietrich, Bette Midler, and Judy Garland

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Snapshot photographs and negatives from gay cruises, Fire Island, Stockholm
Gay Pride Day, and other unidentified events and people