

Photography Goes

POOF!

Mathew Jones' lost photoworks 1989-94

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The title of this exhibition refers to one of Jones's most memorable artistic gestures from this time; a sculptural Poof! cloud, which bellowed through the galleries at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art in 1993 and then exploded in the foyer of the Art Gallery of NSW in 1995. This pivotal work appropriated a derogatory term, used to belittle homosexual men, and transformed it into a visual metaphor for gay identity, conceptualised as fun, illusive and unpredictable. In this exhibition at MGA, only the remnants of that Poof! cloud remain, like the detritus of a 1990s dance party.

The sculptural Poof! cloud, like Jones's photographic work from the time, is a response to a specific moment in the history of contemporary art and cultural politics, a moment often referred to as the 'Age of AIDS'. A gay man himself, Jones was uncomfortable with the way gay politics of the time was focused on making homosexuality more and more visible in the public sphere. To be a gay man was to be out and proud, and preferably flamboyant and spectacular if possible.

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The works in this exhibition question the value of making sexuality more visible, of making private proclivities into public spectacle. And the artists achieve this by critiquing clichés that define homosexuality in the public sphere, and by offering the audience aesthetic experiences that confuse and complicate visual clarity.

MGA has worked with Mathew Jones to recreate these important historical artworks a quarter of a century later. These works capture the passion and desperation of queer politics at the height of the AIDS crisis, but they also continue to offer critical insights on the contemporary politics of sexual identity and social equality.





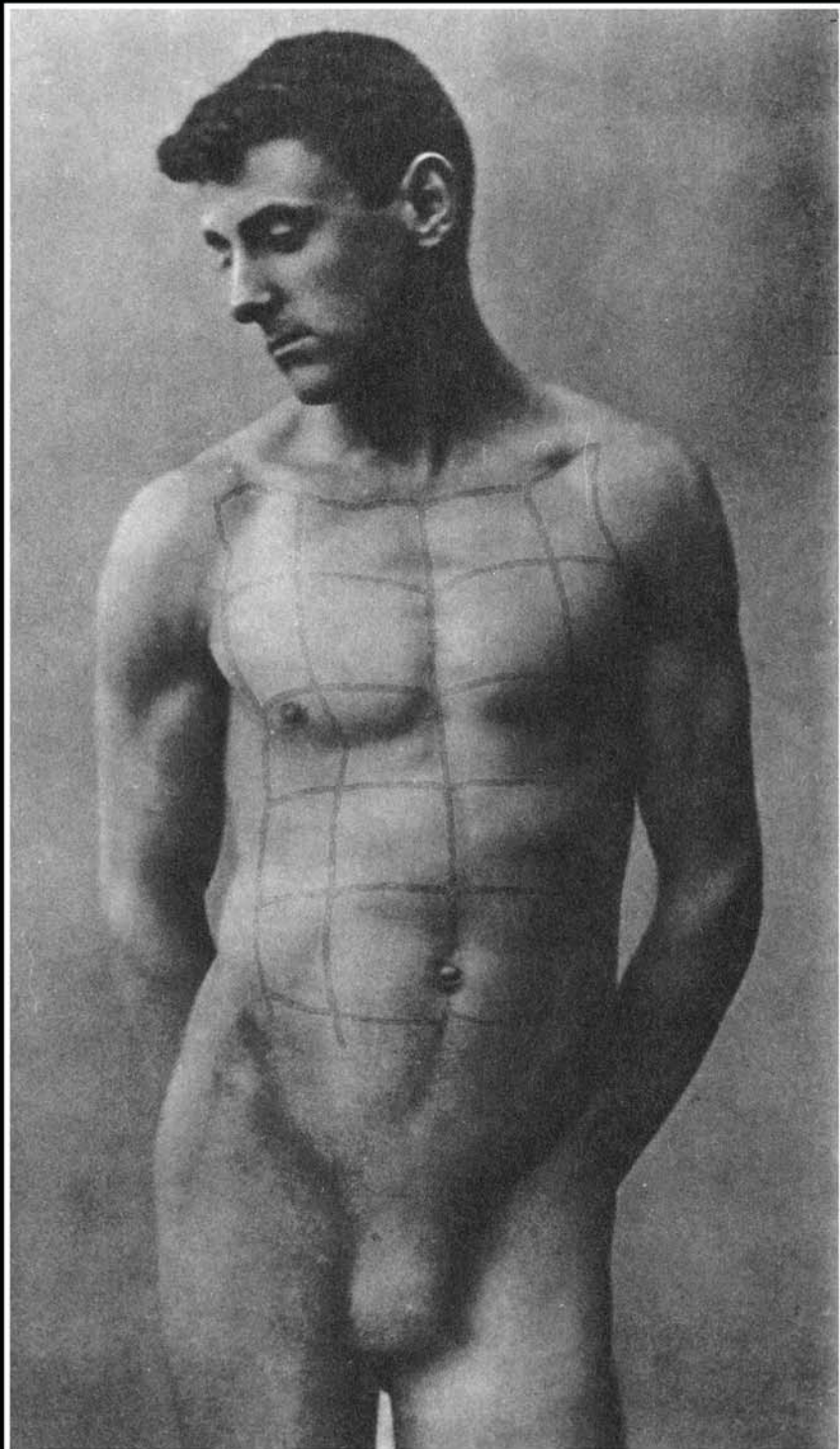
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Stephen Zagala, Curator MGA

© photos: the artist, texts: the authors 2016

left: newspaper cartoon circa 1993, source unknown



GRID (Gay Related Immune Deficiency)

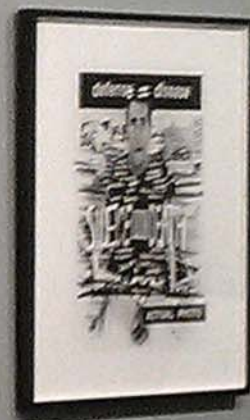
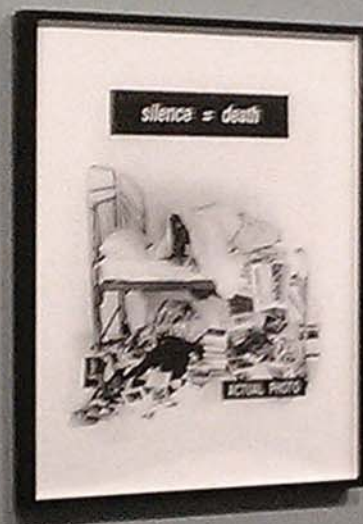
Originally exhibited in Imaging AIDS, ACCA, Melbourne, 1989

This photograph of a man is from a book I bought back in 1981 when I was taking classes at the Art Students League, NYC and the embryonic New York Academy. I was a young art student, drawing from life and drawing classical plaster casts and studying anatomy and buying a human skeleton (in those days it was legal) that I used to memorise the bones from every possible direction as homework.

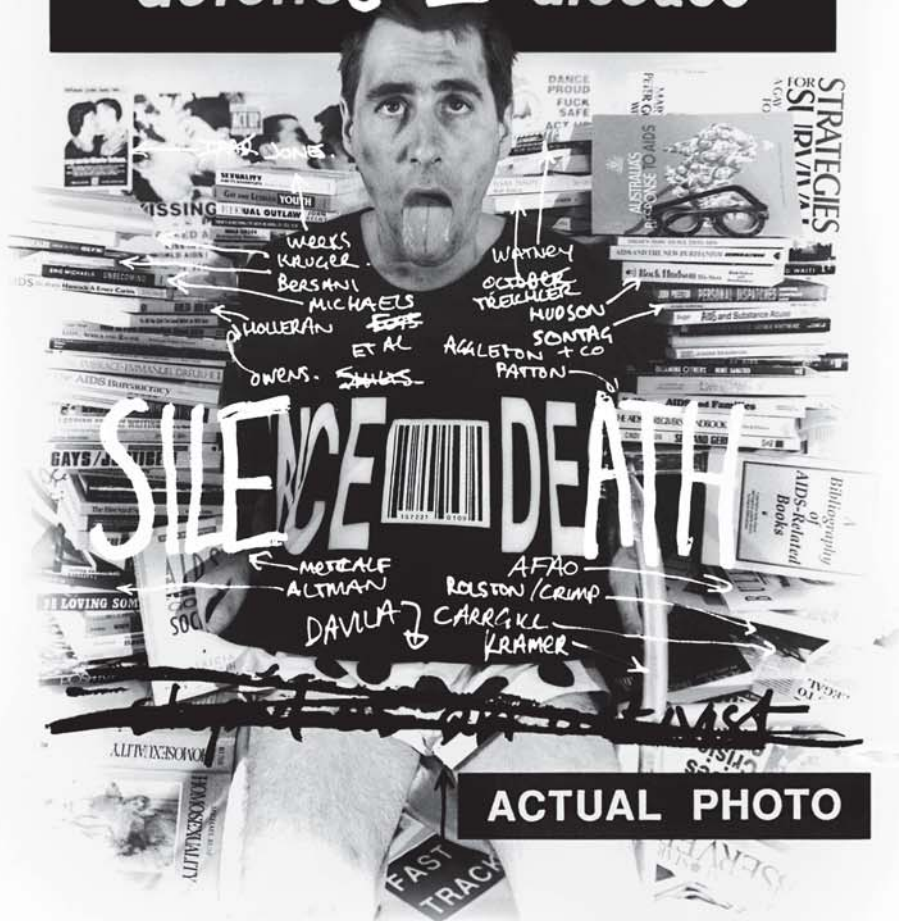
The book is Arthur Thomson's 'A handbook of anatomy for art students' (1929), though the photographs inside, of athletes with airbrushed genitals, date from 1896. It's a standard teaching text and you see images from it in many artists' work even today. All the penises were removed for propriety thereby accidentally creating rather lovely images of what my feminist friends of the time might have called 'dephallusised men', or, of what my other friends would have called 'bum-boys'.

Although my student work subsequently evolved and became what you see here around you, I am very grateful to that academic art training. It enabled me to do things like imagine the contours of this man's flesh more perfectly and freehand a grid, a standard mapping device, across the figure in order to express his surface more eloquently to others. The best thing to draw the grid proved to be eyeliner because it ran gently across his skin.

It was about that same time, in 1981, that The Village Voice started to report increasing instances of what was then called 'GRID' or 'Gay Related Immune Deficiency' which later became known as AIDS.



defense = disease



Silence = death

Originally reproduced in a photobook for the following exhibitions:
Silence = death, Gertrude Contemporary Art Space,
Melbourne, 1991

Over my dead body, Artspace, Sydney, 1991

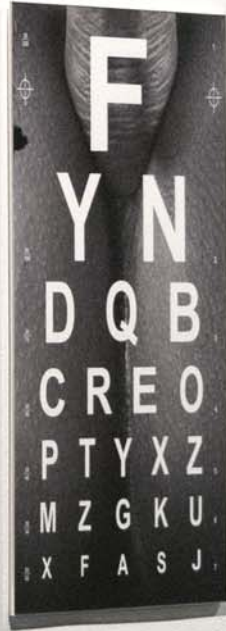
Silence = death, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1991

In the 'Age of AIDS' anxiety ran high and the gay male body had to be constantly discussed and determined and written up, in one way or another. Even the activists insisted that silence equalled death.

Looking back at these images, the boxer shorts strike me as strange. I bought a pair of white boxer shorts and carefully hand painted those big black polka dots onto them. Why? Like Rohan (my best friend and the guy in the photographs) said, 'Surely you could buy a pair pretty much the same'. But no, like the flag and the signs, I had to paint them myself. The books were the entire 'gay section' of the International Bookshop, which I borrowed one weekend and wheeled in a barrow up Flinders Lane to my studio; the hospital bed was dragged in from a charity store in Coburg. It was ridiculously labour intensive.

The whole project was inspired by an essay deconstructing the ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) slogan 'Silence = death' (Lee Edelman, 'The plague of discourse'). At the time, that essay was considered sacrilegious by gay activists. One didn't criticise ACT UP! But I thought it so good, and such a release, and such a breath of fresh air that I recreated it, or my version of it, as a photographic essay. Because, at that time, nothing being said about gay identity seemed good enough. Everything seemed part of a proscriptive trap. I had to critique it all, destroy it all and make it all anew from scratch, like the boxer shorts.

Photographer: Jan McArthur



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3

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4

R A T E I

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5

S T O B E

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6

B L I N D

$\frac{20}{20}$

7

To be illiterate is to be blind

Originally reproduced as artists' pages in 'Sex before crime', Art & Text, no. 38, 1991

In the early 1990s I worked at the International Bookshop on Elizabeth Street, which sold lots of cultural theory and feminist theory and queer theory books, and I read them and chain-smoked and chatted with my work colleagues Kate and Judy.

Both feminists, Judy was a lesbian who was staunchly opposed to all forms of pornography and there would be heated discussions about male (heterosexual male) sexuality and how it was intimately linked to the outward, showy spectacle of the penis as opposed to the hidden, interior nature of female sexuality. I always complained that her argument had a blind spot, because there was also a (mostly homosexual) male body where sexuality was not all about the penis. I protested that I knew hundreds of men who were entirely, totally, happily anal in their sex lives. One of the posters we had up in the shop was a picture of a blindfolded man walking off a cliff captioned 'Pulling out before cumming is not as safe as it looks', produced by the AIDS Council of NSW in the summer of 1990. By sheer coincidence my colleague Kate found its almost exact replica in a book we had about Soviet posters from the 1920s. The original poster by Aleksei Radakov was captioned 'To be illiterate is to be blind: on all sides lurk danger and unhappiness'.

Side by side these two posters, with their strange conflation of literacy and visibility and safety and sex, epitomised the terrible anxiety that surrounded the gay male body at that time. Because suddenly, in the early 1990s, all eyes turned to the blind spot. In the 'Age of AIDS' it was no longer possible to tolerate a body that was hidden from public view, and pursued pleasures that leaked through boundaries of class and race and language and propriety and safety; tactile pleasures which enfolded and tore and ruined and infected and were blind (like love). That gay male body had to be written up and determined and circumscribed and proscribed.

And I started to wonder about the risky advantages of a life lived in other people's blind spot.



Wilbow Gallery

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What makes this a photo of a gay man?

Originally exhibited in Perspecta '91, Art Gallery of NSW, 1991

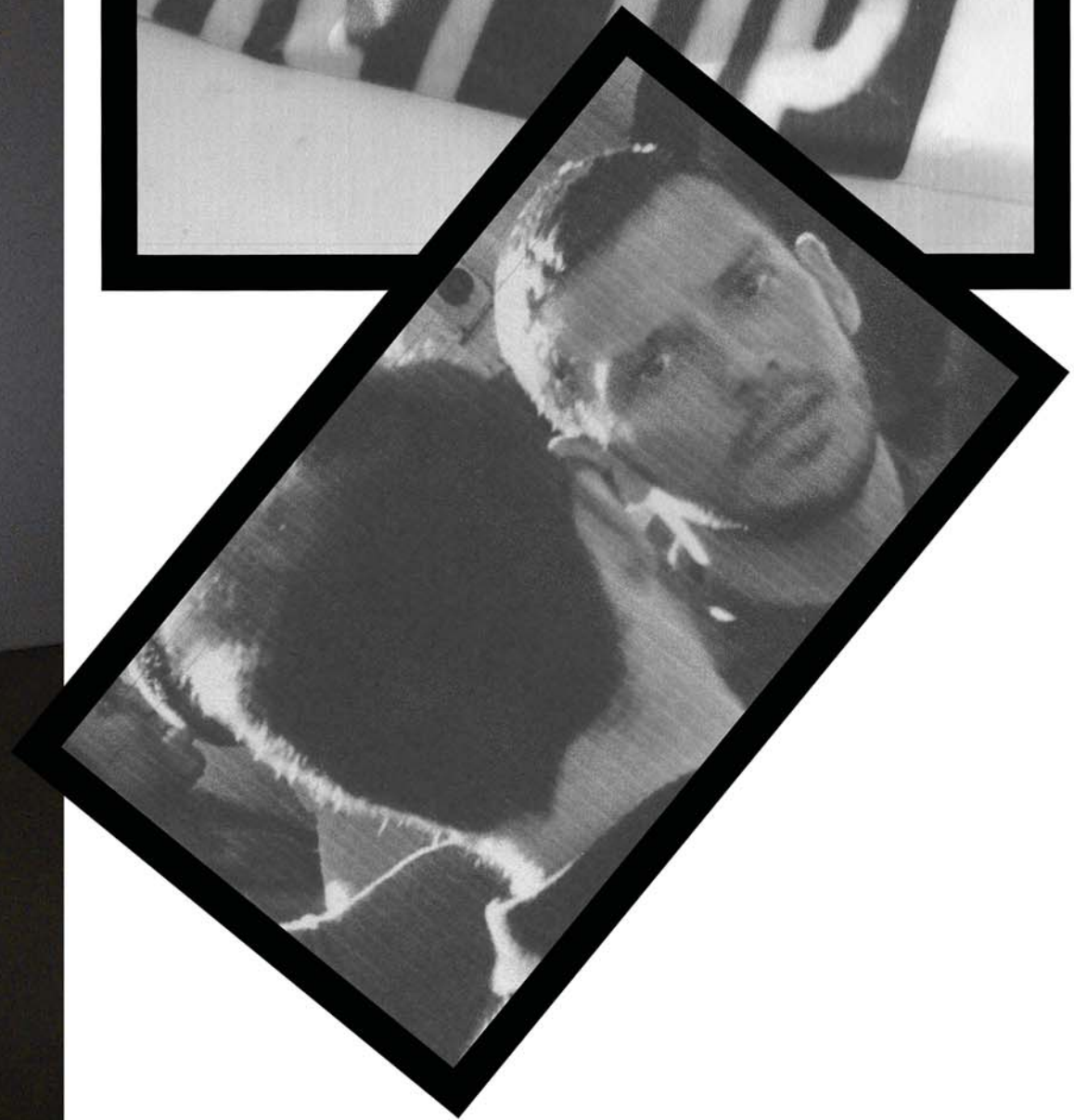
When I showed this work at the Art Gallery of NSW in 1991 the critic in *The Age*, a nice critic, a good critic, a gay critic, made a telling mistake, an almost inevitable mistake given the work's title and the epoch. He described them as photos of PLWA (people living with AIDS).

And when his review was published the people in the photographs rang me up and started abusing me saying I had 'outed' their HIV status and then I had to write to the critic and abuse him and then he apologised in print and I apologised and then the lads who I'd photographed calmed down (in exchange for prints) and no harm was done. For me the answer to the question in the title is either 'nothing', or any one of a whole host of weird prejudices. I don't even know if they were gay (although Dennis Altman is in one photograph); I just know I took the photographs in Melbourne at an ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) demonstration.

I was involved with ACT UP in the early days, until the bitching that seems inevitable when the marginalised come together overwhelmed my commitment. I did design a poster for the group called 'When you say no, say no to Marie Tehan' (pictured elsewhere in the gallery). But no poster or slogan interested me nearly as much as one rather beautiful, wordless, silent, super-graphic protest gesture ... the 'die-in'.

The 'die-in' was where people simply lay down at the entrance to buildings as if dead. And of course that death equated to silence. But this silence was more terribly eloquent than text or speech because anyone passing through the space had to stretch to step over the bodies. It was a mute expression of gay corporeality; the basic fact that these different people existed, physically, bodily and no one could escape negotiating that fact. So that is what the blank canvases are; representations of that silent corporeal presence.

Thanks to AGNSW for providing images of the original photographs.







A place I've never seen

Originally exhibited in the following contexts:

Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney, 1993

Museu de Arte Moderna do Sao Paulo, Sao Paulo, 1994

Ace Art, Winnipeg, 1995

Toronto Photographer's Workshop, Toronto, 1995

PS1 Studio, The Clocktower, New York, 1995

It is an easy mistake, but a very great mistake, to think art in the 'Age of AIDS' was limited to elegy and outrage. The second version of this work was made sitting at the end of the artist David McDiarmid's bed in the months before he died, working away on his computer, whilst he smoked dope and we chatted away, not bemoaning the discrimination we had experienced or discussing how best to confront mainstream prejudice, but about queer nation, about the birth of queer theory, about exploring new freedoms. It felt like a dawning, not a passing.

If all the other work in these galleries was me being critical and unravelling all the weird intertwining threads of corporeality, visibility and invisibility, textuality, photography, pornography and gay identity that ran through the cultural environment of the time, this work is my addled brain trying to weave them back into some sort of shape which more openly acknowledges their mutual interdependence; to create a photograph of that which evades vision.

The smudges are based on microscopic images of photochemical grain, the milky silver nitrate crystals which decompose when exposed to light, releasing the nitrate as gas whilst the silver crumbles up, black like burnt crumpled tinfoil.

Typically the main entrance is at the back, but it's always best to work your way round to that. Curiously, I have only just realised that here too one is only skirting around the outside of something. Literally. No matter how deeply you feel you are getting en route.

But then, I have felt that in some way about all of these pieces, as I have slowly worked through recreating them for this show. Somehow it is a project incomplete, abandoned because gay politics pursued another route towards assimilation into the mainstream – gay marriage and gaybies and the agenda of equivalence – whilst the investigation of 'difference' became less urgent, less communal.

