

MATHEW JONES

WHAT IS THIS PLACE?

I was at a lecture at the George Paton Gallery in Melbourne, where one gay man was talking about another gay man's paintings. This is an infrequent occurrence. I don't know how it was received on the whole, but I was talking, afterwards, to a women artist I like who wasn't that impressed. And I wanted to say something to her. Something I felt was important & something she would want to hear. Something about what it's like living in one ghetto & then visiting this other almost mutually exclusive ghetto that is [was] the George Paton. And in order to introduce this important thing I said, "But he was talking to a predominantly straight audience ..." & she interrupted "You don't know that." Which shut me up! I said "Oh" & then kind of ended saying "Bye" & walked away feeling so annoyed; I mean, I couldn't argue with that but it's as if the position that I was speaking from, my ability to have a voice of difference or dissent, was pulled away from under me like a rug, at least, I didn't get to say what I wanted to.

There's two or three things here. For starters, I did know! And secondly, she said what *I'm* meant to say! I mean, usually it's *me* who's pulling people up for presuming the world is heterosexual or that a lover's discourse necessarily involves the difference of gender. The crux is, *I couldn't argue* with this foreclosure on my voice. It's not like gender or race ... these truths we hold to be self-evident ... the code is so privileged there. Maybe that means sexuality is a non-issue. I don't think so. No. I think this invisibility, this difficulty we have in being seen is linked to the difficulty we have in being heard. And the paradox of her having used 'my' line ... it just makes me feel that someone's got tabs on this whole thing that I don't and I want to say by way of reply, or rather ask, "You tell me ... What makes this a photo of a gay man?"

What makes any photo a representation of a gay man? Does the man in the photo have to be wearing a pink triangle, an ACT-

UP T-shirt, to be cross-dressing, to be semi-clothed & cute, to be standing just a bit too close to another man ... it's a pretty limited code, you'd come to the end of that list very quick. And what a gay man has to say is as limited as that list, is limited to that list. What about a man walking through a park, a beat, minutes before he's bashed? Or a man sitting alone in his room, without the T-shirt, or the magazines or anyone ... just a T.V. playing a soap, and he's laughing, laughing at the straights. How could his difference be *shown*? Would the photo of him ever be the photo of a gay man?

Maybe I'm kind of neo-essentialist, looking for a biological origin to reinforce the cultural difference. Perhaps. Though I do like theories of social construction because they seem to put the onus on the majority, on straights, to explain my situation a little more accurately. It's not as if there's a reluctance to discuss this ... I sometimes think the only words straights never use is 'heterosexual'. And then again, I remember my frustration reading Irigaray, whose thought I'll probably be accused of colonising or misappropriating, & her assertion that male homosexuality was "both forbidden & required".¹ Where does that leave me? What place does that leave me from which to voice my subjectivity, or to demand change. You tell me ... What place *is* this between forbidden & required?

And then I got to thinking about this idea of no-place. And I thought about those pieces of Robert Smithson's called Non-Sites, where he laid out aerial photos of a specific place, an open cut mine or such, and then presented rock samples in metal bins, information sampled from each of these places mapped. So then all I needed was an aerial photos of, well, of being gay. The mind boggles. Its not like I can answer this. You tell me. Cause the only time I've seen anything like that is that photo, almost aerial, at the Washington Mall, of the Quilt Project.

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1. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Cornell U.P., 1985, p. 193

