

THE NIMBUS OF THE SEXUAL

'As though through a fog I caught sight of Giton standing at the side of the street. I rushed to the spot ...'

– Petronius, *The Satyricon* (ca. 63 A.D.)

It is known that initially gay people wanted at the very least to defeat prejudice, the environment suitable to the unlimited deployment of new passions. But of course this was not easy and so we found ourselves forced to rethink our specialness. And during the entire course of events various critical projects had to be abandoned and a good number of our innate capacities were not employed, as is the case – but how much more absolutely and daily – for countless millions of our counterparts.

In a gallery overlooking the Botanical Gardens, Mathew Jones has now deftly respun a few old myths and is carving out a space in which to lose all of them. What more tenuous commentary could there be? We have become accepted, we are told. But our time, which has not yet uncovered all of its ambiguities, is also far from having afforded solidity to all of our behaviour. Mathew Jones has come out so much, here and there, that many people do not know that above all he is an artist of the closet, the permanent heretic of a movement that cannot tolerate any indiscreetness. Nobody has contributed as much as Jones has to the origin of this incoherence: he scavenges among "La Race maudite", he comes up with staid icons, and even in the most confident plenitude he often finds the means to etch out the most telling holes that have accumulated in our defence. The quarter century that has passed since the clash at Stonewall has indeed begun to change the world, but not our latitude.

Jones is one of those artists who is not changed by identity but rather who continuously changes the stakes of identity. He is the opposite of those who, at one time, built their definition on the basis of conventional, same-sex acts; he is also the opposite of those who, more recently, claim to establish their generally rhetorical typology by the mere affirmation of an exclusionary stance that is both total and

totally unemployable. Instead, Mathew Jones does not hesitate to intervene, on even the most minor scale, in all categories that seem pre-empted to him. At one point he was one of the first to undertake a partisan critique of that most recent form of repressive discourse, the SILENCE = DEATH campaign that to this moment is like an empty secret in the 'place where we refuse to use their terms', and whose tenets and ideologues can thus be located everywhere on both sides. And in this Spartan identity complex, Jones once again jumps in and tackles even the founding question of our assumption into history, demon-

strating that what is spawned in the rage of distinction is an even greater definitional barrier, which saps our ability to believe in 'the homosexual' as an unproblematically discrete category. The dacron and chicken-wire forms, the irregular clouds between the different levels of perspective, the lights, the requisite pink, an archway, stickers, the most vague sort of always diffuse ambience, all woven together in a perfect screen, compose one of the most obscure and, ultimately, one of the best elucidated landscapes that one can encounter in the space of the queer ghetto. Identity finds its contour there without difficulty.

For anyone who has not forgotten the conflicted and passionate relations and has necessarily remained quite distant from both separatists and redemption, this must appear to be a sort of Sodom in advance: the aftermath of a city that was destroyed. Similarly Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's presumption in the aspect of the work gives it, if not the character of a glass closet (whose capacity for evacuating the link between secrecy and brute life is exposed by Jones), then at least the nimbus of the sexual.¹

The 'Persona Camille Paglia', more of an antiquarian, has constructed an oblique riposte of her own;² the cruisers of Gomorrah had pagan means. Among other things and in passing, Jones seizes upon a type of essence loosely confined to the marginalisation of such a new 'queer expression', a concept that bears witness to what one can begin to call 'the ontological necessity of homosexuality [in the other sex] in a kind of universal heterosexual relation of all human subjects to their own desires', as formulated by Leo Bersani, another one of those who pierce the numinous poetics of exclusion.

Identity creep is, in any case, never missing from antihomophobic slogans even at the very centre of so many ruptures and oppressive acts, of hysterical claims and unstoppable strategies. Those who love to ponder in vain what history might have been – of the sort: 'It would have been better for mankind if those people had never existed' – will be wondering for quite a while about the following amusing problem: Could one not have appeased the

Stonewallites around 1969 by means of a few adroitly contrived costume changes, that is, by giving us two or three police squads to mobilise instead of pushing us to the edge and forcing us to unleash on the world the most dangerous subversion there ever was? But others will surely retort that the consequences would have been the same and that by conceding a little to the straights – who had even then never intended to be satisfied with just a little – one would have only increased their requirements and their demands and would have only arrived even faster at the same result.

Paul Foss

NOTES

1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1990
2. Camille Paglia is the author of *Sexual Personae* (1990) and *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (1992). In her 1991 essay 'Homosexuality at the Fin de Siècle' she argues, 'Every gay man pursuing another man is recapitulating that civilisation-forging movement away from the mother. ...Gay men are guardians of the masculine impulse. To have anonymous sex in a dark alleyway is to pay homage to the dream of male freedom. The unknown stranger is a wandering pagan god. The altar, as in prehistory, is anywhere you kneel. Similarly, straight men who visit prostitutes are valiantly striving to keep sex free from emotion, duty, family – in other words, from society, religion, and procreative Mother Nature.'

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THE LAST WORD IN QUEER ART

The installation you see here is only part of the exhibition. But don't worry, it's the best part. It's the end of a game played across the streets of Melbourne, a maze marked out with adhesive stickers and a mail-out of 'letterbombs'. Such a dispersed formal structure brings this exhibition perilously close to some notion of 'public art'. Similarly, the stickers themselves imitate ACT UP, or rather, one particular ACT UP campaign a few years ago. It's not parody, just copying, and there is a name for the complex formal structure of this show ... it's 'advertising'.

The stickers distinguish themselves, arguably, from those of ACT UP by virtue of being inarticulate. Or at least, they don't give much away. Just a logo, the word 'POOF' in a cartoon explosion. The absence of context, the anonymity, leave them open to interpretation as either cutsey pro-gay or homophobic threat, an ambiguity reinforced by their cartoon source as a frame which heralds both sudden appearances and sudden disappearing acts.

In part 'POOF' is a xenophobe's version of 'QUEER', an attempt to give local spin to the successful U.S. tactic of appropriating a term of abuse for defiant self-identification. As Jones explains, "I feel odd calling myself 'Queer', I was never called a 'queer', on the street or at school, in my youth ... I was always called 'poof'!" This author, however, was always called 'Helen', and I value the semantic shift from 'Gay' or 'Lesbian' to 'Queer' because it represents a new sensitivity to the differences of gender, race and class within the totalizing construct 'Gay Community'. In theory, that is.

Ironically, a parallel fascination with difference and identity in visual arts debate has created a sudden perceived lack of 'Gay Art' in the local context. Typically, the anxious rush to fill this gap has not yet introduced any new names to the

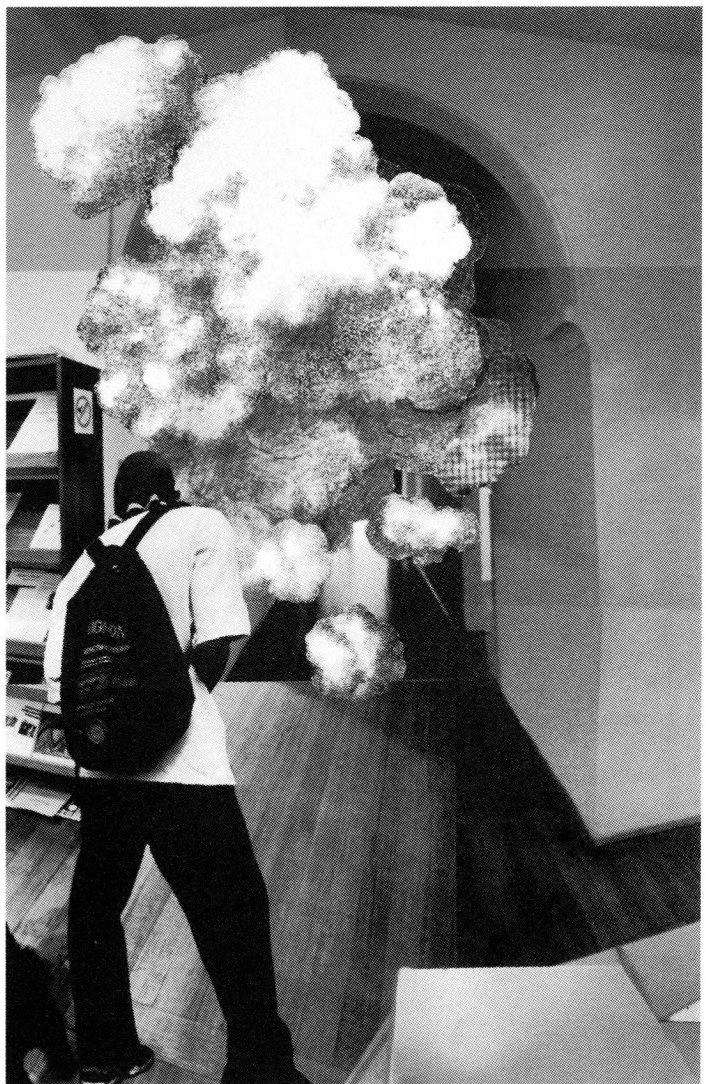
roll call, nor changed the look of Australian art. Instead, established artists are gesturing towards their pre-existing oeuvre and pointing out that, they too, 'jab pooh'! When the art world creates a niche, who can blame the artist who seeks to market it. But perhaps this cashing-in on the cachet of right-mindedness acquiesces too readily to a carefully *controlled* construction of difference in which Poof Art is both here to stay and gone tomorrow.

It is of this trend that Jones speaks when he puts his copyright imprimata on the word 'POOF'. For if Jones has gained any prominence it is remarkable for being as 'a Gay Artist'. And if his work is, more often than not, a critical stance on notions of gay community or identity, it is nonetheless obvious, that he rides on the ticket of marginalization and his identity inheres more in his ability to guilt-trip curators than in aesthetics or theory.

Jones himself would justify such a confused stance with a vague theory of activism. As if the position it gives him to raise instances of discrimination, homophobic violence or AIDS education was an end in itself and constituted some fledgling intersection of art and social issues. But if he has chosen now to literally put the bomb under this trend then it would be wise to remember his own oeuvre, his own speaking position, blows up with the rest of it.

Helen Back

Helen Back is a fellow of the Freudian School of Melbourne and a practising cabaret artiste.



Australian Centre for Contemporary Art

MATHEW JONES

Born Melbourne 1961

STUDY

B.A. Fine Art, Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne.
1980-81, 1984-85

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

- 1988 *Tableaux Historique*, George Paton Gallery, Melbourne
1991 *Over My Dead Body*, Artspace, Sydney
Silence = Death, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne
Silence = Death (scale model), Microscope, Melbourne
Silence = Death #2, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
1992 *To be illiterate is to be blind...*, Room 4, Linden Gallery, Melbourne
1993 *A Place I've Never Seen*, Australian Centre for Photography, Sydney
POOF!, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 1987 *Mirabilis: Post-Appropriation*, Chameleon Gallery, Hobart; Museum of Contemporary Art, Brisbane; George Paton Gallery, Melbourne
1989 *Imaging AIDS*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne
St Kilda 2 Acquisitional, Linden Gallery, Melbourne
1990 *Moët & Chandon Touring Exhibition*, national tour
St Kilda Acquisitional 1990, Linden Gallery, Melbourne
1991 *Porn: An Installation Publication*, Studio 4, Linden Gallery, Melbourne; Ars Multiplicata, Sydney
Australian Perspecta 1991, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney
1992 *Supermart*, Blaxland Gallery, Melbourne
Gail Hastings, Mathew Jones, Anne McDonald, Scott Redford, Black Gallery, Sydney
You Are Here, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane
1993 *Dislocations: Body, Memory, Place, Access* Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne
You Are Here, McDonald Street Gallery, Sydney; Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne

GROUP WORKS

- 1990 *Axes Edge*, set design with Rohan Storey for *Going Through Stages*, dir. Peter King
1991 *Installation*, as part of ACT UP Melbourne, Platform, Melbourne
1992 *I'll Show You*, 2 min. VHS video with Stephen Jones and Linda Sproul, Melbourne Lesbian & Gay Film Festival

COLLECTIONS

St Kilda City Council, Private Collections

FORUMS

What Is This Artworld, Next Wave Festival, National Gallery of Victoria
Persona Obscura: Identity and Photography, SHOT Forums, Centre for Contemporary Photography, Melbourne

COMMISSION

- 1993 Map inlay in public foyer for St Kilda Town Hall reconstruction; with Stuart Koop

PUBLICATIONS

- Nadine Amadio & Frances Lindsay, *Moët & Chandon Touring Exhibition*, (exhibition catalogue), 1990
Carmela Baranowska, 'To be illiterate is to be blind...', *Agenda*, No.25, 1992
Gary Catalano, 'Jones Keeps Up With The Catalogues', *The Age*, 1988
Billy Crawford, 'Australian Perspecta 1991', *Eyeline*, No.17, 1991
Juan Davila, 'Deathwatch', *Art & Text*, No.41, 1991
Juliana Engberg, *Mirabilis: Post-Appropriation* (exhibition catalogue) Chameleon Gallery, Hobart, 1987
Juliana Engberg, 'Silence = Death', *Agenda*, No.18, 1991
Paul Hayes, 'Imaging Aids', *Art & Text*, No.38, 1991
Christopher Heathcote, 'Installation focuses on the life of the AIDS victim', *The Age*, 1991
Peter Hill, 'Queuing to get into the Future', *The Age*, 17 August 1991
Mathew Jones and Richard Brown, *Tableaux Historique* (exhibition catalogue), George Paton Gallery, Melbourne, 1987
Mathew Jones, 'Imaging and Audience', *Tension*, No.16, 1989
Mathew Jones, in 'Sex Before Crime', *Art & Text*, No.38, 1990

Mathew Jones, *Over My Dead Body* (exhibition catalogue), Artspace, Sydney 1991

Mathew Jones, *Silence = Death* (exhibition catalogue), 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne, 1991

Mathew Jones, 'ACT UP or DO NOTHING', *Agenda*, No.16, 1991

Mathew Jones, 'What is this place', *Australian Perspecta 1991* (exhibition catalogue), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1991

Mathew Jones, 'The Body Dis-Corporate', *Agenda*, Nos.20/21, 1992

Mathew Jones, *To be illiterate is to be blind...* (exhibition catalogue), Room 4, Linden Gallery, Melbourne, 1992

Mathew Jones, 'Ya Wanna See My Arrest Record', *Outrage*, August 1992

Mathew Jones, 'Here's looking at you, kid: Q Vs Murley', *SHOT Forum Papers*, Centre for Contemporary Art, 1993

Stuart Koop, 'Silence = Death', *Eyeline*, No.16, 1991

Victoria Lynn (ed), 'Introduction' in *Australian Perspecta 1991* (exhibition catalogue), Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, 1991

Stephen O'Connell, 'To be illiterate is to be blind...', *Art & Text*, No.43

Marcus O'Donnell, 'Buttocks, balls and human cells', *Melbourne Star Observer*, 1 May 1993

Marcus O'Donnell, *Dislocations* (exhibition catalogue), National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, 1993

David Phillips, 'Rhetorical Silence', *Eyeline*, No.19, 1992

Leigh Raymond, 'Mardi Gras: a sparkle here and there', *Sydney Star Observer*, March 1993

Scott Redford & Luke Roberts (eds), *You Are Here* (exhibition catalogue), Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1992

Shiralee Saul & James Harley, *Porn: An Installation Publication No. 4*, 1991

Sam Schoenbaum, 'You Are Here', *Art & Text*, No.44, 1993

Robert Schubert, 'You Are Here & Dislocations', *Agenda*, No.30/31, 1993

Jonathon Trebilcock, 'Mathew Jones: Tableaux Historique', *Agenda*, No.1, 1988

Geoffrey Williams, 'The Difference Theory', *Brother/Sister*, No.1, 1 May 1992

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...the last word in Queer Art

Mathew Jones: Poof!

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