

SILENCE = DEATH

**200 GERTRUDE ST
MELBOURNE MAY 1991**

**INSTITUTE OF MODERN ART
BRISBANE JULY 1991**



'Silence = Death', 200 Gertrude St, Melbourne 1991

Life cycle of today's homosexual brought to life, or is it death?

SILENCE = DEATH

Studio 12, 200 Gertrude Street, Fitzroy.
May 3 - 25.

Review: STEVEN LAWSEN

EXHIBITION

these spaces below. What you make of the brief slogans will be informed by a small booklet that essentially accompanies the 'blank' shapes. Besides, there is so much visual material in the photographs of the booklet, it is understandable if you were to mistake the exhibition to be in the booklet and not in the space.

But no - it is two exhibitions in one, like a mathematical equation where the two pieces fit to create a third entity which the observer experiences. Mathew Jones' 'silence = death' is a cryptic deconstruction of images and words where five slogans are the linkage between the sensory environment of the space and the intellectual arena of the booklet.

The slogans in *The life-cycle of the contemporary homosexual* as the exhibition is sub-titled, develop the ideas expressed in the images but turn on themselves in a closed circuit of 'discourse = defence', 'defence = disease' and 'disease = discourse'. This sequence is where the 'life-

cycle' goes askew.

Given this exhibition asks us to review our use of terms and slogans which Jones clearly shows all dismantle down to words and more words, there are two words of the artist that alter the meaning of the statements they are used in, in such a way that I would take issue with their inclusion.

The life-cycle of the contemporary homosexual needs to read "... of a contemporary homosexual" so it is not inclusive of all homosexuals or a definitive statement about our lives. Generalisations can indicate a degree of political naivety. Secondly, in the closing comment of the artist at the back of the booklet, "but" needs to be replaced with "and". Therefore "we rally to the slogan because they have forced us to, and keep the silence as a place where we refuse to use their terms."

By this substitution, we are able to do both as needed. A word can be like the thin end of a wedge dividing us further into 'either/or' choices.

Mathew Jones studied at the Victorian College of Arts, and spent two and a half years studying at the New York Academy. *Silence = death* is his third solo show and he is looking forward to participating in *Perspecta* in September at the Art Gallery of NSW.

silence = death

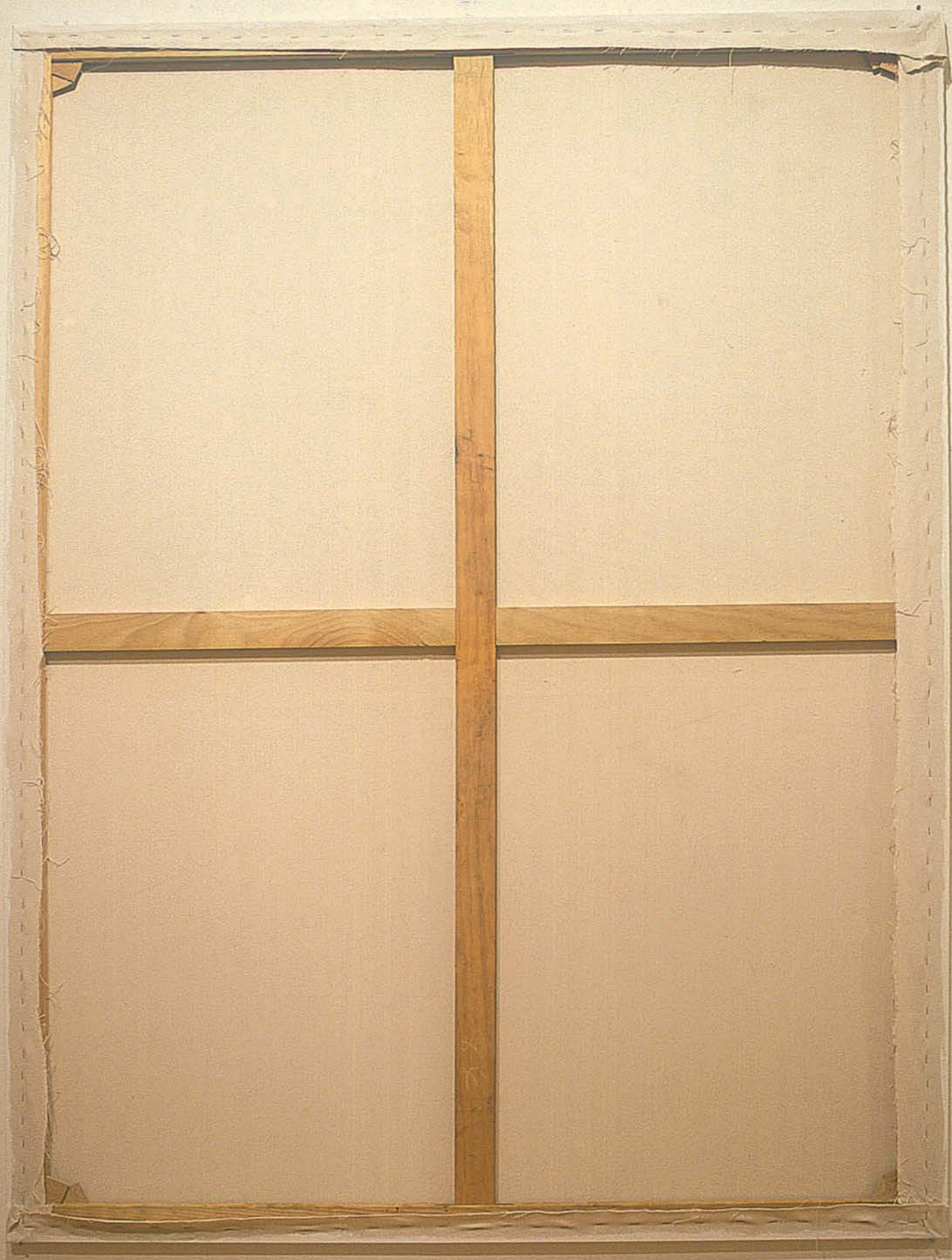


ACTUAL PHOTO

Mathew Jones, a Melbourne artist exhibiting at Studio 12, has assembled a visual art statement which can only be described as black and off-white. Jones seems to want some participation in the AIDS debate, (dare I say debate), and his work offers this discourse a point of view that polarises form and content.

His exhibition divides shape, space and surface from text and image so the observer pieces it together in the form of a giant crossword puzzle that hangs, leans and sits about the gallery area. His cleaned homage to the smooth surfaces of course linen or fresh cotton sheets suggest a clinical setting and contemporaneous decor both at once.

Of course, none of these types of material are used. Primed canvas, and metal and wooden frames are sculptured to depict: a painting turned to the wall; a canvas sling on the floor; a large monolith like a swollen painting propped against the wall; a canvas sling, this time hung on the wall; a massage couch of canvas and metal framing again; and a second monolith swollen even further and leant against the wall. Their large, rectangular, off-white surfaces are like a crossword, as I have mentioned, where our responses to the corresponding slogans above, fill in



DEATHWATCH

AIDS
&
SILENCE

JUAN DAVILA

"We rally to the slogan because they have forced us to, but keep the silence, as a place where we refuse to use their terms."

Mathew Jones

Mathew Jones's recent exhibition at 200 Gertrude Street (Melbourne, 3 - 25 May) and the Institute of Modern Art (Brisbane, 4 - 27 July) takes to task the ACT UP visual and ideological campaign regarding AIDS. Jones works in terms of silence or refusal against the orthodoxies of the gay pictorial discourse. He does so by using ambiguity and subtle shifts of language rather than the militant voice he parodies, thus incurring the wrath of both the right and the left.

ACT UP has entered the artistic field in the guise of a traditional avant-garde (or should I say, post-avant-garde) movement. It has created a connection between art practice and the social despite the prevailing distrust toward the avant-garde model as a utopian expression of anarchy. The graphic work by various ACT UP groups has used provocation against a system of political taste and tradition that silences the AIDS epidemic. Their billboards and posters revive artistic militancy with an ideological commitment to denunciation, subordinating art to the combative slogan. ACT UP uses a postmodern visual tactic but at the same time opposes

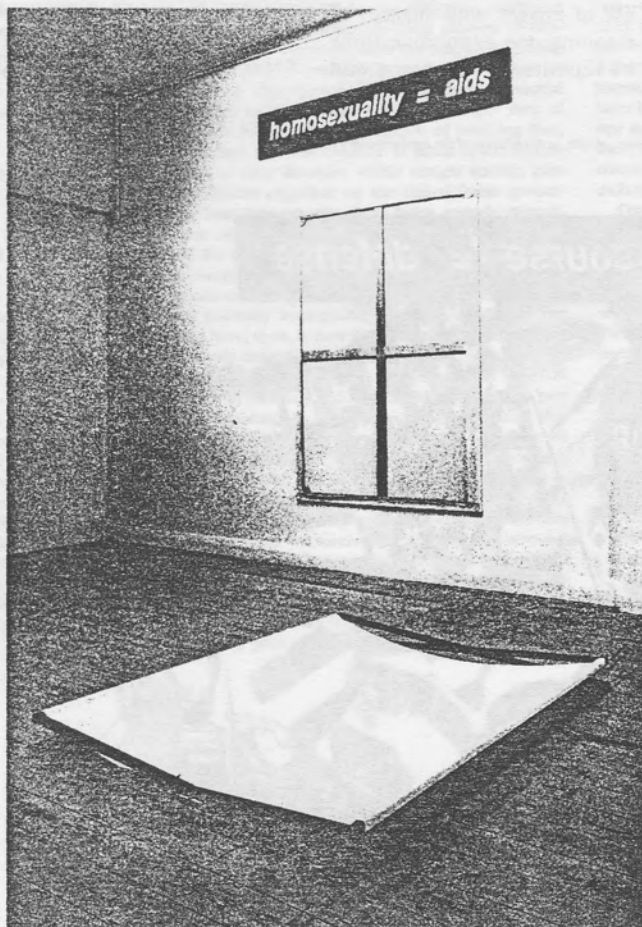
more conservative forms of postmodernism that argue for a pluralist scene where everything has equal value and where differences are erased by a conciliatory atmosphere. ACT UP has used the quotational device, recycling many of the most successful artists' formulas in New York but politicising their styles.

The campaign has a goal that overdetermines its progress, thus assuming a concept of history that is universal and unified.

Mathew Jones uses the traditional format of the picture in an art gallery. He simply turns the picture against the wall—silences it—and then metamorphoses it

into useless objects: an inflated bed, a huge cushion, a folding chair or bed. He quotes the ACT UP slogan SILENCE = DEATH on the wall and presents several variations (DISCOURSE = DEFENSE, DEFENSE = DISEASE, DISEASE = DISCOURSE). This is a true representation of a fake incident.

ACT UP's slogan has already been quoted by the commercial chain, Macy's, which used the pink triangle to advertise other goods. This points out the problem of a lineal graphic: ACT UP reuses Barbara Kruger, for example, who in turn quotes corporate advertising, but neither alters the powerful lineality of such expression, other than substituting one authoritarian message for another. Hence the ease with which the slogan can be appropriated again by commerce. Jones's quotation moves in a contrary way; it makes the slogan inoperative, weak, hesitant, non-efficient through irony. The epidemic might be the same in New York and Melbourne, but the cultural conditions that the slogan addresses are not. What could be read as a totalising formula of an interventionist aesthetic is appropriated and transformed into "cultural discussion", a mediation of representation. For ACT UP, this would be a pointless use of the slogan because it hinders its assertion of the real as immediate. For Jones the reality of the object is not a continuum but a montage of ▶



Mathew Jones, installation detail, 200 Gertrude Street, Melbourne

signs, as his photos demonstrate. Reality for him seems already to be a semiotic version codified by the symbolic means of art. This opposes the commonsense, ideological, or mythical interpretations which the slogan pleads. From Melbourne he seems to remind us that the concept of history has split into fragmentary and transitory signs, that today no revolutionary option can continue to promote one formula of social liberation. Changes cannot be resolved equally in different places and times, as if only one law of historical transformation exists in the fight against race, sex and class domination. In a recent statement, Jones says: "The exhibition takes issue with the AIDS activist slogan, SILENCE = DEATH, which has become a generalised gay activist catch cry ... this pressure to 'speak out' often forces us (gay men & lesbians) to implement discourses which are ultimately homophobic, to become involved in a game

where the rules are set by others."

Another authoritarian aspect of ACT UP graphics can be seen in the posters where they speak *for* the Blacks and Hispanics in New York. There is an assumption that they can read, react, that they are one cohesive group, that they understand the white man's scientific logic, etc. Many "Hispanics" cannot afford a condom. And if they had one it would become a lucky charm, to be used in its proper place: the pocket. The supermarket voice used by the ACT UP campaign aims at efficiency and reaction, but denies the baroque, hybrid, kitsch, sentimental and magical elements that constitute any other's cultural ethos. To them, to be succinct is to be simple-minded. The "natives"—and they share this with gays—admire expansive rhetorical styles. Double entendres, the use of images with nuances of meaning, the expressive force of repetition, synonyms and

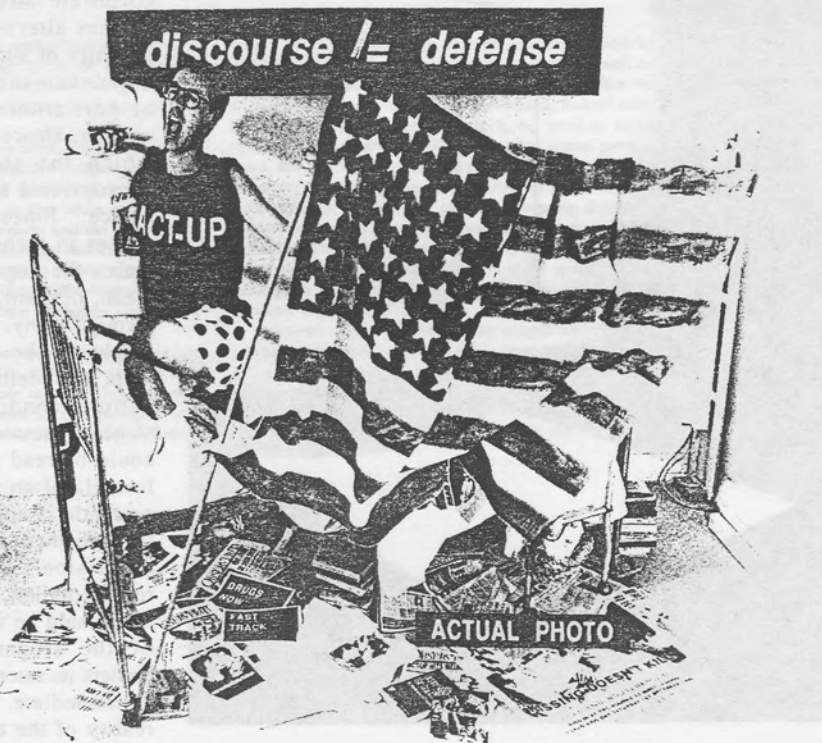
undercurrents are evidence for them of the shape-shifting face of the world. The logic of contradiction, the use of puns, the excessive ornamentation, fragmentation and chance have formed their syncretic cultural base. Just as the use of the term "Hispanic" erases the complexities of race, there is a similar flattening out of what could possibly form different types of gay utterance in the ACT UP graphics. One might venture to say that there is a megalomania at work here, but this criticism always results in total dejection. For ACT UP, history has a defined trajectory and the art work should subordinate itself to the total view of a project for the world. Hybrid language, parody and collage seem to express something useless, something that implies a decentered condition of power, as if it had become diffuse and flowed erratically through micro-circuits—a sort of nightmarish labyrinth opposed to the "real" gains of the ACT UP

campaign. And who could deny them? Jones's "silence" appears to fit this sort of counter-institutional practice in a game that wavers between passive conformism and active dissatisfaction.

The death invoked by the ACT UP campaign—which Jones parodies and dresses up in polka-dot shorts—would belong to that unspoken region. In terms of desire, ACT UP's slogan "Men, Use Condoms or Beat It" illustrates a naïvety, both in terms of the therapeutic properties of a condom and in men's desire. The body of jouissance corresponds neither to the psychical nor to the physiological, but rather to the realm of the signifying discourse, a heterogeneous field. Why should homosexuals sustain their desire only as an unsatisfiable one? The symbolisation of the homosexual body—the body informed by the signifying elaboration of desire rather than the physiological results of somatic compliance—is not elaborated upon. ACT UP seems to "desexualise" those who are defended and denied their displacements of erotogeneity that mobilise the body of jouissance. It is as if all at once the words covered a thing, a portion of the body whose otherness with respect to the words which designate it is no longer apparent.

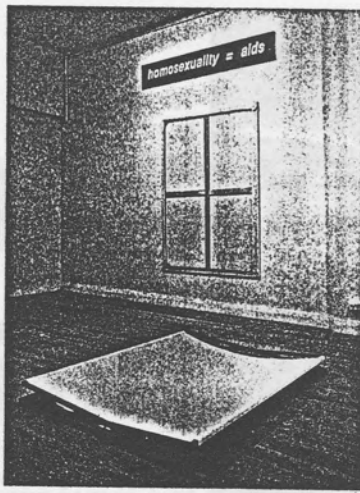
Travelling to America in 1909, Freud allegedly said: "They don't know that we're bringing them the plague." American psychoanalysis pursued a biological vision of the subject through its social and somatic roots, rejecting the sexual problem in favour of sublimation, the unconscious in favour of the ego, the destructive drive in favour of culture. ACT UP follows the American way. ■

Mathew Jones, from exhibition catalogue, *silence = death, or the lifetime of the contemporary homosexual*

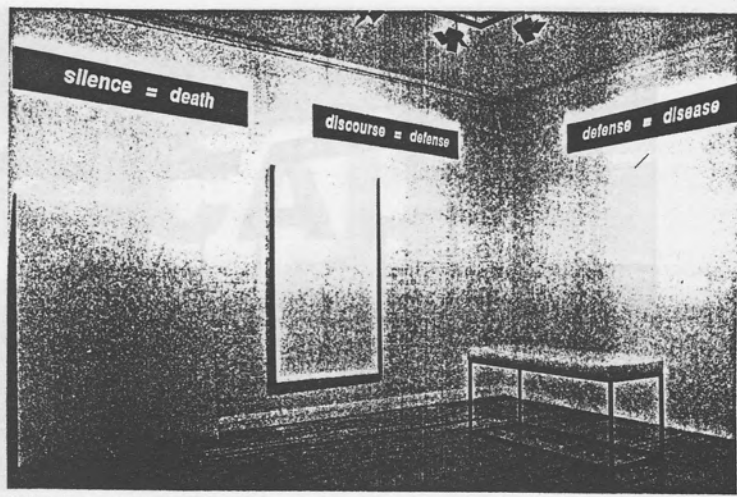


homosexuality = aids





Matthew Jones, From Silence=Death, 1991.



Matthew Jones, From Silence=Death, 1991.

3.

SILENCE = DEATH: MATTHEW JONES

200 Gertrude Street,
Melbourne
Institute of Modern Art,
Brisbane

In Mathew Jones' installation the gallery space is divided in half: one half measured out according to the works' equidistant placement on the floors and walls (two works lean against walls); the other half left empty. Above each of the wall-pieces hang painted (white on black) canvases bearing the slogans: homosexuality = aids; silence =

death; discourse = defense; defense = disease; and disease = discourse. There would appear to be two referents for this work: the issue of homosexuality and AIDS; and Minimalism.

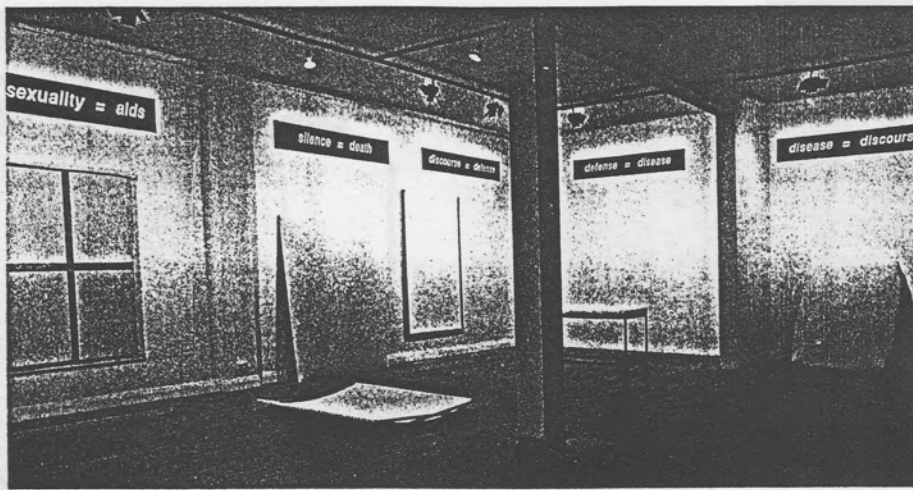
The works employ a number of Minimalist tropes or signatures modified in certain ways. For example a unitary form (a blank white canvas) repeated throughout the installation is transformed by a process which seems *mechanical*, opposed to the process of *reduction* which may have constituted the implied originary Minimalist form. The canvas is either swollen so that it appears to exceed its original dimensions or it hangs limply between its exposed black graphite support like a collapsed deckchair. And in the absence of any overt pictorial content the materials and construction of the works become constitutive rather than incidental to their meaning. But the corresponding textual analogues suggest a meaning beyond the works' evident materiality, a correspondence with the representation of AIDS. And while the surrounding space (the cultural and public space which, according to Rosalind Krauss, is crucial to the critical intentions of Minimalism) is implicated in the placement of works, and in particular by the leaning of several works against the walls—a sovereign Minimalist device for bringing the wall into relation with the floor—there might be, nonetheless, a residual content *in* the work.

A straightforward gestalt reading of the installation (that is, according to its evident *minimalism*) is complicated by a certain kind of pictorialism, better expressed as an inhering dysfunctionism. A primary unmediated experience of these works is prevented by the recognition of a pervasive and pathetic utility—beds you cannot lie on; camp stools you cannot sit in; deck chairs that it would be impossible to erect. So the spectator's physicality is acknowledged (apropos the intended phe-

nomenological effect of these tropes) and his/her repose is quite literally invited (*via* an oblique association with a range of furniture). But it is ultimately frustrated by bad design or precarious placement.

Here the disavowal of anthropomorphism (the imitation of the human figure), which according to a number of commentaries¹ differentiates Minimal art from a long tradition of sculpture which preceded it, is perversely acknowledged. But so is the indebtedness of Minimal art to the host of functional objects which surround us and which likewise might remind us of our corporeality, though by different means.² Thus the works appear as hybrid forms, happily irresolute according to the predominant systems of representation at work: one, the anti-pictorial and phenomenological effect of primary structures which lingers on in the appropriated Minimalist forms; and two, the pictorialism which arises in depicting (or appropriating) those forms. The distinction between what is literal and what is metaphorical is ever-present but unable to function in the production of a single coherent meaning.

The textual analogues—including the title of the exhibition *Silence = Death*—occupy the same ambiguous territory with regard to language. They parody the slogans of gay activism which in turn, according to Lee Edelman, endorse the validity of the rhetorical form of homophobia. The metaphoricity of these equations (functioning within the gay community like flags) contaminates their logic (their literalness) producing an infection within language which suggests that any properly gay politic is impossible without at the same time validating the contrary logic of homophobia. "So homophobic and anti-homophobic forces alike find themselves producing, as defensive reactions to the social and medical crisis of AIDS, discourses



Matthew Jones, *From Silence=Death*, 1991.

that reify and absolutize identities, discourses that make clear the extent to which both groups see the AIDS epidemic as threatening the social structures through which they have constituted their identities for themselves".³

Christopher Heathcote, critic for a daily newspaper, finds the work "meaningless" since it neither "supplies us with information" nor "empathises with the tragic victims of AIDS".⁴ He interprets this as the work's failing. For him the work is incorrigible and mute. But to occupy either an objective or benevolent position in relation to the issue of AIDS might be a greater failing since the issue would then be subordinate to the knowledge and morality of a single artist or critic.

On the contrary the work is *resolutely ambiguous*, and precisely because of its historical referent. But the critic's response elides this. Describing the exhibition as a "tired attempt to invoke early 1970s minimal and conceptual art" he disallows any continuity in minimalist forms, maintaining instead the rigidity of historical categories according to which Jones' work is "deskilled" and "unimaginative". Thus he sustains his own privileged discursive identity as a newspaper critic who can differentiate the periods, styles and genres which comprise art history. We might even say that history is invoked by the critic for this very reason; to maintain the artist in a subordinate role to the categories of art history and therefore subordinate to the critic himself who defends those categories. And yet these categories are by no means settled as recent debates about Minimalism attest.

Michael Fried recently reaffirmed his view that Minimalism represents the apotheosis of the inherent literalness in modernist painting, "as if the Minimalists were the ones who really believed the Greenbergian reduction—that there

was a timeless essence to art that was progressively revealed".⁵ Accordingly, Minimalism is the culmination of "modernist idealism".⁶ For several critics who claim to speak from an anterior position to that of Fried⁷ the use of certain materials and techniques in Minimalism and the repetition and seriality of works reflect the conditions of late industrial capitalism and mass production. Minimalism "initiates the postmodernist critique of institutional and discursive conditions."⁸ Within the latter perspective Minimalism remains representational but the means have changed; no longer a matter of depicting but of *embodying*. In this sense the Minimal work is no longer literal (a relevant term only within American modernism) but symptomatic or metaphorical (within postmodernism).

Perhaps what motivates this debate is the 'silence' of Minimalist works. As Darby Bannard commented in 1966, Minimal works of art "are made to be talked about", the result of having to incessantly ask "but what does it mean?"⁹ Indeed, '60s Minimalism is characterised by unprecedented verbiage which continues in the larger claims presently being made on the works' behalf to mean something historically within either a modernist or postmodernist paradigm. But this might be the current value of Minimalism and the whole point of its evocation in Jones' work; as a reservoir for all the putative meanings of the current debate which fall either side of the division literal/metaphorical.

While it is the virtue of silence that others may speak, it is also, implicitly, a refusal to speak in others' terms. The *use* of these tropes by Jones is a decidedly non-partisan contribution to the debate about Minimalism. It is intended to broach but inevitably elude the explanations or meanings available which conform to the same

division between metaphor and literalness which complicates definitions of gay identity in discussions of AIDS. Therefore, the correspondence between form and text in the installation occurs on the basis of a common syntactic structure, the confusion of standard grammatical arrangements. As Jones suggests, perhaps this is inevitably the speech of a gay man, an explicit refusal of terms which are insufficient to a sense of gay identity. But it is a refusal or silence which does not equal death (that is, as the end of discourse according to the equation silence = death), rather a silence which aims to maintain debate by frustrating definitive interpretation.

The implied strategy in Jones' work, and one commensurate with the notion of activism, is to problematise the predominant means of explanation and thereby circumscribe the absence of a critical position from which the gay community and the gay artist might speak unequivocally, or, from which the issue of AIDS might be adequately addressed. In this sense we should conceive of the work in terms of its *effect*, as an attack on all accounts which, in parody of disease, undermines the assuredness with which the critic demands information, empathy and orthodoxy. It is the critic's insistence upon certain inviolable art historical categories, his refusal to engage with the problematic proposed by the work, which is the most worrying. For the critic's *silence* speaks loudest of his refusal to reorient public awareness in relation to the deficiencies of art and language in accounting for the experiences of the gay community. And it is perhaps only within the configuration of artist—work—critic—criticism that the *problem* of gay identity is manifest, in various incommensurable terms.

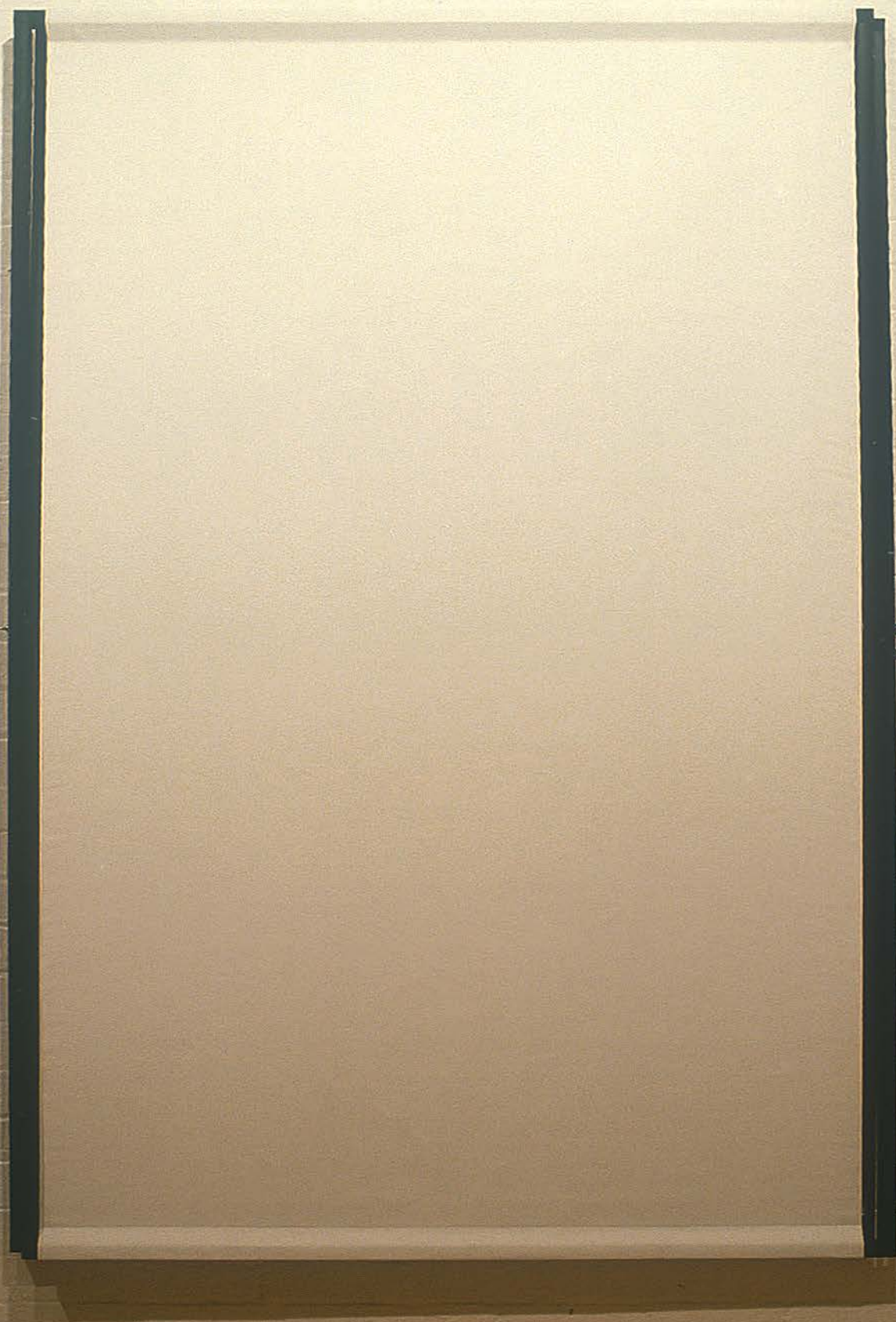
STUART KOOP

NOTES

1. Frances Colpitt, *Minimal Art: The Critical Perspective*, UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, 1990, pp. 67—73.
2. This indebtedness is most apparent in the phenomenological analyses of everyday objects by Merleau-Ponty which are read as a subtext for Minimalism, especially by Rosalind Krauss in *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1977, pp. 239—240.
3. "The Plague of Discourse" in *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture*, edited by Butters, Clum and Moon, Duke U.P., 1989, p. 297.
4. Christopher Heathcote in his review of the exhibition for *The Age*, Wednesday 22 May, p. 14.
5. "Theories of Art after Minimalism and Pop", in *DIA Art Foundation Discussions in Contemporary Culture*, Bay Press, Seattle, 1987, p. 73.
6. Peter Schjeldahl, "Minimalism", *Art of Our Time: The Saatchi Collection*, Vol 1, Rizzoli, New York, 1985, p. 20.
7. Rosalind Krauss epitomises this point of view: "we look back on the modernist origin and watch it splinter into endless replication."
8. Hal Foster, "1967/1987" in Janet Kardon, 1987: *At the Crossroads*, Uni of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1987, p. 20.
9. "Present-Day Art and Ready-Made Styles", *Artforum*, December 1966, p. 33. Incidentally, a question which Heathcote refuses to ask but certainly answers in claiming the work is "meaningless".

INSTANT IMAGING: Mark Davies, Hiram To, Edite Videns, John Waller, Pat Hoffee, Adam Wolter, Malcolm Queen
Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Seven Brisbane artists, each using new technologies, shared the exhibition at the Queensland Art Gallery which was, misleadingly, called *Instant Imaging*. For although at the heart of each work there lay an instantaneous creative event, the laser-sweep of the colour copier or the computer



RHETORICAL SILENCE

BY DAVID PHILLIPS

There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses.¹

Is there a gay voice or, more generally, is there a body of discourses or identities which can be cited as being intrinsically gay? Although framed in terms of a deliberate refusal to speak, this is a question raised by Mathew Jones's exhibition *Silence = Death*:

We rally to the slogan because they have forced us to, but keep the silence, as a place where we refuse to use their terms.²

The "slogan" to which Jones refers is of course the by now infamous *Silence = Death* rallying cry coined by Act Up (New York). But the exhibition *Silence = Death* is not the loyal reiteration of this slogan. Instead, Jones's purpose is to draw attention, through reiteration, to what he sees as the closures which are set up by such a statement.

However, while this critical scepticism is to be welcomed in that it offers to set in motion a speculation about responses to AIDS which does not ultimately resort to a reductive didacticism, the question of closure is one which returns to haunt Jones's own intervention. For, to quote Simon Watney in his various analyses of what he has described as "the politics of [the] representation" of AIDS, "strategy is everything".³ It is precisely the strategy of this exhibition (the forms of visual rhetoric it employs, the institutional space in which these are mobilised, the potential audience to whom they are addressed *etcetera*) which is perhaps somewhat oblique and potentially self-defeating.

Watney's reference to a "politics of representation" is indicative of the cultural activism that has arisen around AIDS. Fundamental to this activism has been a political critique of the dominant representations of the epidemic. This critique aims to denaturalise these representations (e.g. of the causes of the disease, its constituencies *etcetera*) so as to reveal the motivations which lie behind their mobilisation as well as their ideological status.

There are two aspects to the mobilisation of AIDS by the institutions claiming to speak for heterosexuality which are perhaps especially pertinent here. Firstly, the use of the spectre of AIDS has provoked the realisation that the epidemic has effectively been allowed to happen. This is, of course, particularly the case in the United States where government inaction and wilful negligence have revealed what can only be described as a genocidal agenda. The dawning awareness amongst gay men of this agenda has involved the shock of realising that, whatever their personal 'success' in terms of the accommodation of their life-styles within straight society, gays are nonetheless regarded, by the United States government at least (among others), as being entirely expendable. For not only has AIDS in the West been used to reverse the increasingly fragile gains of social liberalism but the ways in which it has been mobilised have provided an unavoidable reminder—as if we needed one—as to how intensely homophobic our culture remains. The question here, then, is how are the targets of this agenda to effectively defend themselves?

The second aspect of the representation of AIDS (especially in the early and mid 1980s) that was also perhaps so disturbing to gay men was the recognition that many of the dominant representations of homosexuals (as pathological, sick, disease-ridden, promiscuous *etcetera*) were still deeply embedded within our own psyches. In other words, much as we may have thought of ourselves as confidently self-identified and politically active, the images we received of AIDS in part revealed how, to varying extents, we as individuals had not rid ourselves of these images of homosexuality. What I am referring to, for example, is a sense of guilt and self-blame which frequently took the form of the condemnation by many gays of what were now being described as

the "excesses" of sexual liberation. My point here is that discourses and images of AIDS directly impinge upon our self-identities at subliminal and unconscious levels in spite of our political resistance to them or our belief that they had finally been exposed and done away with. However, these often unconscious representations cannot be so readily disavowed, no matter how much we might wish to identify with a gay-affirmative identity. Instead, this return of the repressed or disavowed within gay politics which AIDS has re-incited necessarily raises the question—one which is also directly pertinent to this exhibition—as to whether gay men can indeed escape from, deny or overcome these representations. In short, can gays represent themselves from a place outside of these dominant discourses and representations or are we instead committed to working from within them? If the latter is the case (and I shall be suggesting that it is) then one strategy in responding to AIDS should be to disrupt these discourses—a strategy, in effect, of revealing their contradictions and instabilities as well as revealing why such representations need to be endlessly reproduced.

One consequence of this is that our response to AIDS cannot be simply one of the denial or rejection of those images which circulate within our culture. What of course this also entails is the recognition that AIDS is more than just a disease but that it has instead accreted a repertoire of complex and shifting meanings. As Paula Treichler has succinctly put it, AIDS is "an epidemic of signification".⁴

This relation between AIDS and representation has been described by Douglas Crimp:

AIDS does not exist apart from the practices that conceptualise it, represent it, and respond to it...This assertion does not contest the existence of viruses, antibodies, infections, or transmission routes. Least of all does it contest the reality of illness, suffering and death...If we recognize that AIDS exists only in and through these constructions, then hopefully we can also recognize the imperative to know them, analyse them and wrest control of them.⁵

What Crimp is addressing here is the question of empowerment. This wresting of control over images of AIDS needs to operate in terms of exposing these images as ideological constructs through highlighting the interests which they serve. But the question also needs to be asked as to why it is that heterosexuality needs AIDS in order to maintain its fantasy of sexual normalcy? This aside, the further question also needs to be addressed as to how gay men and lesbians (regardless of their actual HIV status) as well as other social groups singled out as being more prone to HIV, can generate and mobilize images as a way of countering those images which are endlessly directed against them. It is here that the question of strategy becomes central, for one implication of Crimp's analysis is that dominant images cannot simply be dismissed. What, then, might be effective strategies?

One response has been the use of "positive" images (for example, images of gay anger and political action so as to counteract the construction of the passive "victim" waiting to die). While such strategies no doubt have some usefulness, they remain limited. Not only do such images imply that there is a "truth" to AIDS or to homosexuality that has merely been suppressed and which can thus be uncovered, but this strategy of counterposing two sets of images (empowerment *versus* victim, gay affirmation *versus* pathological deviancy *etcetera*) serves to maintain a positivist truth/falsity opposition. Most often this takes the form of a naive assertion of the natural and evidential status of photography or the filmic image. Moreover, a strategy of positive images may even entail a reductive denial or negation of the complexities of our identities and desires as well as effacing our own implication, perhaps even complicity, with dominant constructions.

As a limited but nonetheless often pragmatically necessary strategy, the use of positive images comes up against the paradox involved within any assertion of identity, sexual or otherwise, in that while this strategy enables a process of empowerment and the assertion of visibility, it also involves a constricting and fixing of identities. Furthermore, it often entails losing sight of the basic fact that identities are historically contingent and are not the expression of some pre-given ontological truth of our being.

What is required, then, is not merely the countering of dominant images but instead a strategy or aesthetic of disruption so as to make visible not only those interests which are served by these discourses (for example, Gran Fury's attacks upon the pharmaceutical industry, federal

and city government inaction) but also to reveal the instabilities within these constructions. As Simon Watney has argued:

The AIDS activist aesthetic amounts to nothing less than a guerilla semiotics on all fronts, threatening 'normality' with a long, sustained, deliberate derangement of its 'common sense'.⁶

Such demands do not exclude other tactics. However, it is also important to assert that there are certain goals that need to be kept in sight. Firstly, of course, there is the need for the constant provision of information (on

the images—their connotations of blankness—which is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the series. For these blank canvasses are open to a variety of readings which would seem to militate against the polemical strategy motivating this exhibition in that what we are left with is a totalising pictorial rhetoric which has the effect of disempowering us. This fatalism is itself further reinforced by the call for a self-imposed silence: if discourse entraps us, then say nothing.

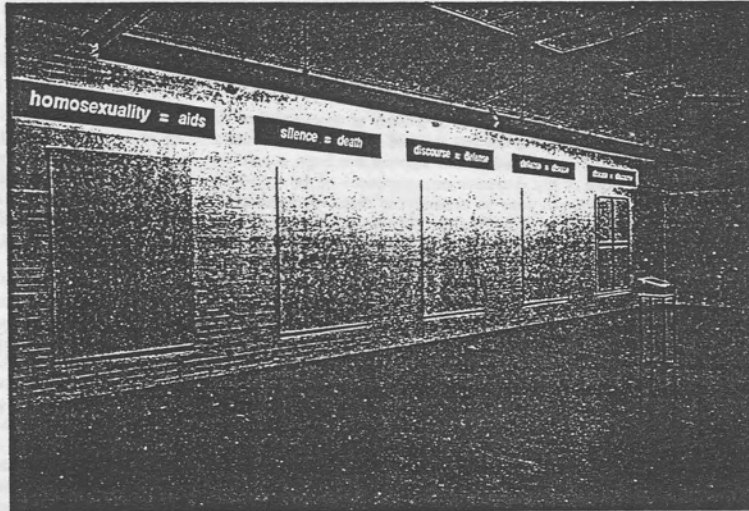
This question of discourse aside (for the moment) not only do the canvasses themselves evoke notions of sanitation, purity *etcetera*-connotations which are unavoidable in the context of an exhibition about disease—but these

connotations readily conflate with notions of aesthetic transcendence and the suppression of any references to historical and social contingency. But as Crimp has stated: "We don't need to transcend the epidemic, we need to end it."⁷ As a consequence of this, the question might be raised as to how appropriate is gallery painting in this context? Moreover, not only might we ask what can a single image in fact tell us as opposed to video, film, photo sequences, but painting here also implies a privatisation of experience and response as distinct from collective intervention.

What I am essentially getting at here is that, while this show importantly focuses our attention upon the discourses that frame AIDS, its strategy of negation in fact merely allows for the reintroduction of some rather orthodox metaphorical tropes. For, evacuated of reference, these canvasses function

as projective screens for metaphorical or figural representations which are incited by AIDS itself or by disease more generally. It is through its evoking of such figural readings that the exhibition would seem to misfire in that, while advocating a strategy whereby "we [as gays] refuse to use their [homophobic] terms", this strategy of silence may well serve only to let those terms return whether they be overtly homophobic or just plain clichéd.

While, then, this exhibition would seem to seek a place outside of dominant discourses by means of a literal removal of reference (the blank canvas), a difficulty emerges in that these emptied spaces cannot remain empty because meaning will always flood in. Moreover, because the exhibition offers a position of withdrawal rather than critique it is unable to prevent the paintings from being reappropriated as metaphors. Yet, as "an epidemic of signification", AIDS is already massively encumbered with a battery of metaphorical associations.⁸ The aim, surely, must be to expose these metaphors, not to invite their recirculation.



From *Silence = Death*, 1991. Installation view. Courtesy Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane. Photo: Richard Stringer.

modes of virus transmission, safe sex advice), an activity which involves both the enablement of choice as well as a demythologisation of medical knowledge—in effect we all become experts—while also reaffirming, indeed celebrating, sexuality. Secondly, there is the need to make visible the interests of institutions ranging across government, the media, drug industries *etcetera*—a strategy, for example, motivating the *Let The Record Show* in New York. Thirdly, there is the goal of disrupting dominant images (examples here might include the work of Diane Neumaier, David Bussell among numerous others). How, then, does *Silence = Death* relate to these goals? And, if "strategy is everything", how effective is the strategy here and how might we gauge this?

In terms of any overtly informational status these images clearly tell us very little. Instead, what we have are a series of blank canvasses each under a slogan which mimics ACT UP's *Silence = Death* which is itself part of the sequence. This is not to say, however, that the images are without content. Indeed, it is the content of

Two issues seem to be at stake here. Firstly, Jones would seem to be advocating silence as an effective strategy of refusal or resistance. In this promotion of refusal Jones would appear to have an ally in Foucault who, in referring to "the political 'double bind', which is the simultaneous individualization and totalization of modern power structures", states that:

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are, but to refuse what we are...We have to promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of this kind of individuality which has been imposed upon us for several centuries.⁹

But not only does Foucault's call for a refusal of certain forms of subjectivity involve a call for "new forms" but his own work has shown how new identities may in fact emerge from what would appear to be entirely hostile discourses. As Foucault observes:

There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth-century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and the literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and the subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and "psychic hermaphroditism" made possible a strong advance of social controls into this area of "perversity"; but it also made possible the formation of a "reverse" discourse: homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or "naturalness" be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified. There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it.¹⁰

An instance of such "reverse discourse" was the medicalisation of homosexuality which provided a platform of legitimation for early homosexual reform (for example, Magnus Hirschfeld's work)—the point here being that, as distinct from rejecting such discourses outright, they can potentially be turned against themselves or at least we might be able to reveal their instabilities and incoherences. Similarly, psychoanalysis, despite Foucault's own suspicion of it, can function as a powerful weapon in destroying the claims to normalcy of any one form of sexuality.

However, another implication of such a strategy is the necessary recognition that heterosexuality is the dominant organising paradigm for sexuality within our culture in that the construction of homosexuality is inescapably predicated upon, and remains a function of, heterosexuality. As such, the positing of a mutually exclusive either/or option between hetero/homosexuality is both untenable and idealistic. This assertion is one that has also been made by Teresa de Lauretis in her discussion of Sheila McLaughlin's film *She Must Be Seeing Things*. Taking up McLaughlin's statement (an uncomfortable one perhaps for many lesbians and gays) that:

Heterosexuality is the dominant code of the society that we live in, and it defines and in a sense creates our own sexuality, whether we choose to partici-

pate as literally heterosexuals or not. I think it's somehow inescapable, that we're inextricably bound up with that. We've gone through a long time of trying to deny that, and yet it's important, if we ever want to get beyond that stage, to find a "new language" or whatever you want to call it, to work through that in some sort of discourse before we can free ourselves from it, or figure out what our desire is or is about...¹¹

de Lauretis comments:

She [McLaughlin] means, of course, the institution of heterosexuality, and not heterosexual behaviour, the event of sexual intercourse between a woman and a man, which may or may not occur, but even for those whose sexual behaviour has never been heterodirected, even for them heterosexuality is "inescapable", though not determining. For, if sexuality is represented as gendered, as the direct result of the existence of two sexes in nature—on which basis culture has constructed gender and onto which in turn civilisation has attached meanings, affects, and values, such as love, social relations, and the continuation of the human species—then it follows that sexuality is finally inescapable for every single human being, as is gender; no one can be without them, because they are part and parcel of being human. Thus sexuality is not only defined but actually enforced as heterosexuality, even in its homosexual form.¹²

Such an analysis necessarily undermines the tenability of Jones's own strategy of refusal and its implicit assumption that there is a homosexual discourse outside of the discourses and institutions of heterosexuality. However, returning to the implications of Foucault's remarks, if Jones perhaps confuses "refusal" with outright silence this is in part because he is at least alert to the dangers of discourse, a concern which is indicative of a second and related issue. Here Jones takes his acknowledged cue from Lee Edelman's critique of the "logic of identity" which Edelman claims underwrites the slogan "Silence = Death". Examining the slogan with reference to Derrida's analysis of metaphor as contamination in Plato's philosophy, Edelman argues that:

the politics of language governing the claim of absolute identity in such a formula as Silence = Death aligns that formula, despite its explicitly anti-homophobic import, with the logic of natural self-identity implicit in Plato's binary oppositions, a logic that provides the ideological support for the homophobic terrorism Plato himself endorsed...The proliferating equations that mark the discourse on AIDS, then, suggest that in the face of the terrifying epistemological ambiguity provoked by this epidemic, in the face of so powerful a representation of the force of what we do not know, the figure of certainty, the figure of litarality, is itself ideologically constructed and deployed as a defence, if not a remedy.¹³

Edelman's argument is that the slogan (formula) Silence = Death in fact reinstalls a logic of identity predicated upon a litarality "beyond rhetoricity" which is itself premised upon a binary opposition between the literal and the figural (metaphorical).¹⁴ Edelman's unease with this would seem partly to turn upon his representation of both AIDS and homosexuality (or, rather, what they have come to figure) as that which undoes the apparent fixity of heterosexuality. While this analysis (whereby the scandal of homosexuality lies in its exposing the contingencies of heterosexuality) is valid enough, there is a danger here of merely setting up another binary opposition of heterosexuality (= fixity, identity) and homosexuality (= ambiguity, dissolution of identity)—an opposition which implicitly assumes, of course, that there is indeed such a thing as a stable heterosexuality to begin with.

In effect, Edelman would seem to identify homosexuality with the figural or metaphorical which contaminates the rationalist logocentrism of a (heterosexual) logic or discourse. The recourse to literalism in the slogan Silence = Death thus entails the (re)containment of homosexuality within a logic of absolutes:

So homophobic and antihomophobic discourses alike find themselves producing, as defensive reactions to the social and medical crisis of AIDS, discourses that reify and absolutize identities, discourses that make clear the extent to which both groups see the AIDS epidemic as threatening the social structures through which they have constituted their identities for themselves.¹⁵

In other words,

Precisely because the defensive appeal to litarality in a slogan like Silence = Death must produce the literal as a figure of the need and desire of the shelter of certain knowledge, such a discourse is already necessarily a dangerously contaminated defence—contaminated by the Derridean logic of metaphor so that its attempt to achieve a natural or literal discourse beyond rhetoricity must reproduce the suspect ideology of reified (and threatened) identity marking the reactionary medical and political discourse that it would counteract. The discursive logic of Silence = Death thus contributes to the ideologically motivated confusion of the literal and the figural, the proper and the improper, the inside and the outside and in the process it recalls the biology of the human immunodeficiency virus as it attacks the mechanism whereby the body is able, in David Black's words, to distinguish between "Self and Not-Self".¹⁶

While, Edelman's discussion raises important issues, the question still arises of where does it leave us? For if "any discourse on AIDS must inscribe itself in a volatile and uncontrollable field of metaphorical contention in which its language will necessarily find itself appropriating AIDS for its own tendentious purposes and becoming subject to appropriation by the contradictory logic of homophobic ideology",¹⁷ and if we are to be implicated within litarality so as to assert our needs and identities

(and one can think here of the entire history of gay-positive slogans and images), should we then simply refuse to speak for ourselves?

What Edelman overlooks is the strategy at work behind Silence = Death. For, while his argument is valid, it does nonetheless present itself as a textual exercise which fails to address how this slogan functions in the public domain—in other words, its heuristic status. As Douglas Crimp has observed:

First, it is precisely as a figure that it does its work: as a striking image appearing on posters, placards, buttons, stickers and T-shirts, its appeal is primarily graphic, and hardly therefore to be assimilated to a privileging of the logos. Second, it desires not a discourse of facts but direct action, the organized, militant enunciation of demands within a discursive field of contested facts. And, finally, a question of address: for whom is this application of literary theory intended other than those within the academy who will find it, simply, interesting?¹⁸

To be fair, however, Edelman is at least sympathetic to the possible perception that his engagement in "intellectual arabesques" in this discussion of AIDS from a perspective of philosophical and literary criticism might appear to some to be mere self-indulgence. So too, he also acknowledges that we can in fact only speak from within discourse:

Yet as painfully as my own investment in the figure of literacy evokes for me the profound inhumanity implicit in this discourse on AIDS, I am also aware that any discourse on AIDS must inevitably reproduce this tendentious figurality... We must be wary, then, of the temptations of the literal as we are of the ideologies at work in the figural; for discourse, alas, is the only defence with which we can counteract discourse, and there is no available discourse on AIDS that is not diseased.¹⁹

This conclusion may be grim but it is also a realistic one. Jones, however, would seem to advocate a position of complete withdrawal. In his own (unpublished) statement about the show he states:

The exhibition takes issue with the AIDS activist slogan Silence = Death which has become a generalised gay activist catch cry. The catalogue suggests that this pressure to 'speak out' often forces us (gay men and lesbians) to implement discourses which are ultimately homophobic, to become involved in a game where the rules are set by others. Both the catalogue and the exhibition posit silence and refusal as alternate forms of resistance. The body of the exhibition consists of variations of a blank canvas, each of which signifies an opportunity to speak, an opportunity I've refused to take up. However, a considered response to the work would probably decide that I'm fatalistic about this proposition, that the blank canvasses always evoke something else and are filled in by the viewer, usually in terms of their own prejudice.

This statement immediately raises questions. Where, for example, does this "pressure to 'speak out'" come from? Moreover, isn't it the case that it is only because gays have spoken out that we have a gay presence at all? Perhaps, having taken in Foucault's remarks on the relation of confessional discourse to sexuality, Jones thinks that a position of no discourse at all is a more valid and worthy tactic. Implicit in this statement, too, is the notion that perhaps there is a gay voice which is not implicated within homophobic discourses—a belief which would parallel feminist attempts to locate a specifically feminine language.²⁰

Furthermore, given Jones's own views in this statement in which he would seem to pre-empt the failure of these paintings to in fact challenge dominant (homophobic) discourses, one might ask what, indeed, is the purpose of this show? For while it is true that ACT UP's slogan has sometimes become both generalised and commodified and while ACT UP itself is at times caught up within factional differences, Jones's apparent dismissal of its activities as merely a "game" betrays both an arrogance and a failure to break out of a way of thinking predicated upon notions of an artistic avant-garde.

Such a perception is even more pronounced in Juan Davila's approving, but extraordinarily confused, appraisal of the broader context of Jones's tactics—an appraisal which demands the same kind of criticism (but even more so) as Crimp makes of Edelman.

Davila describes ACT UP as an essentially redundant (i.e., modernist) avant-garde committed to a "universal and unified" model of "social liberation" and to notions of "the real as immediate."²¹ This representation is surely an unwarranted one if only because ACT UP is itself indicative of the fracturing of a unified historical subject even though Davila claims that it merely expounds "the white man's scientific logic". This itself is a curiously 'liberal' view given that Davila has just condemned (from the position of a fashionable but ill-conceived postmodernism) notions of social emancipation while surely, also, much of the point of ACT UP's activities is precisely to resist so-called 'scientific logic'. Similarly, ACT UP's use of what Davila describes as "a postmodern visual tactic" hardly indicates a naïve belief in the real.

Ultimately, however, Davila's entirely reprehensible dismissal of ACT UP, and his complete failure to posit any kind of alternative strategy, stems from a point of view which can only comprehend ACT UP's activities in terms of models derived from the art world and its markets, in that, for Davila, the significance of Jones's work is that he is more avant-garde than ACT UP. Thus Jones understands and plays the game in a more sophisticated fashion in that his "silence" appears to fit this sort of counter-institutional practice in a game that wavers between passive conformism and active dissatisfaction.

But the real issue at stake for Davila is an attempt to retrieve the purity of art and aesthetics. ACT UP's sin is that its "billboards and posters revive artistic militancy with an ideological commitment to denunciation, subordinating art to the combative slogan... For ACT UP, history has a defined trajectory and the art work

should subordinate itself to the total view of a project for the world." For Davila, the value of Jones's pictures lies in their status as "useless objects" in that, while they adopt ACT UP's slogan, they then make it "inoperative, weak, hesitant, non-efficient through irony."

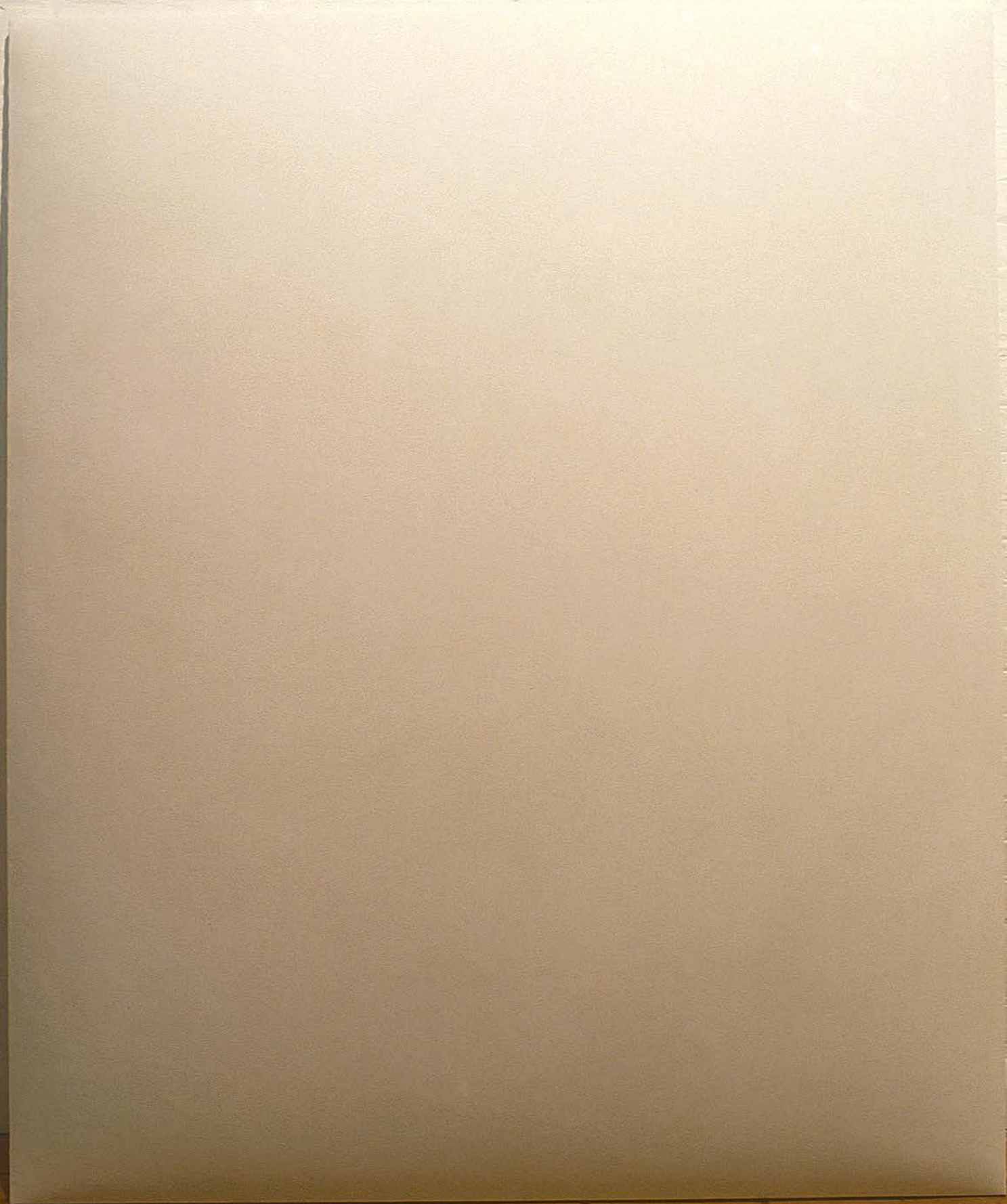
But while ACT UP and other counter-AIDS strategies are not, of course, above criticism, any response is surely better than none at all especially given the deepening of the AIDS crisis. Moreover, ACT UP and the multiplicity of groups that have arisen from within the gay 'community' (however we might define it) have in many ways been extraordinarily effective given the odds stacked against them.

Although Jones's exhibition does usefully provoke thought around how gay identities might be articulated (even if it does not get beyond simply raising the question), the kind of response it has produced from Davila is entirely unhelpful. And while Jones's paintings (and, indeed, the gay community) deserve better than this, the reservation must remain that this exhibition necessarily invites such a response.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York, 1985, p. 27.
2. *Silence=death, or the lifecycle of the contemporary homosexual, actual photos by Matthew Jones*, Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, 1991.
3. See for example Simon Watney, "Representing AIDS" in *Ecstasies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology*, Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta (eds.), London, 1992, p. 185.
4. "AIDS, Homophobia and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification", October, 43, Winter 1987, pp. 31-70.
5. "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism", October, 43, Winter 1987, p. 3.
6. "Representing AIDS", op. cit., p. 190.
7. "AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism", op. cit., p. 7.
8. See Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, Penguin, 1989.
9. "The Subject and Power", Afterword to Michel Foucault: *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* by Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, Harvester, 1982, p. 216.
10. *The History of Sexuality*, op. cit., p. 101.
11. "She Must Be Seeing Things": An Interview with Sheila McLaughlin", Screen, 28, 4, (Autumn 1987) pp. 20-21.
12. "Film and the Visible", in *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video*, ed. Bad Object Choices, Seattle, Bay Press, 1991, pp. 252-253.
13. "The Plague of Discourse": Politics, Literary Theory and AIDS" in *Displacing Homophobia: Gay Male Perspectives in Literature and Culture*, eds. Ronald R. Butters, John M. Cum and Michael Moon, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1989, p. 301. Jones's captions discourse-defence, defence=disease and disease=discourse are taken from Edelman's article. Edelman's references are to Derrida's essay "Plato's Pharmacy" in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson, London, Athlone and the University of Chicago Press, 1981. The most relevant section of Derrida's discussion on the pharmakon is between pp. 95-134.
14. Referring to the pink triangle above the slogan as "a geometrical shape—a triangle too court—that produces a cognitive rhyme with the equation marked inscribed in the text, thus reinforcing semiotically the scientific or geometric inevitability of the textual equation." Edelman then elaborates upon his central argument claiming that, "At the same time, however, the very formula of the mathematical discourse (A = B) that appeals to the prestige of scientific fact evokes the paradigmatic formulation or figure of metaphorical substitution. A = B, after all, is a wholly conventional way of representing the process whereby metaphor improperly designates one thing by employing the name of another. Though Silence = Death is cast in the rhetorical form of geometric equation, and though it invokes, by means of that form, the necessity of articulating a truth of 'facts and figures', the fact remains that the equation takes shape as a figure, that it enacts a metaphorical redefinition of 'silence' as 'death'. What this means, then, is that the equations that appear to pronounce literal, scientifically verifiable truth cannot be distinguished from the disavowed literariness of the very figural language those equations undertake to repudiate or exclude. The truth of such equations can only pass for truth so long as the literal must itself be produced by a figural sleight of hand", *ibid.*, pp. 299-300.
15. *ibid.*, p. 297.
16. *ibid.*, pp. 301-302.
17. *ibid.*, p. 303.
18. " Mourning and Militancy", October, 51, Fall, 1989, pp. 3-4.
19. "The Plague of Discourse" op. cit., p. 304.
20. For a useful introduction to these attempts, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985.
21. "Deathwatch", *Art and Text*, 40, 1991, pp. 33-34. Much of Davila's article simply makes little sense. I confess to being baffled by statements such as "What could be read as a totalising formula of an interventionist aesthetic is appropriated and transformed into 'cultural discussion', a mediation of representation" or else, "Reality for him seems to already be a semantic version codified by the symbolic means of art", while references to the "body of jouissance" are equally opaque. One would like to think that perhaps this is merely the result of poor editing.

David Phillips lectures in art history and theory at the University of Queensland. Matthew Jones is a Melbourne based artist. An early version of this paper was delivered at the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, while Matthew Jones's exhibition, *Silence = Death* was on show there during 1991.



ARTS & ENTERTAIN

disease = discourse



ACTUAL PHOTO

From the Mathew Jones exhibition at 200 Gertrude Street.

Installation focuses on the life of the AIDS victim

MATHEW JONES is an artist whom I have considered well worth keeping an eye on. His previous exhibition appearances deserved more attention than they received, in fact an installation of his wall-drawings held at the George Paton Gallery of a few years back is asterisked in my memory as one of the best shows at that time. Jones was then a promising postmodernist, his ambitious works juxtaposing shaded geometric motifs with renderings of baroque-looking ornamentation.

I wish that I could be as enthusiastic about his latest installation which focuses on the AIDS issue. Taking two walls in the main space at 200 Gertrude Street, Jones has fixed a number of black signs near the gallery ceiling, each bearing slogans like "Homosexuality = AIDS" and "Silence = Death". Beneath these are placed several isolated white objects, including a bed, a screen and a mattress.

As such, I found the display obscure and meaningless, and slightly silly. Then we come to the catalogue; this contains a short statement at the rear. It is also filled with the slogans, and a series of comic photographs of a youngish man in T-shirt and polka-dot boxer shorts who we see alternately cavorting on and cowering in a hospital bed. What is apparently causing him distress throughout is not the disease but a range of books, magazines and pamphlets on AIDS and homosexuality which accumulate beneath his bed. The final photograph shows him lying on his back with legs and arms upraised, presumably having died.

Frankly, I am at a loss to understand why the gallery has mounted this insensitive and potentially distressing project. It neither supplies us with information, nor empathises with the tragic victims of AIDS. The exhibition seems to me to trivialise the matter from start to finish, treating the process of pain and fear, of illness and death, as a slapstick routine. And yet the exhibition has

REVIEW

ART

Mathew Jones, (200 Gertrude Street, until 25 May); Stephen McCarthy, (Verity Street Gallery, until 7 June); Glyn Williams, (Pinacotheca, until 8 June).

CHRISTOPHER HEATHCOTE

received Government support and will be travelling interstate. Why? Surely the funds would have been better spent on medical research?

Both the exhibition and the publication raise serious questions as to what kinds of artistic activity are nurtured at this gallery. Contrary to 200 Gertrude Street's vanguard reputation this is not "outsider art" at all, but the bureaucratically-sanctioned, state-endorsed art that today's outsiders must rebel against. Regular visitors to the venue will be familiar with this form of visual and intellectual display; this is l'art officiel, an elevated hybrid culture preferred by exactly these kinds of public institutions. In many respects it might be likened to a species of fish that has evolved to a point where it can exist only in the pampered artificial environment of a specially designed aquarium.

One can only wonder why the gallery cannot exhibit the odd reasonably-proficient painting, sculpture, print or drawing, rather than specialising in these tired attempts to invoke early 1970s minimal and conceptual art. To compound the issue they are not even adequate on their own terms. Those of us who witnessed the development of art during the '70s realise that this gallery's apparent "house style" is third-rate conceptualism. In fact the present show pales beside recent installations by Andrew Cooks, Peter Cripps, Brigid Cole-Adams and Tom Arthur that we have seen at local commercial galleries. And,

as I say, it is markedly inferior to Jones's previous efforts.

However, the most worrying thing is that in favoring such exhibitions 200 Gertrude Street plays straight into the hands of its conservative opponents. This trivial exercise provides ample polemical ammunition for those who argue that our contemporary spaces have degenerated into a nursery for the deskilled and the unimaginative. Normally I would want to strongly dispute such claims, but on this occasion I can only nod in reluctant agreement.

HAVING heard a rave review of Stephen McCarthy's work on the radio, I visited his show expecting great things. Instead I was left totally perplexed as to exactly what all the fuss was about. McCarthy's chromatically restrained abstract paintings are gimmicky to say the least. Seemingly unable to develop an adequate geometric arrangement for his compositions, he has resorted to filling in his emblematic triangles, arrows and bands with regiments of abbreviated little figures.

Glyn Williams's latest paintings are more visually stimulating, indeed in certain respects they recall the 1920s Purist works of Fernand Leger and Jean Metzinger. Leaning towards strong primary pigments, Williams takes isolated objects like pipes and mannequins as his subject matter. These are deployed like signs upon an empty colored space, thereby achieving a curious monumentality; his style is purely static and so simplified that it approaches abstraction.

There is a similarity to the works of Brett Colquhoun, who exhibited at Pinacotheca six weeks back, and Dale Hickey, who also showed here for many years. However, where Colquhoun and Hickey would refine enigmatic visual *haikus*, Williams prefers to play about with his subjects. Williams does not make "major" art, but these lively, unpretentious images do cheer you up if you're tramping round the galleries on a gloomy, drizzly day.

defense = disease



silence = death

Mathew Jones

Julliana Engberg

Mathew Jones' earlier work, *Tableaux 1989*, included the head and upper body of an athletic, classically-posed nude male, eyes averted, arms behind, penis-less and grided up; like a target Saint Sebastian, his sexuality dissected and castrated by both the circumstance of standing in for the biological and social body of AIDS and by the gaze freezing him in a time of medical research. He has become a curiosity, a monstrosity even, in his state of benign-ness. The evidence of his virile self has been erased. For him, there are no props and innuendoes such as guns and roses. He is not a private dick for hire: not a bud ready to bloom. He is a piece of the action of the new discourse: the discourse which glides over the surface of things; which has trouble dealing with the bottom line body; which revels in an intellectual melancholy, and which is passive: resigned to mortality, morality and metaphor.

On first glance, Jones' recent exhibition *silence = death: or the life cycle of the contemporary homosexual, actual photos by Mathew Jones* (at 200 Gertrude Street) appeared to be stuck in a time zone located on the 49th parallel. What was all this stuff: stuff that looked suspiciously like General Idea's stretchers; stuff that seemed to have been lifted from the pages of Simon Watney and the ACT UP book, *AIDS Demographics*; stuff that was 'doing the rounds' on the streets of New York, London and everywhere else?

Around the walls of the gallery, are the slogans of our social and political present: slogans, which fill in

for the grid of discourse. Equations of cancellation: homosexuality = aids; silence = death; discourse = defense; defense = disease; disease = discourse. The trademark-like telegrams of Act Up which has come to stand in for not only the biological and social body of AIDS but, as well, the grided lines of the artist's visual and technical trajectory. The same grid which holds Kruger's Happy/Sad/Alive/Awake... in place.

But these are *not* the slogans of ACT UP, with the exception of 'silence = death'. And these are not General Idea's hospital stretchers (and not even Robert MacPherson's camp stretchers). And this is not New York or Toronto or London.

Central to the installation of the exhibition is the artist's book (catalogue). For this, Jones returns to his tableaux format to present a parodic query about the state of this checker board of discourse, art and media.

... *the life cycle of a contemporary homosexual* is displayed, viewed under the microscope, so to speak, to reveal the permutations which occur as a result of following the grid of discourse and disease closely. Wheeled in to lend affect, General Idea's hospital cot now stands in as the platform for hysteria, fear, militancy, exhaustion and finally resignation. The growing level of 'AIDS' literature 'shown' underscoring the 'industry' which has developed as a network of support, information and fantasy.

Jones statement at the end of the book summarizes the whole thing. . . . *We rally to the slogans because they have forced us to, but keep the silence, as a place where we refuse to use their terms.*

We have imported these slogans which grid and make us anxious but in doing so we have not, as yet, found a way to deal with our own situation. Perhaps we have even avoided doing so. Where are the works which are confronting and which make our hearts bleed and our minds and senses reel? And where is our own discourse, the one which makes sense here where other issues are at stake? And what about the sensuous body?

I'm not sure if I wouldn't have preferred to see this exhibition in two parts. The first part, the set-up; and the second part, the shake-down. Because in the dense and complex matrix of the discourse grid, Jones' plump and sensual, non-resistive but receptive, white shaped-canvas paintings get somewhat lost.

They are the work we are looking for. They redeem the sexual body and remove the grids which zone it up as a danger spot. They return the swelling forms of muscle and tendons and invite a meandering caress - and more aggressive touching.

In the white shaped-canvas paintings, Jones returns from the zone of the demographic and with him he brings the *putti*, the model, the snake and a different line which follows the longed for curves and folds of the desired body, a return which references his earlier work inspired by paintings and drawings of Boucher, where plump, fleshy and taunting *putti* frolic with intent: their pink and chubby little arms meeting in the sensuous fold of wrist and knee and thigh and buttocks.

And these are the sensuous bodies of pleasure which like to be touched and for whom slogans are too rowdy and too negating; and these are the silent bodies of defiance for whom the slogans are not enough and do not say enough.

Jones is not undercutting the important work which has been undertaken by ACT UP. He is, however, asking questions about the relevance of much discourse to the issues of the body, and needs and wants, and whether or not this discourse can move beyond a slogan of cancellation.

Mathew Jones, detail from *silence = death*, 1991.

disease = discourse

disease = discourse



JESDAY, JULY 23, 1991

GALLERIES

Dianne F. Jidke, Metro Arts.
Mathew Jones and John
Armstrong, IMA. Anne Lord,
The Verlie Just Town Gallery.
Les Brough, McWhirter's
Artspace

By MICHAEL RICHARDS

□
THE same cannot be said of Mathew Jones' installation, *Silence = Death*, at the Institute of Modern Art. Jones presents yet another of those minimal and tedious semiotic exercises that continue to occupy a small segment of the art community — in this instance no more than several blank canvases, a few words stuck on the walls and a book of rather silly pictures.

Jihad Muhammed John Armstrong's *Green & Black* also at the IMA, has substance. A —



'Silence = Death', Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane 1991

silence = death



Mathew Jones: Silence = Death

200 Gertrude Street: May 3 to 25

With the advent of AIDS, suddenly everyone has something to say about the gay man's body. These paintings don't, they're blank, white and speechless. Presented in the context of AIDS that constitutes defiance, a refusal to enter into a game where the rules are set by others.

silence = death

A series of photos by Mathew Jones, *Silence = Death*, is subtitled "the life-cycle of the contemporary homosexual".

Exhibited in May in Melbourne at 200

Gertrude St, the exhibition travels to

Brisbane in July to the Institute

of Modern Art, 4-27 July.

The book of photographs closes with an

intriguing message:

"We rally to the slogan because they have forced us to, but keep the silence, as a place where we refuse to use their terms".

silence = death

