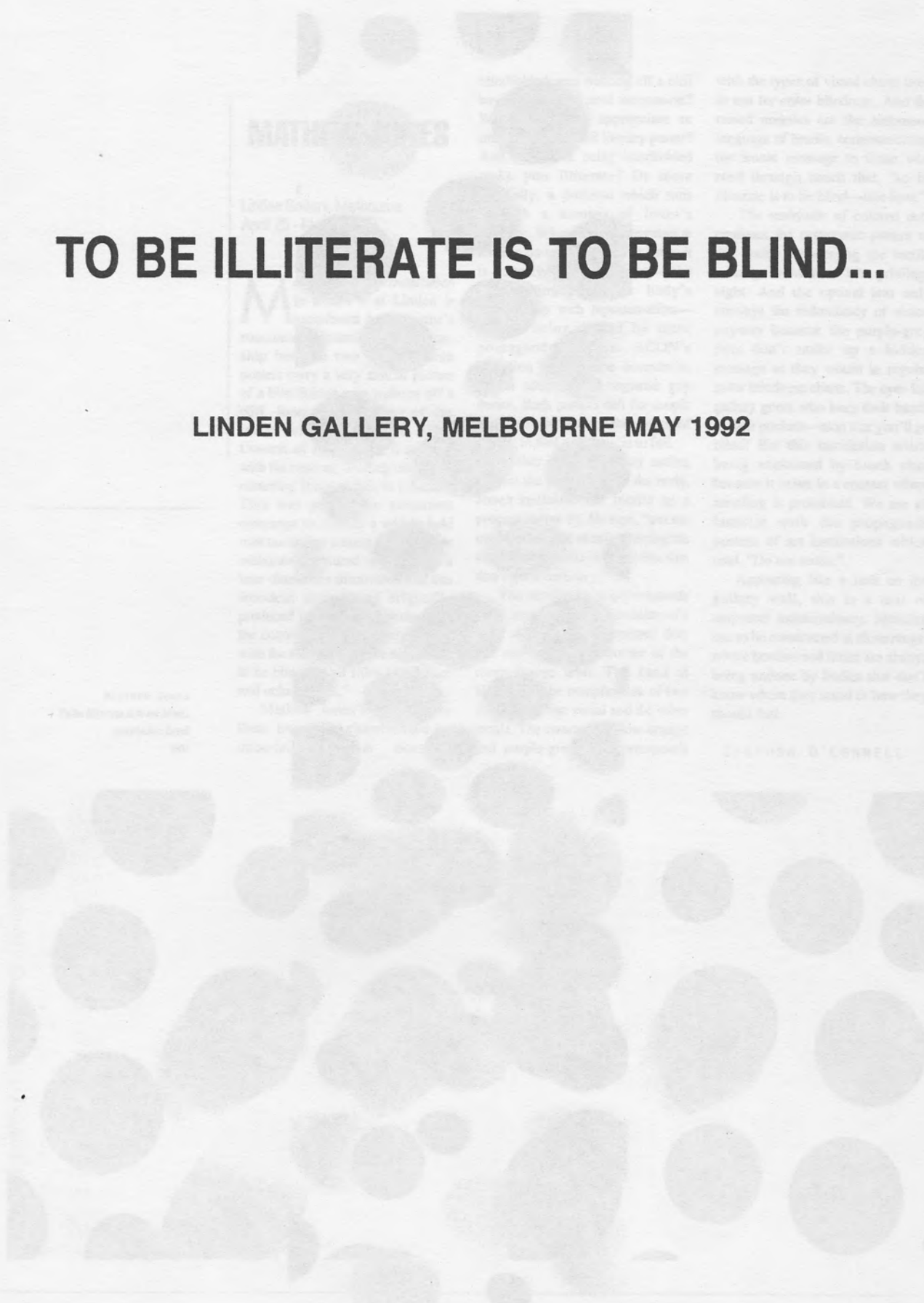


# TO BE ILLITERATE IS TO BE BLIND...

LINDEN GALLERY, MELBOURNE MAY 1992





## MATHEW JONES

Linden Gallery, Melbourne  
April 25 - May 4, 1992

Mathew Jones's installation in Room 4 at Linden is introduced by an artist's statement discussing the relationship between two posters. Both posters carry a very similar picture of a blindfolded man walking off a cliff. Jones became aware of this image when ACON (the AIDS Council of NSW) used it in 1990 with the caption, "Pulling out before cumming is not as safe as it looks." This was part of an education campaign to counter a widely held misconception among gay men that withdrawal ensured safe sex. At a later date Jones discovered that this woodcut design was originally produced in 1920 and circulated in the context of revolutionary Russia with the message, "To be illiterate is to be blind: on all sides lurk failure and unhappiness."

Mathew Jones's approach to these images is characterized by uncertainty. What does a

blindfolded man walking off a cliff have to do with anal intercourse? Why did ACON appropriate an image from a USSR literacy poster? And why does being blindfolded make you illiterate? Or more generally, a problem which runs through a number of Jones's projects: What does representation have to do with desire? For Jones it is exactly this uncertainty—the indeterminacy of his body's relationship with representation—that is being denied by these propaganda posters. ACON's intention is to create boundaries which educate and organize gay desire. Both posters call for scopic certitude concerning the limits of safety; to feel your way is to fail.

Rather than anxiously acting against the uncertainty of the body, Jones reclaims the tactile as a process to live by. He says, "put me on the other side of safe, dancing the chocolate cha-cha in the places that don't get a look-in ..."

The installation which responds to the artist's statement consists of a strip of nodules and colored dots that run around one corner of the room at eye level. This band of blotches is the complication of two discourses, one visual and the other tactile. The swarm of yellow-orange and purple-grey dots corresponds

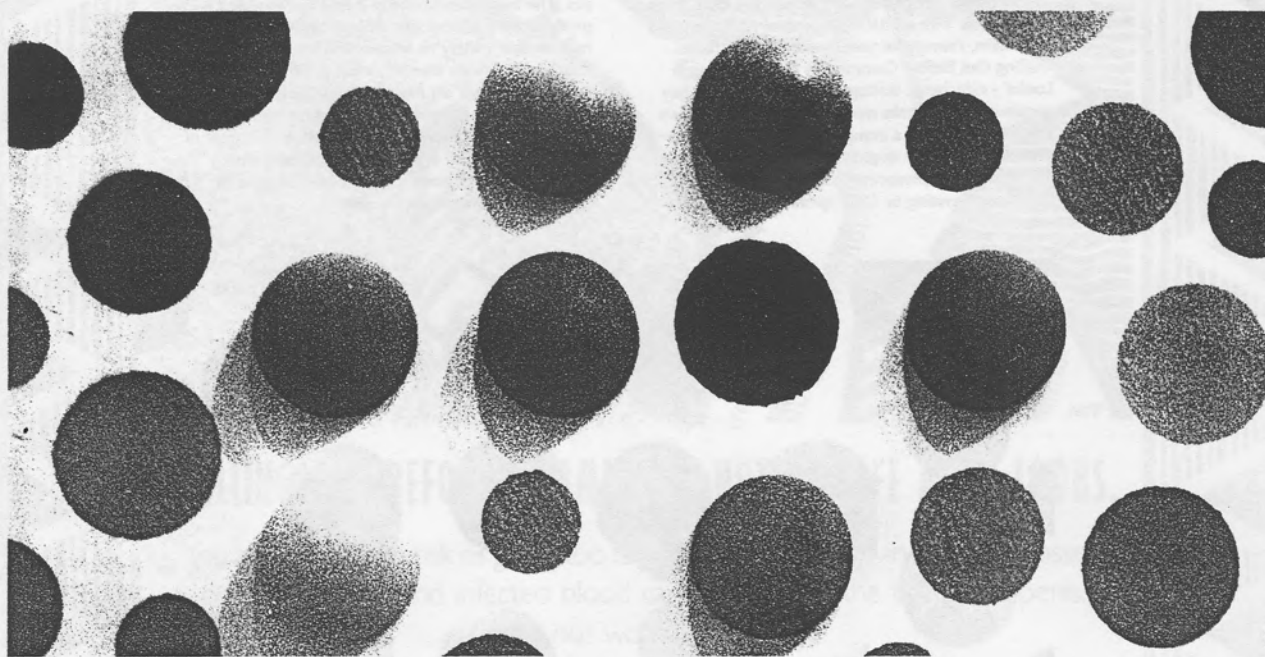
with the types of visual charts used to test for color blindness. And the raised nodules are the embossed language of braille, communicating the ironic message to those who read through touch that, "to be illiterate is to be blind—like love."

The multitude of colored dots confuses the systematic pattern of the braille, concealing the tactile message from those who privilege sight. And the optical text only conveys the redundancy of vision anyway because the purple-grey dots don't make up a hidden message as they would in regular color blindness charts. The eyes fail gallery goers who keep their hands in their pockets—stop it or you'll go blind! But this installation resists being explained by touch also, because it exists in a context where handling is prohibited. We are all familiar with the propaganda posters of art institutions which read, "Do not touch."

Appearing like a rash on the gallery wall, this is a text of corporeal indeterminacy. Meaning has to be constructed at close range, where borders and limits are always being undone by bodies that don't know where they stand or how they should feel.

STEPHEN O'CONNELL

MATTHEW JONES  
*To be illiterate is to be blind...*  
installation detail  
1992



# MATHEW JONES

**TO BE ILLITERATE IS TO BE BLIND, OR, PULLING OUT BEFORE CUMMING IS NOT AS SAFE AS IT LOOKS, OR GETTING OFF AT REDFERN.**

INSTALLATION AT ROOM 4, LINDEN, MELB.

CARMELA BARANOWSKA

A key debate in the politics of AIDS - a reference point which is repeated in the theoretical writings of Cindy Patton, Simon Watney and in the graphics of New York ACT UP - is that AIDS involves a crisis of representation. Earlier forms of signification crumble under the strain of a narrative whose telos is death. All the traditional narratives (science, history, culture) heave a gigantic postModern sigh before collapsing into an incoherent babble. It is ironic that in all this disintegration the authority of the theorist; the statistician; and the activist provide a coherent identity. Simon Watney's cut up texts appear thoughtfully put together in their disjunctiveness; those who question are pre-appeared to accept a statistician's results as a *fait accompli*; the reformist Australian bureaucrat and AIDS activist belong to a broadly defined, gay community.

Despite the disaster of the Grim Reaper Education Campaign, Australia's response to the AIDS pandemic has been viewed as a 'model' for other Western countries. There has been - according to this line of thinking - a well-developed and coordinated synthesis of action between communities, bureaucracies and governments in Australia. Those involved speak in terms of strategies, containment and the even stranger expression, 'We are winning the fight against AIDS but the war hasn't been won.' Groups like ACT UP and individuals like Jones tend to disrupt the consensual model.

In the U. S., the graphics of Gran Fury and ACT UP would, on a smaller scale, adopt those features of education campaigns which have been implemented by Australian AIDS Councils and governments. It is well worth mentioning - if not already well known - that the U.S. Government's record in AIDS Education campaigns is, at best, negligent, and at worst, genocidal.

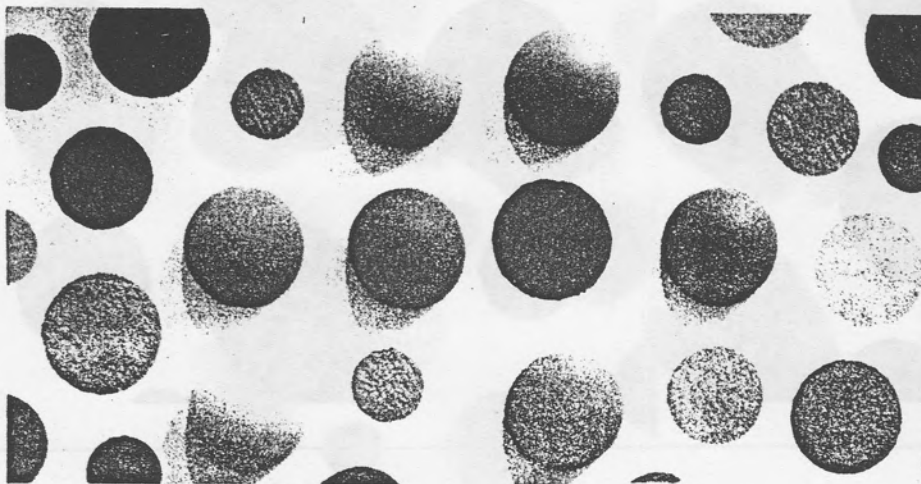
Jones's subject position is curious; his installation which deals with an AIDS Council of NSW (ACON) Education, Prevention and Awareness campaign - 'Pulling Out Before Cumming is Not as Safe as It Looks' - criticises a strategy developed for the gay community by certain representatives of it. Jones's written response is a complex interplay of subjective disbelief at the stupidity of ACON's campaign; and a gay male perspective on the borders and divisions operating in AIDS-speak.

The installation has four parts. The first graphic is archival. It is an early 1920's Russian literacy poster of a blindfolded man; heavily set; bearded and clothed for the steppes; passively walking off a cliff. Subtitle: 'To be illiterate is to be blind.' The second graphic is from ACON's (AIDS Council of NSW) 1990 Education and Awareness Summer Campaign. Another man, whose striking resemblance to the first is offset by a clean-shaven face, studded belt and Doc Martens is walking off a similar looking, yet historically different cliff. Subtitle: (with postStonewall resonance) 'Pulling out before cumming is not as safe as it looks.' The other texts are Jones's responses to ACON's campaign which was clearly modelled on an earlier, and not entirely compatible, Russian counterpart.

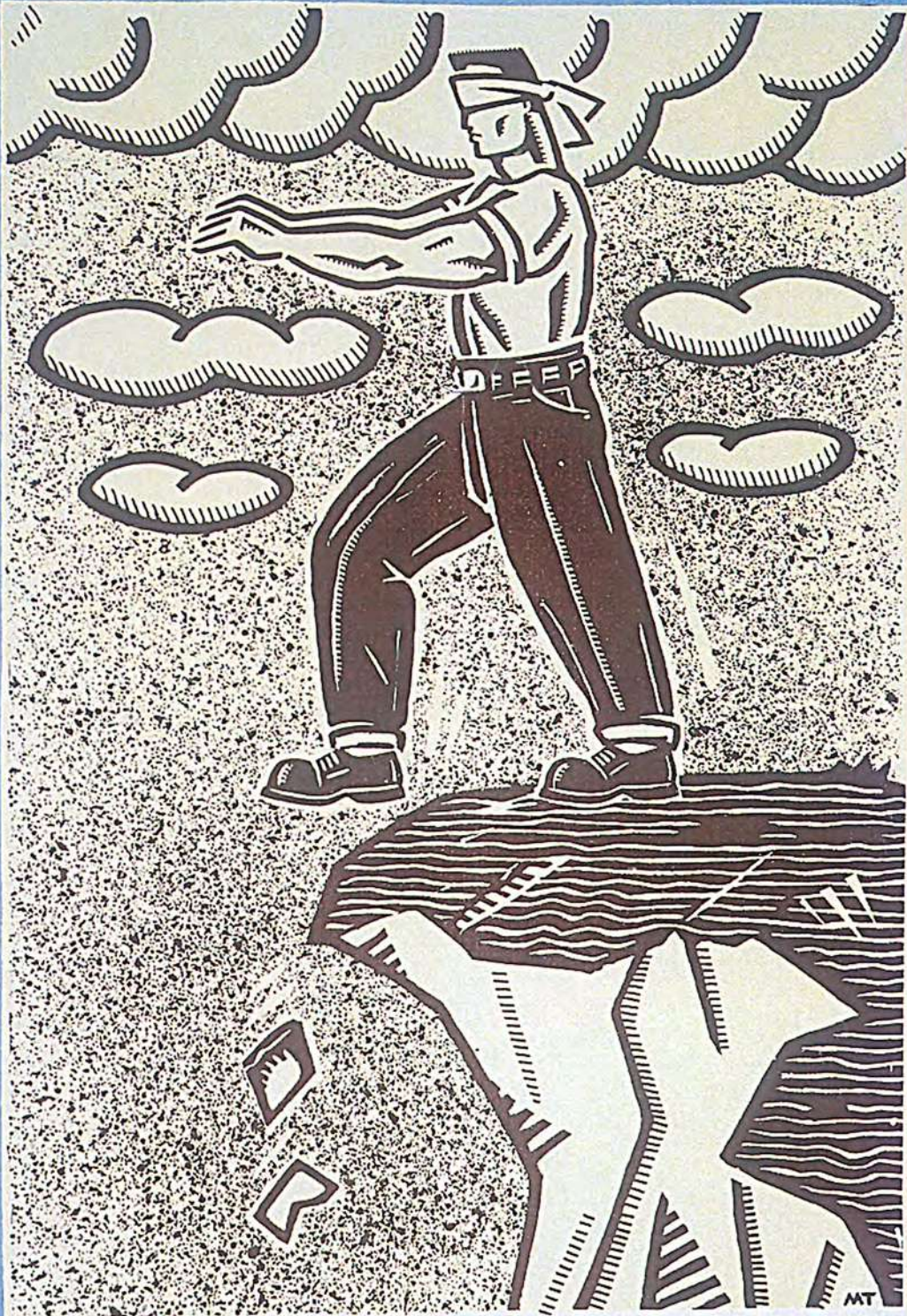
ACON's appropriation of a Russian literacy campaign is more than a mere didactic coincidence. Hoping to draw a favourable comparison between the Russian *avant-garde* and the *avant-garde* of a government funded AIDS Education and Prevention campaign was never going to be easy. There could be a number of 'lessons' drawn from the campaign's failure. Borrowing so heavily as it does from an obsolete 'foreign' model, it reminds me of the differences between the Victorian AIDS Council's eroticisation of gay male sex ('You'll never forget the feeling of safe sex') or even New York ACT UP's multicultural attempt ('Kissin Doesn't Kill, Greed and Indifference Do'). Jones's response to the two different campaigns is the promotion of what personally - yet not politically? - is the only option available to him; the espousal of a private language of dissent.

The major component of the installation is on the wall opposite the posters. The (sighted) spectator's attention is divided between the didacticism of the posters and the confusing circular shapes and colours on the other side of the room. Tennis ball hemispheres, painted in different colours, are fixed to the wall in a frieze of painted circles, confusing the viewer. However, Jones's model reader can distinguish the politics of AIDS, of representation, of desire . . . by touch, instead of by mere sight. In order to allay ACON's 'anxiety about borders', Jones's wall message reads, in braille, 'To be illiterate is to be blind (like love)'.

Some would argue that Jones produces a reading camouflaged in the traditional guise of an earlier, modernist *avant-garde*, concerned as it is with the tenuous relationship between aesthetics and politics. The oppositional *avant-garde* has travelled a troubled path historically. Either mummified in the museum/art gallery or fragmented, (in the U.S. at least) as 'politically correct', what is left? In Australia, Jones's 'dissident' art practice begs the question, what next? The oppositional model here depends on a private language of representation. Sceptical of grander theoretical and practical claims, Jones's scepticism could, however, become ensnared in opposition for opposition's sake.



Detail of installation



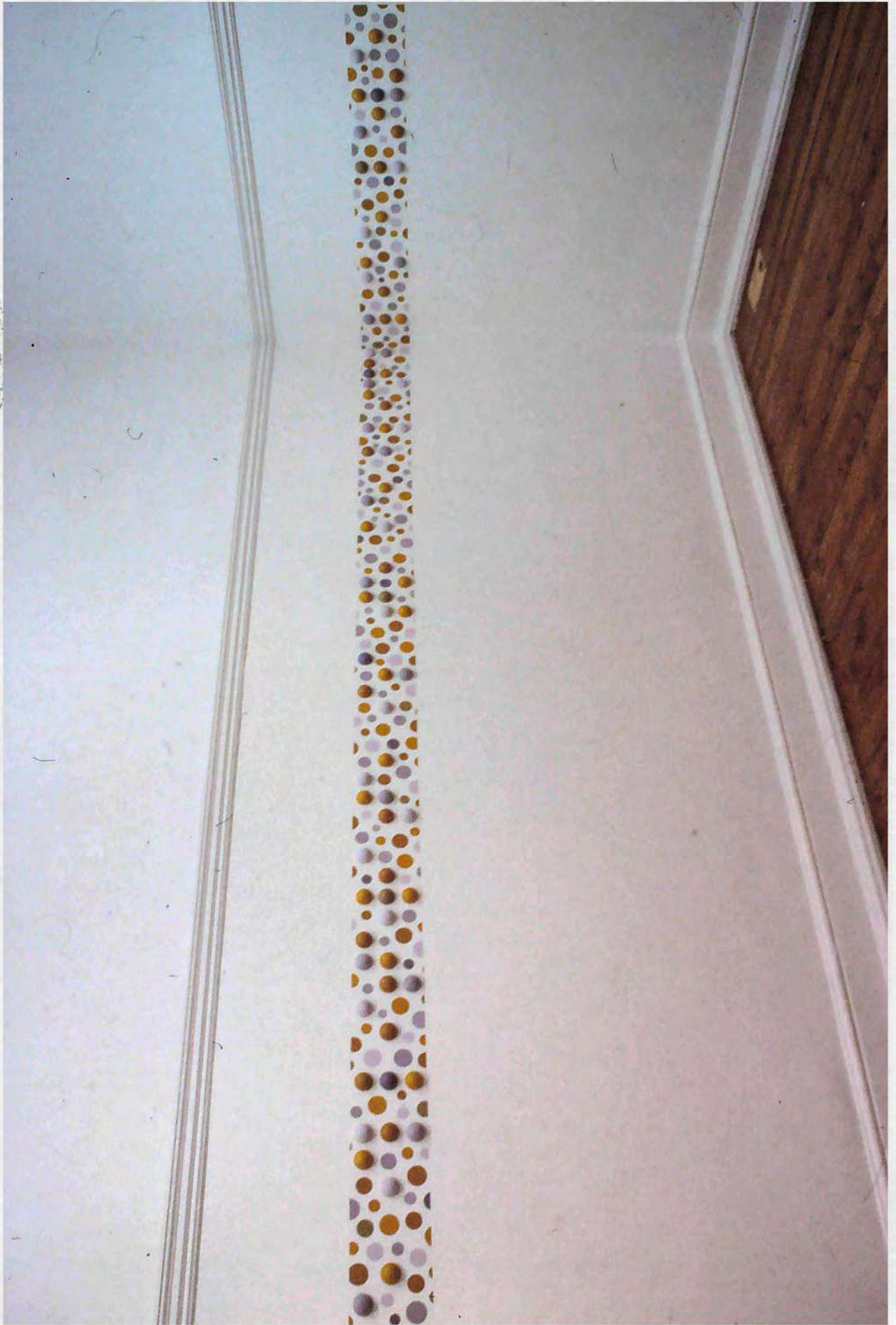
## **PULLING OUT BEFORE CUMMING IS NOT AS SAFE AS IT LOOKS.**

You always run the risk of going too far. Besides, the AIDS virus can be passed on in pre-cum. And infected blood can easily enter the tip of the penis.

So it's not worth the worry.

Always do it in a condom. The blindfold is optional.

AIDS COUNCIL OF NSW



# Buttocks, balls and human cells

To be illiterate is to be blind, or Pulling out before cumming is not as safe as it looks, or getting off at Redfern.

MATHEW JONES  
Artist Run Space; Linden Gallery, 26 Acland St St Kilda  
April 25-May 14

Mathew Jones' seductive minimalism always makes you work hard intellectually as well as delighting you with the poise of its arrangement.

To describe this exhibition

would be to rob some of its power, but suffice to say it is a simple arrangement of coloured circles painted directly on to the gallery wall. Some of the circles are flat others protrude as painted half spheres, thus setting up his first reference: to braille the literacy of the blind. The colours are not accidental either, all flat shades of purple, green and brown, they are taken from optician's charts to detect colour blindness. It is clean, it is stark but it is certainly not cold.

The colours dance: so many circles so close together can play havoc with your eyes.

These circles aligned in uneven rows also have a musical quality and remind one of musical notation or even animated singing along where we are asked to follow the bouncing ball.

Circle, egg, ovum, eyes, breasts, buttocks, balls, human cells: there is something fleshy about these shapes; especially when we know that this exhibition is not just about literacy, braille, or blindness, it is about the language of AIDS. Jones explains that the genesis for the show was reflection on an AIDS prevention advertisement from the AIDS Council of NSW.

The ad featured a blind-

folded man about to walk off a cliff, its slogan read: "Pulling out before cumming is not as safe as it looks". This ad was modelled on a USSR literacy campaign poster from the early 1920s, which featured the same image and the slogan: "To be illiterate is to be blind". Jones admits he was confused and found it difficult to connect the images and the slogans. Why did the AIDS ad say: "Not as safe as it looks" rather than "not as safe as you think". What sense would the Russian poster make to the illiterate anyway? And what did walking off a cliff, illiteracy, being blind-

folded and anal intercourse have in common?

Well Jones certainly makes a leap and demands that we do too, not into a void like the character in the posters, but into a new place where these types of questions can be viewed from a different perspective. He reflects that AIDS is in fact all about borders, boundaries and transgression. The boundaries between cells, the boundaries between body fluids, inside and outside the body, the boundaries between gay and straight communities may all seem more difficult in the age of AIDS.

So we have Jones' state-

ment, equally as perplexing as the posters, a decorative border, which raises more questions than it answers (for example, does it really say something in braille, and if so what?). But importantly it reminds us that faced with an epidemic that constellates around deep issues of sexuality, identity and death, the only language we can use to describe our experience is a tentative one not a proscriptive one. Jones finishes his artist statement: "call me blind, like love, and give me the literacy of the blind... which is braille... which is touch".

MARCUS O'DONNELL

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# ART + TEXT

*Quincentennial Blues*

*Australia's Asia Link*

*The Dialectical Image*

*General Idea: "Fin de Siècle"*



To be illiterate is to be blind, or, Pulling out before cumming is not as safe as it looks, or, Getting off at Redfern.

*"Two years ago I wrote an article for the National AIDS Bulletin about the 'Places, Times, Reasons' study I carried out in Melbourne at the end of 1988. That study had two aims. The first was to identify the types of occasions on which gay men are most at risk of having unsafe sex. The second aim was to examine the thought processes that enable gay men to decide to have unsafe sex in a given sexual encounter; to identify the types of self-justification for having unsafe sex that they use at the time they make this decision.*

*...The most common self-justification recorded in the Melbourne study was a resolution to have unprotected intercourse, but to withdraw before ejaculation. Following this finding, ACON carried out a brief educational campaign presenting information that planning to withdraw is not, in fact, safe. A third reason for repeating the Melbourne study in Sydney was to get at least some idea of how effective this campaign had been. If the incidence in Sydney of this self-justification - but not others - turned out to be appreciably less than in Melbourne, it would be reasonable to conclude that the campaign had indeed had an effect.*

*...As in Melbourne, the most common self-justification used in the sample, involved a resolution to withdraw without ejaculating. Indeed, this self-justification was reported to almost precisely the same extent as it had been in Melbourne. It appears that, like the desire for unprotected intercourse, this self-justification is not greatly affected by the visibility of the epidemic in a community. It seems too - though it is impossible to be absolutely sure - that the ACON campaign to inform gay men of the dangers of planning to withdraw before ejaculating had been in effective." [1]*

As part of its Education and Awareness Summer 1990 Campaign, ACON (the AIDS Council of NSW) produced 4 images aimed specifically at the gay community.

*"These resources have proven to be most effective in conveying the message of safe sex and in encouraging people to maintain their safer sex behaviours ...[they] also set out to encourage a sense of community and a general feeling that we are winning the fight against AIDS but that the war is not yet won." [2]*

One of these images, distributed as a poster, postcard, on a T- Shirt, and as a wrap-around on the Sydney Star Observer (a fortnightly free community newspaper) was of a blindfolded man walking off a cliff and was captioned, 'Pulling Out Before Cumming Is Not As Safe As It Looks.' It was intended to clarify anxiety about anal intercourse.

I didn't understand this poster. I couldn't work out why it said "Not as safe as it looks" rather than "Not as safe as you think". I couldn't work out what a blindfolded man walking off a cliff had to do with anal intercourse. The choice of the image didn't seem to be characterised by either an explicitly educative, not an attention grabbing intent. Then I stumbled

across what must have been the origin for this image in particular, and in its strong graphic woodcut style, its decorative border, etc, have influenced all 4 designs. It was a USSR literacy poster of the early 1920's designed by A Radakov. This original poster was captioned - 'To Be Illiterate Is To Be Blind : on all sides lurk failure and unhappiness.'

Which just made things worse, because I didn't understand the literacy poster either ...what a blindfolded man walking off a cliff had to do with literacy, why someone couldn't be fully sighted and illiterate; nor what sense this poster was meant to make to the illiterate anyway! And what's so illiterate about being blind ...there's braille, ...and besides which there's all kinds of blindness, there's colour blind and form blind and degrees of both ...And then I didn't understand what literacy had to do with anal sex. Nor why the appropriation was so precise (save for minor but significant details of dress sense) ...right down to the border.

Which is what some people say AIDS is all about [3] ...borders ...or at least that boundaries are precisely what AIDS problematises, from the level of microbiology where it is conceived of as a collapse in the borders between cells, to the level of transmission where it is all about which fluids cross which boundaries, to the macro level of social cells and borders such as that between the homosexual and heterosexual 'communities'. Just as this poster is about cumming and precum and when someone's cock is inside or outside you. And this strange conflation of illiteracy and blindness, of the scopic and the linguistic, I see now, is all about the function of language in fabricating boundaries or borders or frames. Corrals of supposed safety; inside/outside, safe/unsafe, I've cum/not yet. [4]

The man walking off a cliff is about to transgress a boundary and ACON is trying to reinscribe one. That's what I think.

And if even the guys who are on my team and doing their best for my benefit can't help but just reinforce these borders, or at least this anxiety about borders ...if we can't do without language, and if the borders have to be there, well then, put me on the other side of safe, dancing the chocolate cha-cha in the places that don't get a look-in, call me blind like love, and give me the literacy of the blind ...which is braille ...which is touch.

Mathew Jones 4/92.

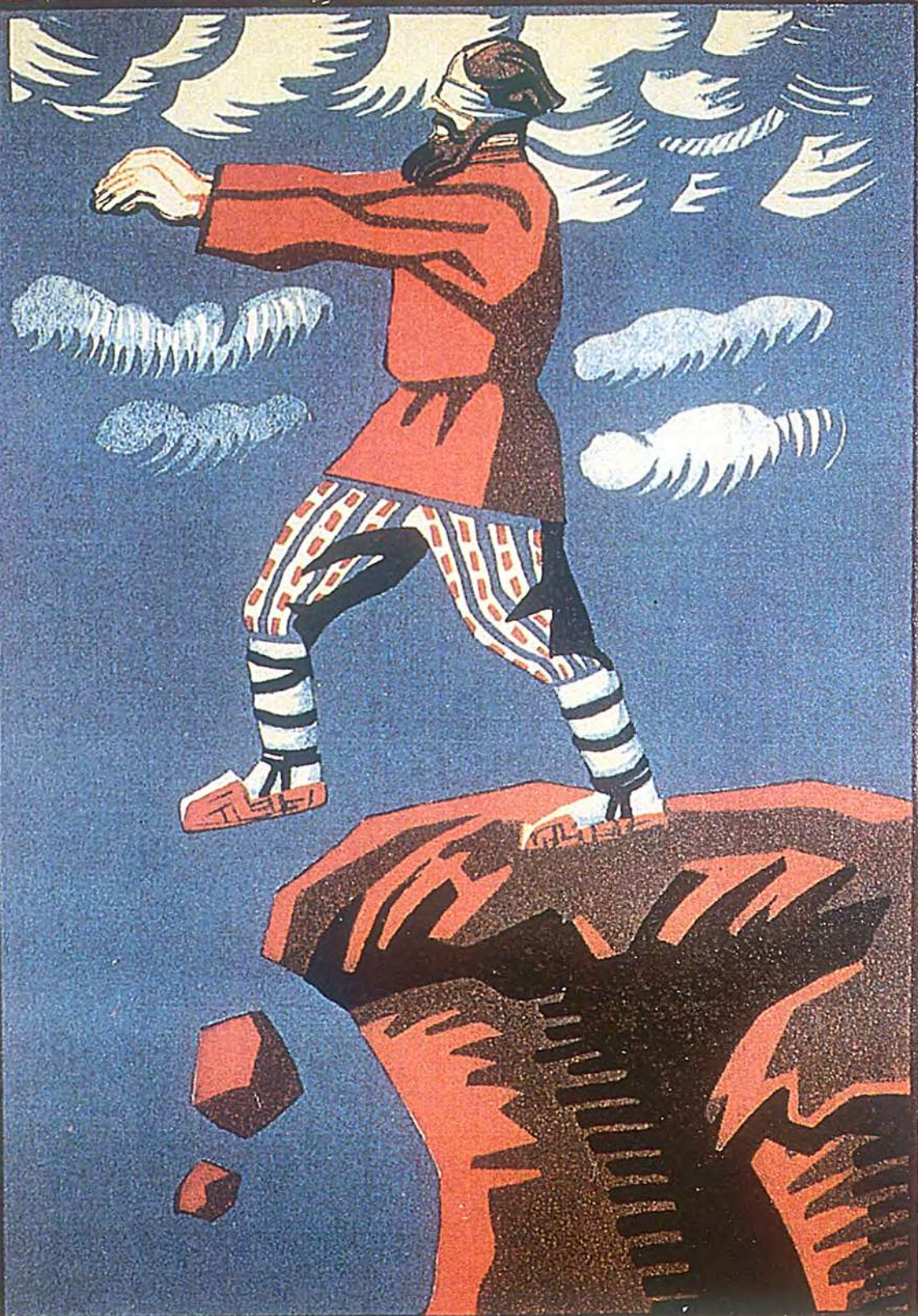
*Thanks to Linda Sproul, Andrew Forster-Jones & Stuart Koop for their suggestions and assistance.*

[1] Ron Gold; 'Places, Times, Reasons revisited: Report on the Sydney study', in National AIDS Bulletin Vol 5 #9 Oct. 1991.

[2] Martin Nunn; 'Education and Awareness', in National AIDS Bulletin Vol. 4 #4 May 1990.

[3] Rosalyn Diprose & Cathryn Vasselau; 'Animation-AIDS in Science/Fiction', in 'The Illusion of Life.' (ed.) Alan Cholodenko, Power Publications & Australian Film Commission, Sydney 1991.

[4]..Diprose & Vasselau, op cit; 'Materiality eludes identification, so how to capture anything of something which exceeds and resists transcription into any fixed form? By punctuation; projection of framed pieces onto an already anticipated map of relations - spacing which determines the meaning or purpose of the pieces thus produced.'



**НЕГРАМОТНЫЙ** ТОТ-ЖЕ **СЛЕПОЙ**  
ВСЮДУ ЕГО ЖДУТ НЕУДАЧИ И НЕСЧАСТЬЯ.

# MAGAZINE

what's hot, what's not, where, when and why

## the difference theory

Currently exhibiting at Linden, MATHEW JONES spoke to GEOFFREY WILLIAMS about visual illiteracy ...

**I**t is clear to see why the cultural identity of Melbourne's gay community languishes behind that of the US & Europe. For centuries, societies have relied on the creativity of their artists to develop culture ... relating issues and values from the perspective of those in the community blessed with the talent to first see, and then communicate. **continued page 8**

IMAGE BY MATHEW JONES

