

QUERIES

#1 (September 2024)



Angels, Doors & Irigaray

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academic writing old and new, by or about Australian artists
identifying as gay, lesbian or queer

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Angels, Doors & Irigaray

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**QUeriEs is seeking any of the following:
reviews of current exhibitions,
extracts of recent postgraduate exegeses,
recent essays on queer theory or art history,
old catalogue essays from the 1990s and 2000s,
profiles on (or interviews with) contemporary artists.**

Acknowledgements:

QUeriEs acknowledges the Traditional
Custodians of the different lands on which we work,
and pay respect to their Elders and Ancestors.
Always was, always will be Aboriginal land.

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Cover Image: Mel Deerson/Briony Galligan, *angel biccies #3*, 2024.

About *QMeRiEs*

QMeRiEs #1 hopes to kick start an open forum for academic writing old and new, by or about Australian artists identifying as gay, lesbian or queer. There seems a new and peculiar interest in queer art and queer writing about art at the moment, but in truth that interest is not peculiar—it has a long (if hidden) history in Australia. One particular aim of *QMeRiEs* is to establish a dialogue between old and new gay, lesbian or queer artists and arts writers.

To this end, alongside texts such as those discussing queer contemporaries (e.g., Spiros Panigirakis, or Nik Pantazopolous in the issue) *QMeRiEs* also hopes to regularly reprint forgotten catalogue essays or reviews from the past accompanied by the original author's reflection in hindsight. Issue #1 presents the catalogue essay for Marcus O'Donnell's *Dislocations* exhibition at the NGV in 1993 alongside his thoughts in retrospect, and, a text by Rob Schubert from almost thirty years ago when the AIDS epidemic created an arts environment sympathetic to gay (and to a lesser extent lesbian) art practises and voices.

When comparing queer art practises old and new, one clear change over the last few decades is that practise-led research has taken hold within postgraduate Fine Art studies. This has led to a wealth of exegetical material by queer artists which unfortunately rarely finds publication elsewhere. *QMeRiEs* is keen to work with current or recent postgraduates to create stand-alone essays which tempt readers to find their full exegesis online. To this end *QMeRiEs* #1 presents Jade Muratore's *Angelic Rebels* which unearths the work of Tessa Boffin.

QMeRiEs hopes to provide opportunity for both airing and discussing work-in-progress through artists' pages (see that by Mathew Jones, and the extracts from Ben Woods' *Wetland Lovers* in this issue) and interview (e.g., with Briony Galligan and Mel Deerson about their collaborative *angels project*). It hopes also to air the work of those exploring alternative exhibition sites, be that online, in broadcast, or on the street. This issue draws attention to activist group the Queer Killjoys by lifting pages from their Instagram account.

QMeRiEs encourages contributions from artists, established academics, early career and higher degree researchers, or just anyone out there with an interest in queer art, or an interested in queering art. This first issue of *QMeRiEs* is dominated by gay white middle-class men. But that will change, and must change, if *QMeRiEs* is to reflect the queer zeitgeist of the 2020s. This issue is also very Melbourne and very Monash. That too must change. But it's a start. Issue #1 is just a start.

Is queer art just another passing fad, like gay art in the 1990s? I guess that is up to you—contribute to *QMeRiEs* #2 and help build a self-sustaining environment for queer artists.

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Angelic Rebels: allegory, service dykes, and safer sex

Jade Muratore

“I’m an angel on all fours, with a child’s feet behind me, seeking my people that have never been made, going down face foremost, drinking the waters of night at the water hole of the damned ...”
— Djuna Barnes, *Nightwood*.

The angel has many manifestations and meanings within queer cultural practice and can be viewed as a dually revolutionary and reactionary figure: of the past (anachronistic), orientated toward the past (backward looking), but also profoundly contemporary and anarchic. Furthermore, the angel is also a productive avatar for the practice of queer historiography for its ability to move between times, between faces (states of representation) and between the realms of the living and the dead. The

word “avatar” itself comes from the Sanskrit *ava* (down) and *tar* (to cross), meaning “the descent of a deity to the earth.”¹ Avatars go down. Angels go down. And in their descent, they come to embody the queer practice of going down and staying down. Of being underground, of embracing the sub-textual, and of going down in history by going down on history.

As divine messengers, guides and intermediaries between the living and the dead, queer angels proliferate the work of the 1980s and 1990s and appear to be making a resurgence in the contemporary moment.² It is the lesbian incarnation of these spectral service deities that is of particular interest within my own research. They not only embody the temporally and figuratively liminal qualities mentioned above, but also evoke something of the queer subcultural epithet “Service dyke.”³ Arguably one of the most consummate and evocative examples of this is the photographic series, *Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex* (1989) by the UK artist Tessa Boffin.

lesbians who assisted during the AIDS crisis as caretakers, nurses, activists and educators; and the Sydney chapter of the Dykes on Bikes (formerly the Vixens) who used to patrol Oxford St, breaking up homophobic attacks and ensuring people got home safely. Some other examples you may know from your community, or note within yourself: That lesbian friend who has a truck and is more than happy to move that bookshelf (your whole house) for you; that lesbian friend who has a drill and knows how to use it; that lesbian friend who runs the community baseball club, volunteers as an ACON drug rover every Mardi Gras, helped you mount your TV last Tuesday, all while holding down a 9 to 5 job and taking care of three rescue greyhounds; that service top/ active sexual partner whose pleasure comes from giving you pleasure.

¹ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “avatar,” accessed July 10, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/avatar>.

² See *Looking For Langston* (Dir. Isaac Julien, 1989); *Rosebud* (Dir. Cheryl Farthing, 1991); *The Attendant* (Dir. Isaac Julien, 1992); Derek Jarman, *Dead Angels* (1992, oil on photocopy on canvas). For contemporary examples see Moyra Davey, *Oozing Wall (Wings)* (2014, c-print); Melissa Deerson and Briony Galligan, *The Question of Angels*, Platform Arts, Geelong, 2022; Melissa Deerson, *The Dream of the Cherry Tree* (2023, risograph booklet); and the exhibition *Angels in Exile*, Incinerator Gallery, Melbourne, 3 February—7 April 2024.

³ “Service dyke” is a term used to describe a lesbian who is steadily inclined toward acts of service, whether it be with friends, lovers, or in the community. Notable examples include: the

What follows is a read of *Angelic Rebels* as a queer historiography rendered through photography. In the series, Boffin draws on art historical materials, together with dyke leather subculture references, to construct images that bridge past and present. They resist the linear temporal schema of traditional capital “H” History through a pastiche of medieval tableau, angelic imagery and queer coded ephemera, collapsing multiple timescales into a single frame. Elizabeth Freeman’s concept of “temporal drag” is easily conjured here, namely her description of the practice as “a friction of dead bodies upon live ones, obsolete constructions upon emergent ones.”⁴ Boffin’s photographs are richly symbolic and unabashedly anachronistic, calling upon the symbols and gestures of the art historical canon to be put to work servicing a dyke subjectivity. They are also deliberately fantastical, a move against documentary-style as the dominant mode of queer (especially lesbian) photography at the time.⁵ As Boffin states: “If we persist in prioritising reality—actual historical role models at the expense of fantasy figures—we leave our sense of selves and our imagery wanting.”⁶ It is this state of wanting that compels queer artists to speculate wildly on queer lives past, and to draw on fantastical figures like the angel, to satiate their desires while simultaneously creating new visual languages in which desire can materialise.

Tessa Boffin was a photographer, performance artist, writer, and lecturer,

⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 66.

⁵ See photographers such as Del LaGrace Volcano, Phylis Christopher, Jessica Tanzer, and Chloe Aitkins.

⁶ Tessa Boffin, in Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser (eds), *Stolen Glances: lesbians take photographs* (London: Pandora Press, 1991), 50.

practicing throughout the 1980s until her death on 27 October 1993. Central to Boffin’s photographic works and critical writing was the question of lesbian visibility, the rendering of a queer subjectivity through photography, and the role of photography in HIV/AIDS activism. In 1990, Boffin, together with Indian-born Canadian photographer Sunil Gupta, co-curated an exhibition called *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS mythology* that drew together works of several queer artists exploring the impact of HIV/AIDS. Presented in the exhibition, and the accompanying book edited by Boffin and Gupta, was *Angelic Rebels*, a five-part allegory on lesbian sexuality in the climate of HIV/AIDS. In this series, Boffin reimagines the embodiment of melancholy from Albrecht Dürer’s engraving *Melencolia I* (1514) as a wistful lesbian angel who finds enlightenment through the discovery of lesbian safer sex. While Boffin’s practice was reasonably well-known within the queer artistic community of the UK in the late 1980s and early 1990s, her work has remained relatively obscure for the decades since, especially outside England. It is only within the past five years that solo exhibitions of her work have begun to proliferate, as well as her inclusion in several major group exhibitions.⁷

Rimming the subtext

My own journey to discovering Boffin’s work was marked by the to-and-fro of a forgotten first glance, a Google-assisted second pass, and a final “Aha!” moment in the library that

⁷ Some recent exhibitions include: *Resist: be modern (again)*, John Hansard Gallery, Southampton, 2019; *Hot Moment*, Auto Italia, London, 2020; *Tessa Boffin: 1989-1993* at Hales Gallery, New York, 2023; *Unlimited Intimacy*, Vane Gallery, Gateshead, 2023; *Women in Revolt!* Tate Britain, London, 2023; *Angelic Rebels*, Company Gallery, New York, 2024.



Figure 1: Tessa Boffin, *Untitled 1* from the series *Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex* (1989). © the estate of Tessa Boffin/Gupta+Singh Archive, London.

took me back to the time and place of my very first acquaintance and forgotten first glance. It was a trip to the Australian Queer Archives (AQuA) in Melbourne on 30 November 2022—a heady four hours spent pooling over the papers of *Wicked Women* co-founders Jasper Laybutt and Lisa Salmon—where I fatefully found myself rimming the subject of the queer angel and caught my first glimpse of *Angelic Rebels*. The encounter happened inside an old art journal of Salmon’s, a treasure trove of leather dykes, winged creatures, and an ode to the polymorphous perversity of fallen angels whose paraphilia provides them with a rich catalogue of masturbatory potential. As I worked through the pages, I came across a photocopied image of Dürer’s *Melencolia I*, and on the page after that, two photographs: one of a child dressed as an angel in a school performance, and above it, a photograph of a Mardi Gras mainstage show. In both the children’s nativity performance and the glittery Mardi Gras production, the performers stand with hands raised as if in exaltation. Below the photographs was scrawled the words: “I am an angel trapped in a woman’s body.” Continuing on, I came to a roughly pasted photocopy of the first two images from Boffin’s *Angelic Rebels*.

It would take another four months and a Google search for “lesbian angels” for me to get re-acquainted with *Angelic Rebels*. It was early April 2023, and I was pulling together visual references for the upcoming shoot of my video work *Angel*. I came across an article by writer and art historian Ksenia M. Soboleva titled “How Tessa Boffin, One of the Leading Lesbian Artists of the AIDS Crisis, Vanished from History” and was immediately captivated by the images of Boffin’s work and curious about her

⁸ Ksenia M. Soboleva, “How Tessa Boffin, One of the Leading Lesbian Artists of the AIDS Crisis, Vanished from History,” *Hyperallergic*, 17 June

purported status as “vanished from history.”⁸ As someone deeply invested in the apparitional state of lesbians in visual culture at large, and specifically within art and film, I felt compelled to make contact with the ghost of Tessa Boffin and her other-worldly angels.

In August 2023, I borrowed a copy of *Ecstatic Antibodies* from the UNSW library, the book Boffin coedited with Sunil Gupta. Flicking through the book I came to a page with the title “*Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex*” and beneath it a reproduction of *Untitled 1* (Figure 1) from the series. There was something familiar about the image. About its exact scale and position on the page. It took me a while of just staring at the page before the memory of Lisa’s journals came back to me. In Lisa’s journal was a photocopy of the same page I was now staring at.

Between worlds, between times, between archives, Boffin’s melancholic angel defies being consigned as “lost to history” and instead becomes an agent for getting lost in history. In my journey to *Angelic Rebels*, I was reminded of all the ways as a researcher I rim my subjects in the search for queer subtext, and with that, queer kinship across time.

Melancholy, symbolism, safer sex

In *Angelic Rebels* we have queer melancholy personified. The series of five black-and-white photographs centres on its protagonist Melancholia, styled after the lugubrious winged woman of Albrecht Dürer’s *Melencolia I*. Her sadness stems from feelings of confusion and fear on how to navigate the world of queer sex in the era of HIV/AIDS, and what unfolds across the five images is Melancholia’s path toward sexual

2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/505433/how-tessa-boffin-one-of-the-leading-lesbian-artists-of-the-aids-crisis-vanished-from-history/>



Figure 2: Tessa Boffin, *Untitled 2* from the series *Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex* (1989). © the estate of Tessa Boffin/Gupta+Singh Archive, London.

liberation through safer sex knowledge and erotic fantasy. To navigate the social and political climate that was hostile to queers and imagine new genealogies of lesbian desire, Boffin stages a reworking of the past. Drawing on a multiplicity of visual references, from classical and medieval art and iconography to dyke sex subculture, from mainstream tabloid newspapers to community produced and distributed safer sex materials, Boffin works to create a new dyke iconography.

In the first two photographs of the series, the protagonist is depicted downcast, with her head propped up by her hands. This posture is not only reminiscent of the Dürer print, but many other depictions of melancholia from the European canon, from Artemisia Gentileschi's *Mary Magdalene as Melancholy* (1625-26) to Edvard Munch's *Melancholy* (1894). In naming the angel Melancholia, Boffin further reifies the symbolism of the sitter's posture, drawing from an extensive visual cache of the down-and-out in Western art history. The relationship of queer subjectivity to melancholia is not unfounded, if anything, it is a pairing that has resonated deeply through queer cultural theory for several decades.⁹ As philosopher Mari Ruti states, "both theoretical and literary renditions of queerness connect it to melancholia with such regularity that it is tempting to view melancholia as intrinsic to queer subjectivity, queer relationality, and queer modes of dwelling in the world."¹⁰ Ruti argues that even when less melancholic affects come to

the fore—such as anger, joy, ecstasy—the association of queer to melancholy persists in a way that "characterises wounded subjectivity, psychosocial injury, and failed intimacy."¹¹ These aspects manifest throughout lesbian literature, from Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) to Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993). In cinema, the accumulation of failed intimacies, psychosocial injuries, and wounded subjectivities combined to create a narrative and visual language that persists to this day. Classics of the genre include *The Children's Hour* (Dir. William Wyler, 1966) and *The Killing of Sister George* (Dir. Robert Aldrich, 1968), with more contemporary examples such as *High Art* (Dir. Lisa Cholodenko, 1998), *Boys Don't Cry* (Dir. Kimberly Peirce, 1999), *Monster* (Dir. Patty Jenkins, 2003), *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* (Dir. Céline Sciamma, 2019), and *Tár* (Dir. Todd Field, 2022), among many others.

Melancholy, loneliness and yearning are affective states synonymous with the representation of lesbian subjectivities in literature, film and art. As Ann Cvetkovich notes: "Mainstream representations that leave lesbians sad, lonely, or dead have become part of the archive of lesbian culture."¹² It is this figure of the sad, lonely lesbian that Boffin is conjuring in *Angelic Rebels*, at once feeding off this generative archive of queer melancholy while also subjecting it to a critical reimagining. In doing this, Boffin is working against a tendency that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century of privileging

⁹ See Judith Butler, "Melancholy Gender—Refused Identification," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 5, no. 2 (1995): 165–180; Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2002; Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2003.

¹⁰ Mari Ruti, "Queering Melancholia: Bad Feelings in *Giovanni's Room*," in Vera J. Camden (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Psychoanalysis* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 275.

¹¹ Ruti, "Queering Melancholia," 275.

¹² Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 253.



Figure 3: Tessa Boffin, *Untitled 3* from the series *Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex* (1989). © the estate of Tessa Boffin/Gupta+Singh Archive, London.

“positive” queer representations over “negative” ones by those who sought to normalise lesbian and gay people in the eyes of mainstream society, but in so doing, risked overwriting all the idiosyncrasies and radical political power of queer subjectivities in service of more palatable and common identities. Choosing to render the queer angel this way also has echoes of Walter Benjamin’s ekphrastic musings on Paul Klee’s monoprint *Angelus Novus* (1920) in his “Theses on the Concept of History.”¹³ Boffin’s *Melancholia* possesses something of the messianic time of Benjamin’s Angel of History whose nostalgia possesses emancipatory potential and whose backward glance offers us a revolutionary method for critiquing of the present.¹⁴ From Marxism in particular, Benjamin draws on insights found within historical materialism, while remaining critical of the progressivist and Darwinian tendencies he noted in Social Democratic Marxism. According to Marxist sociologist and philosopher Michael Löwy, Benjamin instead argues for a “revolutionary pessimism” that rejects the assumption of the inevitability of revolution and instead insists on an ongoing practice of revolutionary action done in communion with others.¹⁵ Löwy goes on to note that Benjamin’s backward glancing angel, who looks upon the ruins of history and remembers the dead, embraces the nostalgia of German Romanticism not as a longing to return to the past but “a *detour* through the past on the way to a utopian

future.”¹⁶ For Benjamin and Boffin alike, the dead do not stay dead and buried, and the need for revolutionary action is never fully over, but must continue to be restaged to ensure continued liberation from oppression.

Indeed, the series begins earnestly, a tenor of grief emanating from the spectre of HIV/AIDS that haunts the images. This is most overtly presented in the numerous books and pamphlets on HIV/AIDS scattered on the floor in front of the angel (Figure 2) and the alarmist newspaper headlines featured in the first two photographs. In Boffin’s statement on the work she says: “*Melancholia*’s despondency places her in a position of identification with the gay man on the front cover of the *Village Voice*, who is fearful about loving in an AIDS climate.”¹⁷ That dykes may have sex with men (including gay men) or engage in higher risk sex and kink practices was anathema to the separatist and essentialist factions of the lesbian community who dominated the discourse on lesbian sexuality at the time these photographs were produced. As Boffin notes, this rendered lesbians “virtually invisible in the crisis” both within and outside of the queer community.¹⁸ To address this issue of invisibility she staged a fantasy, taking medieval tableau style portraiture and infusing it with a distinctly late-1980s leather dyke aesthetic. While Boffin could have stopped at the first two images, holding *Melancholia* (and us as

contemporaries, was navigating the line between revolutionary idealism and a pessimism bound to the apocalyptic tone of the First and Second World Wars. To effect the kind of social and political change the surrealists advocated for, it required a turn away from outright nihilism and a focus on the self (inner psyche) and toward a political pessimism.

¹⁶ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 5 (author’s emphasis).

¹⁷ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 5.

¹⁸ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*, 57.

¹³ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Concept of History,” in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1968), 253-264.

¹⁴ Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’* (London; New York: Verso, 2005), 2.

¹⁵ Löwy, *Fire Alarm*. For his concept of “revolutionary pessimism”, Benjamin was influenced by the work of French surrealist writer, sociologist and dissident Communist Pierre Naville. Naville, like his surrealist



Figure 4: Tessa Boffin, *Untitled 4* from the series *Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex* (1989). © the estate of Tessa Boffin/Gupta+Singh Archive, London.

viewers) in this state of terminal despondency, she instead chose to imagine a queer present not totally marred by grief. It is in the final three photographs of the series that Melancholia becomes more than an angel of death—or an angel in fear of death—adding to her quiver a feeling of hope shaped and enacted through desire.

Angelic S/M

More than an exercise in visibility and the promotion of safer sex materials for lesbians, *Angelic Rebels* works to render publicly aspects of dyke sexuality that tend to only circulate within strict subcultural spaces or behind closed doors. This cryptography of dyke sex begins to emerge in *Untitled 3* (Figure 3) through the various sex accoutrements populating the bottom of the frame and the dormant leather dyke, standing plastic-wrapped and waiting to emerge. In this image, Melancholia is looking less despondent, eyes now settled on the open pages of a safer sex guide with a title that reads “Lesbians and AIDS.” As the angel turns her attention away from the negative static of the outside world and toward knowledge, her anxieties are abated and the potential for pleasure begins to surface. In the top left corner of the frame, the image has changed to a photograph of two stone angels from the Stoke Newington Cemetery with their backs to one another. The two angels mirror Melancholia and her hibernating friend, frozen in the state before encounter. As cemetery angels, they also symbolise the spectre of death that still hangs over *Untitled 3*, as it is the fear of contracting HIV/AIDS that propels Melancholia to educate herself on safer sex practices.

¹⁹ Eros was often associated with homoerotic love between men, while Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was worshiped in the religious household of Sappho and is figured in her poetry as a patron of sapphic love. See: “Angel” in Randy P.

In *Untitled 4* (Figure 4) the “safer sex” butch dyke has emerged from her chrysalis, and Melancholia, still seated, has her head turned toward her. With plastic wrap cast to the floor we can see the butch companion also bears wings, made of metal gauze, strapped to her body with an ornate chest harness. In the top left corner, the two cemetery angels have been replaced by an image of Anteros, the statue atop the Shaftesbury Memorial Fountain in Piccadilly Circus. Anteros, the god of requited love, is one of a retinue of winged gods from Greek mythology that embody love and sex, many of whom were associated with same-sex desire.¹⁹ The requited affection symbolised by Anteros is echoed in the returned gaze of Melancholia and the safer sex angel. Melancholia’s backward glance toward her new companion is at once a desirous longing for what is past and an invitation to co-create a history-inflected erotics in the present.

Anachronism is a critical tool used by Boffin to realise this erotically charged artwork-as-historiography, especially in her references to the European Dark Ages. Not only does she draw on portrait painting conventions, but she also gestures to the practice of alchemy as the chemistry protoscience that rose to prominence during Medieval Europe. More specifically, to alchemy as a practice charged with the impossible task of creating a panacea that would cure all disease. In the 14th century, the epidemic in question was a bubonic plague called the Black Death. In Boffin’s time, it was HIV/AIDS. In *Angelic Rebels*, the sovereign remedy proposed to counter the stigma, fear and misinformation surrounding HIV/AIDS is education around safer sex practices, articulated through a

Lunčunas Conner, David Hatfield Sparks, and Mariya Sparks (eds.), *Cassell’s Encyclopaedia of Queer Myth, Symbol & Spirit* (London & New York: Cassell, 1998), 58-9.



Figure 5: Tessa Boffin, *Untitled 5* from the series *Angelic Rebels: Lesbians and Safer Sex* (1989). © the estate of Tessa Boffin/Gupta+Singh Archive, London.

representation of lesbian desire and sexual agency. This is where the tools of dyke sex and leather S/M culture from the 1980s press against the wings of angels, where the resonances of multiple plagues threaten the queer bodies depicted in the frame. Past and present, sex and death, the seeker and the messenger, melancholy and hope are all alchemised.

In the final image of the series (Figure 5), the erotic potential of *Untitled 4* is fully realised. Melancholia has risen from her seat and is now standing on the plinth. The safer sex angel is seated in front of her with face turned and buried in Melancholia's crotch, one hand wrapped around her thigh, the other grasping her leather chest harness. In response to the safer sex angel's service top energy, Melancholia stands with head flung backward in passion, a gesture reminiscent of Gian Lorenzo Bernini's marble sculpture, the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1647–1652). This same sculpture is evoked in the closing chapter of Jose Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia*, "Take Ecstasy With Me," where he describes the sculpture as representing "a leaving of the self for something larger in the form of divinity."²⁰ He looks to the etymological root of "ecstasy" the Greek *ekstasis* (to stand outside of or transcend oneself). This rapturous unfurling for Muñoz holds within it the potential to occupy multiple temporalities simultaneously, that knowing ecstasy means "comprehending a temporal unity, which includes the past (having-been), the future (the not-yet), and the present (the making-present)."²¹ The transcendence promised by taking ecstasy is for Muñoz a transcendence of "the here and now for the then and there," for the now is a time hostile for queers.²² This was certainly true in 1989 when Boffin produced this series,

contending not only with HIV/AIDS but also Section 28 and the feminist sex wars.

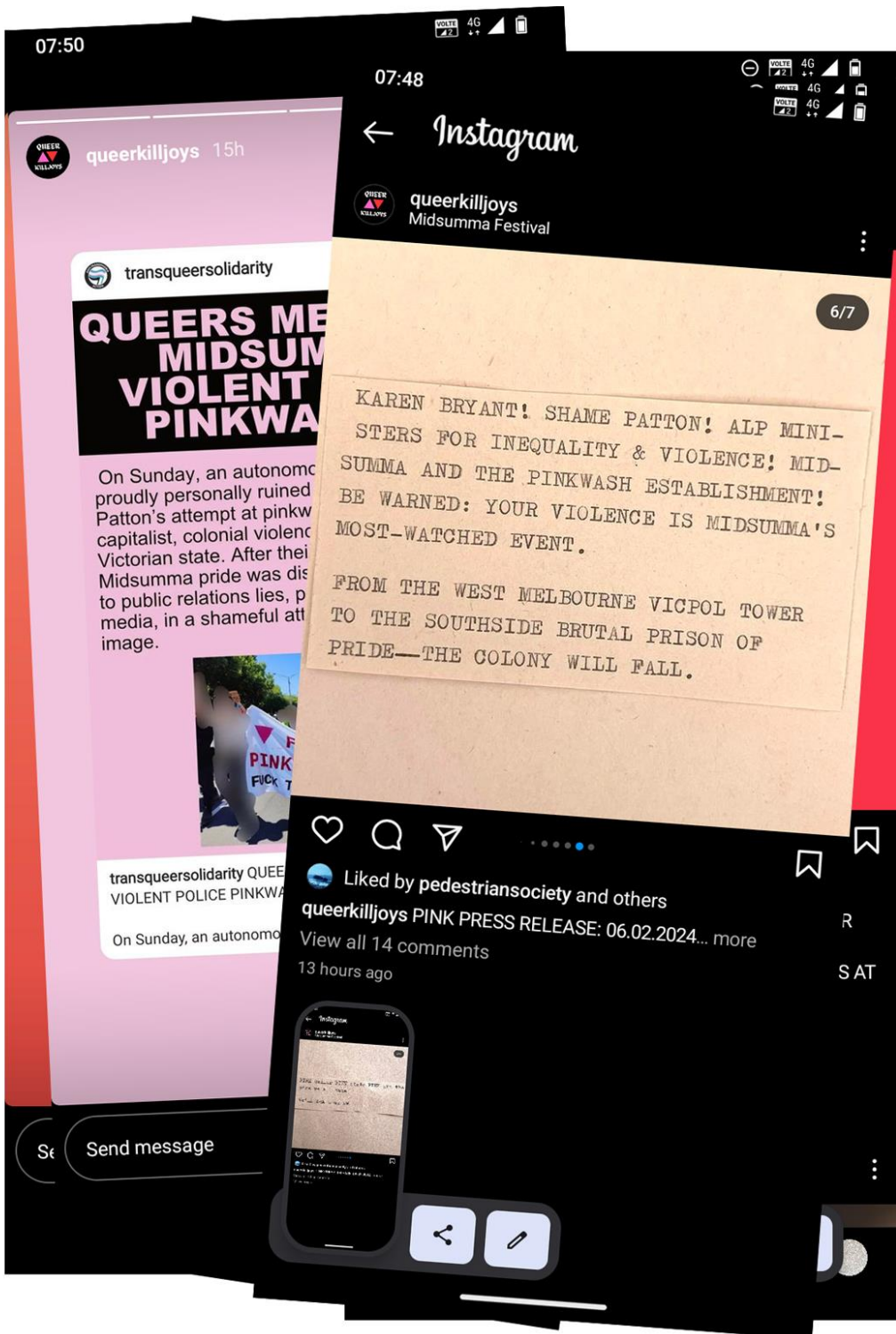
For the queer historical role models we know, we remember. For the ones lost to history, we invent. Mixing memory with invention, the real with the imaginary, Boffin seeks out the gap between reality and fantasy, a place where "we model ourselves on old, tattered photographs and hazy daydreams."²³ In *Angelic Rebels*, Boffin engages in an alchemical blending of dyke subculture and art historical references to challenge the pre-existing scope of lesbian representation and enact an alternative historiography, allowing us to imagine a dyke genealogy descended from angels and safer sex saviours. And with this we come full circle and return to the beginning, to Djuna Barnes' *Nightwood* as quoted in the epigraph. This is an angel who has willingly fallen, who chooses to drink the waters at "the water hole of the damned," who goes down and stays down. In Boffin's work, the angels similarly refuse to submit to a narrative of penance for one's sins, followed by redemption and a return to the heterosexual order. They are lesbians going down on history, like the woman on all fours lapping the milk of a fellow fallen angel. She might be damned to hell, but she is sexually liberated.

²⁰ Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: NYU Press, 2009), 186.

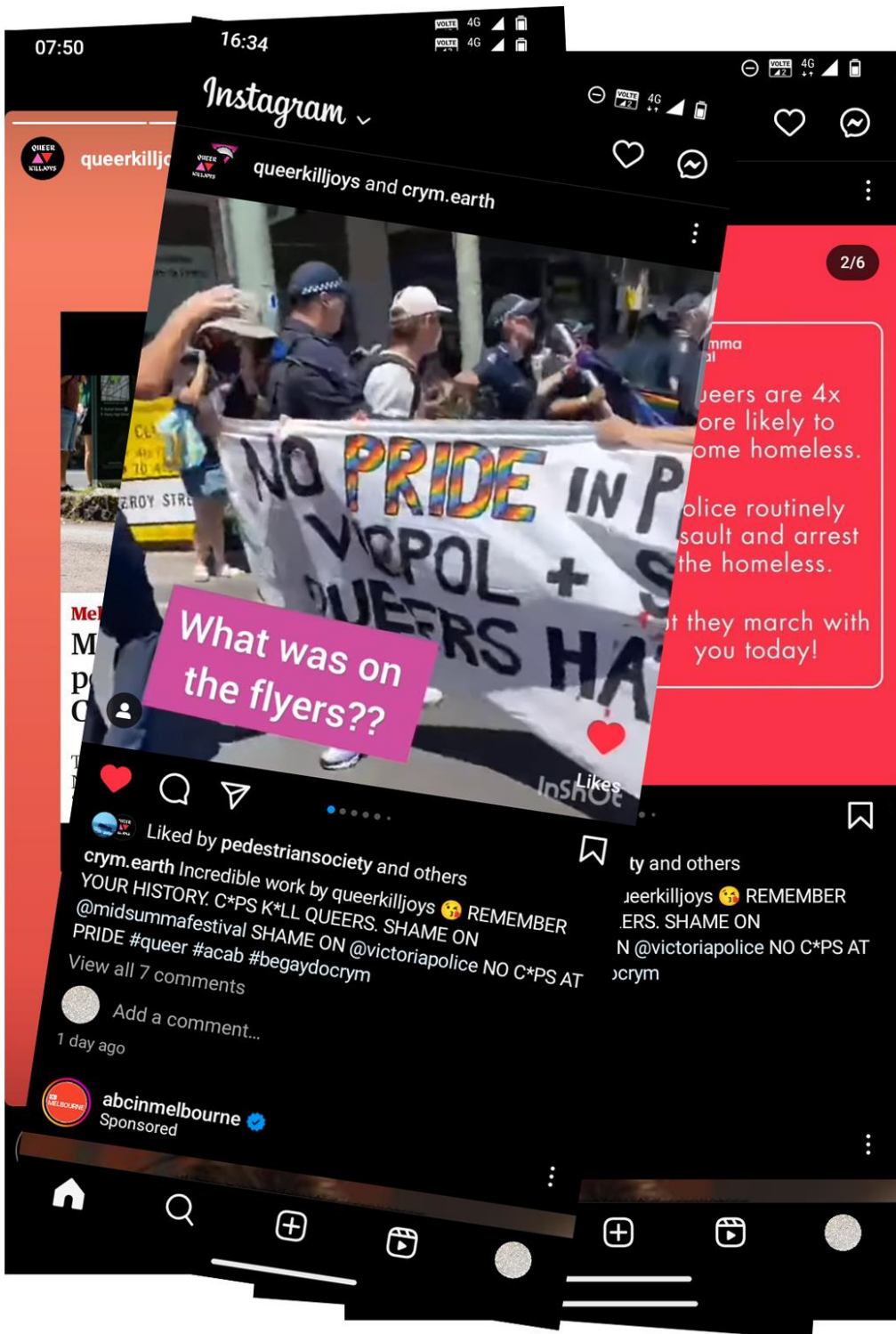
²¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 186.

²² Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 185.

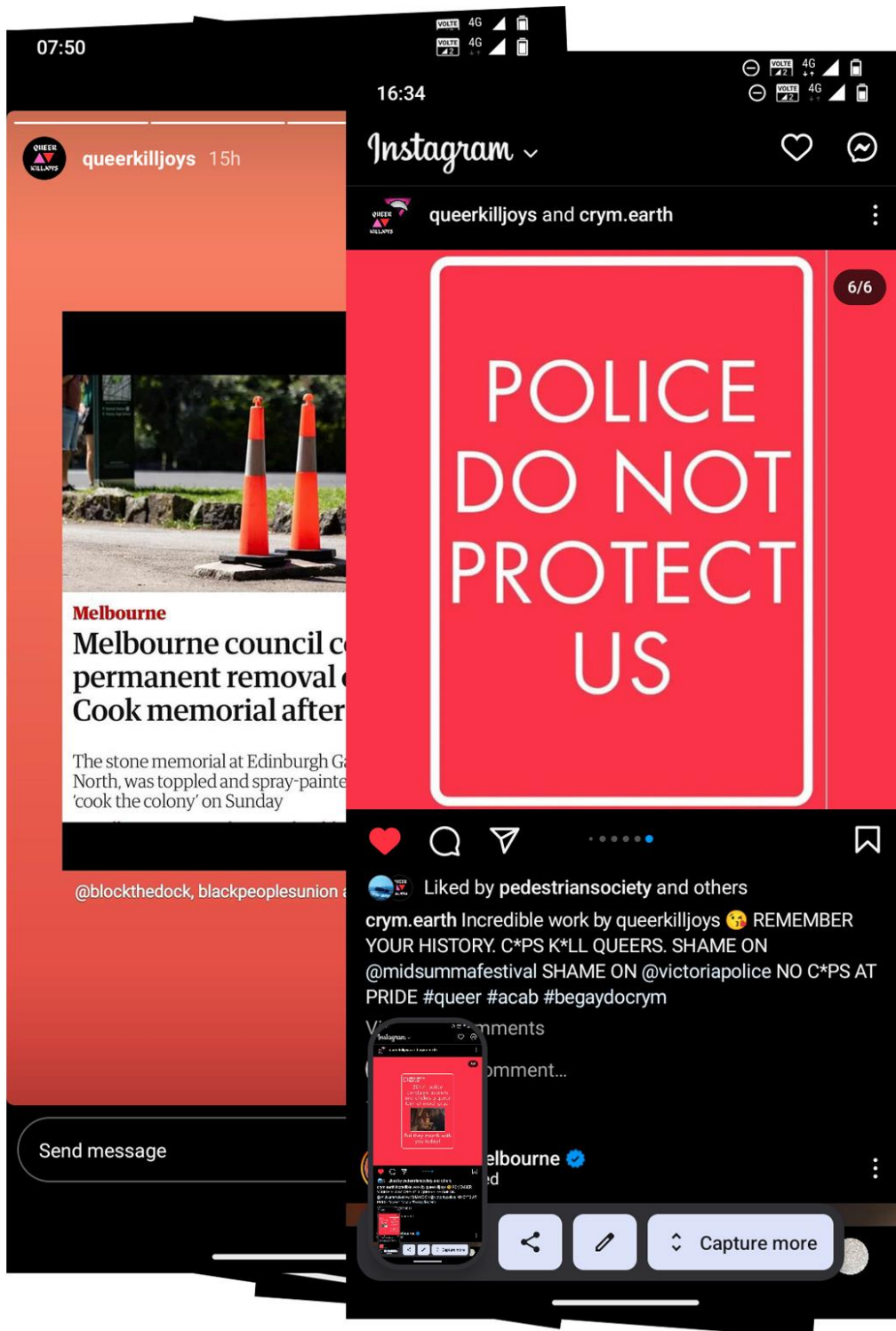
²³ Boffin, in Boffin and Fraser, *Stolen Glances*, 50.



Pages from Instagram: Melbourne activist group Queer Killjoys.



Pages from Instagram: Melbourne activist group Queer Killjoys.



Pages from Instagram: Melbourne activist group Queer Killjoys.

Uncertain Positions

NGV Access Gallery, catalogue essay, 1993

Marcus O'Donnell

This exhibition explores the work of ten gay male artists. Although it deals with a cluster of specific thematic issues it is predicated on showing the diversity of their work rather than the somewhat arbitrary tendency to seek a unifying sensibility amongst gay artists.

Gay men present an interesting anomaly in the construction of sexuality and gender in society. We are *visible* as men and thus linked to dominant systems of patriarchal power but only in so far as our sexuality is kept *invisible*. Once seen as gay we quickly become identified with the marginalised, the other. This complex dynamic of both incorporation by and alienation from society frames the development of a gay man's world view.

This ambiguous position is reflected in the art world's reaction to the work of the artists gathered here. Although a number of the artists are well known and well regarded in the canon of contemporary art there has been little attempt to explore the collective body of their work or the relevance of homosexual identity to their art practice. This is in marked contrast to the proliferation of exhibitions and critical writing regarding gender and sexuality in women's art, for example. Even the recent Erotic Issue of *Art and Australia* dealt only cursorily with homo-eroticism preferring to deal with it in a deflected form

through the Anzac myth rather than engage with its expression in the work of contemporary artists.

For many gay men the body is often perceived as a site of conflict. Particularly as a child and consequently as an adult through the prism of memory, the desiring of other men's bodies is experienced as both energising and problematic. This sense of awkwardness, fear, alienation or dislocation of the body from its desires has often expressed itself in the motif of the wounded or fractured body in gay men's art. The wounded body has more recently become a particularly poignant symbol for a devastating reality in this age of AIDS and escalating violence against gay men.

However, the history of homosexuality as "other," as marginalised categorized and displaced can lead not just to an awkward or troublesome dislocation from society but an active and creative disengagement from prevalent patterns of thought. Simon Watney's delineation of an AIDS activist aesthetic as a "guerilla semiotics on all fronts, threatening 'normality' with a long sustained deliberate derangement of its 'common sense'" could also be applied to the development of a radical gay aesthetic.¹

Interestingly, but not untypically in terms of contemporary art practice, many of the artists in this exhibition are concerned with questioning the certainty of received traditions. This is particularly noticeable in a number of pieces where the iconic certainty of religious art is subverted or undercut in some way. In their position as outsider, the dislocated, or marginal observer is aware that there is not just one perspective on the world, but that truth is intrinsically plural.

¹ Simon Watney, "Representing AIDS," in Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta (eds.), *Ecstatic Antibodies* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1990) 165–192.



Figures 1 & 2: *Dislocations: Body Memory, Place*. National Gallery of Victoria, Access Gallery, 1993.
Photo: Ross T Smith.

Juan Davila is well known for his strong and provocative statements about homosexuality, but constant attention to the shock value of Davila's images prevents an understanding of the complexity of his compositions with their multi-layered referencing of different cultures and art traditions. *Ex Votto* refers to a tradition of votive or invocational painting most common in the religious art of Latin America but also known in Europe. In times of personal sickness or national disaster a painting was commissioned which in its narrative displayed both the nature of the pestilence and the religious figure (usually the virgin) whose assistance was being invoked. In *Ex Votto*, the virgin has become an unflattering self portrait as a middle-aged, mutilated, transvestite Ganymede, as if to suggest that relief from the present disaster is in the power not of an external deity but in a confrontation with the shadow self. For Davila the power of the Ganymede figure in traditional myth and art history suggests a certain continuity across time of the young, well proportioned white male as an exclusionary paradigm of homo-erotic desire. Such images which abound in current gay commercial publishing and some HIV/AIDS campaigns are seen as "totalitarian" images which have the hegemonic power of religious icons.

Ex Votto shifts constantly between its invocation of high and pop culture, between the world of pornography and the world of classical myth between commerce and spirituality, between the modernist and classical traditions of art history, between the interior and the landscape, between the cultures of Latin America, Australia and Europe and between masculine and feminine identities. Davila's refusal to define a unifying perspective from which to view the painting is modernist cliché but powerful statement about the fluid nature of sexual and cultural identity.

Mathew Jones' work draws on both the strategies of conceptual minimalism and of activist art. Although Jones work resembles activist sloganeering, he eschews the didacticism of the rhetorical for a more fluid view of sexual identities and a more complex understanding of the polyvalent nature of visual/verbal sign systems. The name scrawled on the wall will be known to some and not to other viewers. Murley was acquitted in a recent trial which raised many questions about gay identity and codes of visibility and invisibility used, or thought to be used, by gay men. But the piece works irrespective of whether the story of the trial is known or unknown because in the context of this show the graffiti becomes an ambiguous mark, a sexualised invitation which is as much about the entrancing anonymity of the subject as it is about his identity.

Luke Roberts' extravagant canvases with their campy metaphysics and many attachments are visually luscious and full of ironic humour. Roberts grew up in the tiny outback Queensland town of Alpha. The Australian landscape and a search for an Australian myth are strong elements in his work—the deep organic orange of "Alpha dust" and rich desert sky blues are his characteristic colours. His alter-egos Pope Alice and St Luke of Alpha reflect his transformation of the Catholicism of his childhood into a series of uniquely personal emblems. *Exorcism 1: Sky Painting/Inventing Infinity/The Festival Of Light* expresses Robert's characteristic tension between a search for absolute values and a fascination with the kitsch and temporal nature of the contemporary. For all its extravagance the painting has a sombre, almost funereal quality. The dismembered dolls act as signs of isolation within the vastness of the architectural, environmental grid of the painting, but the doll is also a perverse shamanistic accessory in Roberts' compute

of spirituality. For Roberts the isolation of childhood is the crucible of an alchemic transformation which unleashes an adulthood in which transgressive behaviours become normative and secure because they have been so obsessively rehearsed in the privacy of the child's world.

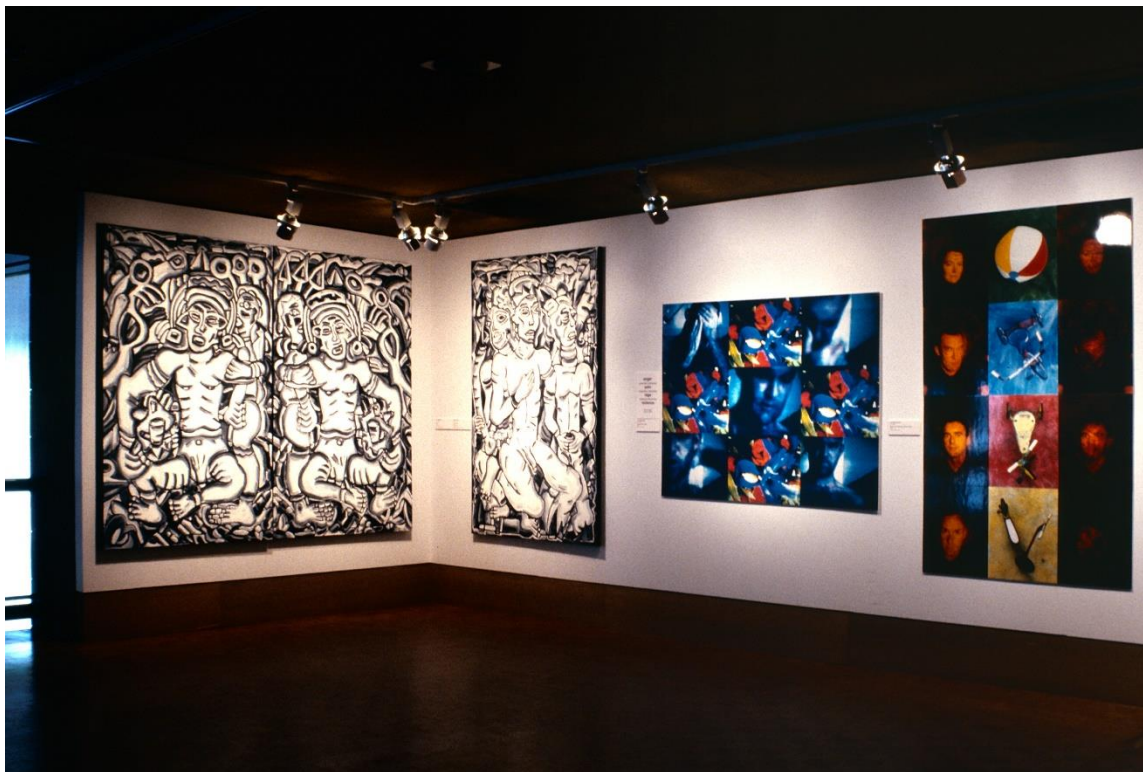
Like Roberts, Rod McLiesh is concerned to articulate a postmodern position about the contemporary absence of certainty. By the casual unframed placement of the simply drawn segments of *A Fall From Place* McLiesh draws attention to our unanchored position in an age which has outgrown any purely metaphysical understanding of reality. The computer-generated figure, whose pixilated form also reminds us of the viral micro-organisms (dis)covered but not controlled nor fully explained by science, tumbles through a scene dominated by the icons of ancient Egyptian certainty.

Ross Moore's exploration of sexual and cultural traditions is complex. An interest in the body is explored through an individualistic adaptation of tribal iconography. In Moore's personal cosmology traditional divisions between the heavens and the underworld, between the body and the earth, between the modern and the primordial, between the conscious and the unconscious are disturbed. The distorted figures in *The Royal Tombs of Ur* can be read as embryonic or mummified forms, the jigsaw of interlocking shapes is at once a clutter of limbs and organs and an inert landscape of stone, the central ominous tower has the ancient resonance of the phallus as well as the contemporaneity of science fiction.

At first the strong silent abstractions of Brent Harris seem only to celebrate the beauty of a minimalist aesthetic with little overt content let alone any gay content. Once identified with a metaphysical abstraction concerned

with the transcendent he prefers now to talk of the psychological rather than the sacred. For Harris each form has psychological as well as material shape, and a particular emotional resonance. His *Another Dead Bunny* can be read as an interesting contrast of organic and geometric shapes or as reference to the prevalence of death in the gay community as we confront AIDS. The series of silk screen prints, *Otherness*, are equivocal and may be read as either positive or negative shapes or as mercurial outlines whose contours constantly invert. These prints celebrate the oddity of their forms and here as in much of his work Harris seductively poses the question of difference.

Ross Watson's ability as a photo realist painter with a strong interest in the male figure and classical form has made his work popular amongst gay men. Although he is associated with a realist style Watson has always demonstrated an interest in surrealist imagery with unusual juxtapositioning of isolated objects creating a strong sense of the mysterious in his work. In this most recent work Watson gives us a realist detail through the viewfinder of a silhouette set against a simple underworked backdrop. The richness of the regal and ecclesiastical imagery is framed by the shadow of the sexual. The intensity of that captured moment, that singular view, is contrasted with the decorative motifs and icons of the everyday which occupy the pale backgrounds. In this instance the isolation of a detail is not about objectification or limitation of the image it is about the distillation of its essential emotional power. This work speaks of the complexity of representing the body and how details can wake us to a deeper understanding of the whole—a phenomena on which both philosophers and fetishists would agree.



Figures 3 & 4: *Dislocations: Body Memory, Place*. National Gallery of Victoria, Access Gallery, 1993.
Photo: Ross T Smith.

Ross T. Smith's fragile forms emerge out of a dense velvety surface of black and are subtly, almost subliminally toned in blues and purples. Like many post-modern photographers there is a tension in Smith's work between an aesthetic of beauty (obvious in the lush quality of the prints). and ideas of temporality and fragility (equally obvious in the assemblage and the treatment of the image). At first sight his image of the pregnant female body may seem to have little to do with the stated concerns of this show however it serves as a potent symbol of the way the mother has been problematised and co-opted as part of the gay male body in the psychoanalytic discourse of homosexuality. In broad psychological terms he reminds us that our primary sense of dislocation is our displacement from the mother. The work as a whole deals with questions of mortality and has a melancholic air as it struggles to come to terms with the tenuousness of our grip on life.

Lex Middleton often uses re-photographed original video images in his multi-paneled pieces. Video style is used generally as a metaphor for the contemporary but in particular as a symbol of the way sexuality is constructed by advertising and the electronic media. *Homage to the Quilt* takes its cue from the AIDS memorial quilt but unlike the quaint original panels with their roots in domestic and community art this highly technologically mediated statement has an emotive power which is at once sinister and sincere. The shadowy images of a shielded face are combined with the vibrancy of the floral motif which reminds us of the traditional wreath but in its saturated colour and pixelation also strongly references the viral.

Simon Carver's *Is the Anus a Grave* is a simple but evocative statement about the pathologising of the gay male body in the

age of AIDS. The raw earth, heaped anus like and red lipped amidst the clinically white cotton sheet and ceramic tiles, makes obvious reference to the current medicalisation of gay sexuality, however it also speak more generally of the tensions between the chaotic and the ordering aspects of desire.

Through a variety of formal structures each of the artists in the exhibition make individual but complementary statements about the body and a gay sense of otherness. The work shows a tentative mapping of a psychological space which is secure because it is claimed as one's own but is gladly without the assurance of certainty which stems from adherence to an absolute moral order.

Almost 30 years before the NGV's high profile Queer exhibition, Marcus O'Donnell curated the much less heavily advertised Dislocations: Body, Memory, Place, in the NGV's Access Gallery, 9 January – 2 February 1993 as part of the Midsumma Festival. Surprisingly the lineage of this show is not mentioned in the Queer catalogue even though several artists are included in both shows (Davila, Harris, Roberts, Watson). Equally surprisingly, other Dislocations artists (Jones, MacLeish, Moore) were not included in Queer even though pieces of theirs are held by the NGV.

In the following text O'Donnell looks back on his own exhibition.

The Quotidian and the Other: Reflections Thirty Years on.

Marcus O'Donnell

The essay *Uncertain Positions* was written to accompany *Dislocations: Body, Memory Place*, an exhibition I curated at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) Access Gallery as part of the Midsumma Festival in early 1993.

1993 marked a period of renewed activism and visibility for queer communities but at a time in which our lives and identities were still very much contested. Homosexuality had been decriminalised in Victoria thirteen years previously, yet it wasn't until a year later, in 1994, that Tasmania became the last Australian state to decriminalise gay male sex. This was not through local legislation but through Federal government intervention following an assessment by the United Nations Human Rights Committee, and years of local and international activism.

In 1993 HIV/AIDS was more than a decade old but we were still two years away from effective antiretroviral treatment. Throughout the late eighties and early nineties ACTUP chapters throughout the world—including in Melbourne—employed a variety of aesthetic and activist strategies to signal the urgency we felt as gay men fighting for our lives. Two years earlier in the gardens across the road from the NGV, ACTUP Melbourne, in one of their most memorable actions, had removed all the flowers in the large outdoor floral clock and replaced them with white crosses.

This mix of art meets activism had grown as a strong tradition in Sydney throughout 1980s due to the Mardi Gras and its evolving festival program. In contrast, Melbourne's Midsumma Festival was still young and this exhibition was an important part of its fourth incarnation. Midsumma's visual arts program boasted two major art exhibitions that year. As well as *Dislocations*, the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art hosted a significant show featuring twelve gay male artists. *You are Here*, curated by Luke Roberts and Scott Redford, was a particularly important moment in the history of queer art in Australia as it travelled from a first iteration in Brisbane, to Sydney for Mardi Gras, and then on to Melbourne. Four artists—Juan Davila, Mathew Jones, Brent Harris and Luke Roberts were included in both exhibitions.

In a review of *Dislocations* and *You are Here* published at the time Robert Schubert suggested that I relied too heavily and uncritically on the trope of otherness in discussing both the themes of the exhibition, and, the possibility of a "radical gay aesthetic."² He suggests that a number of the works in *You are Here*, by contrast, celebrate the emergence of the queer from the quotidian, as not other but "same." This is an astute observation and one that resonates with me more over time. However, I don't believe these two postures are at odds and although our context has changed both remain relevant.

In a post-same-sex marriage, post-PrEP world, surely the other has been brought into the centre? Yet as I write the Federal Labor Government (elected with a well-defined set of pro-LGBTIQ+ policies) are backing away from their promise to include questions about sexuality and gender in the

² Robert Schubert, "You are Here, Dislocations," *Agenda: Contemporary Art Magazine*, no. 30/31 (1993)

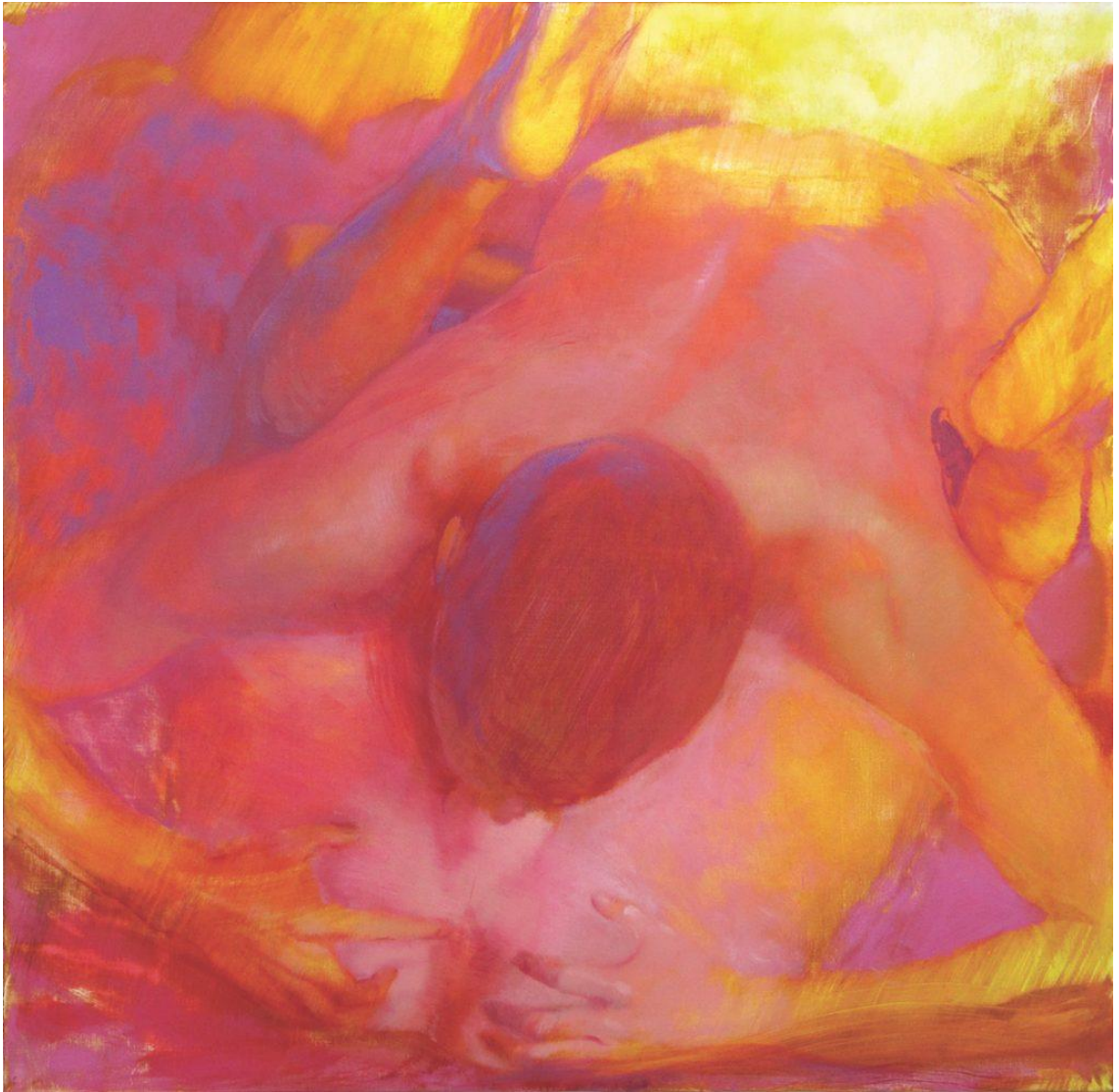


Figure 1: Doron Langberg, *Zachary*, 2018, oil on linen, 112 x 112cm, courtesy Yossi Milo Gallery, New York.

upcoming census. When questioned, their response has been that this is for our own good, and they are trying to protect queer people from “divisive debates.” This seems like a case of othering us again to avoid us being othered!

Schubert himself notes that the works by Juan Davila in each exhibition are contrasting, with his work in *Dislocations* a vintage challenge to the status quo while his work in *You Are Here—Interior with Built in Bar*—presents a domestic scene “mundane to the point of absurdity.” But rather than favouring one approach over the other as somehow more significant or more revealing I would say that Davila’s ability to move back and forth between the decorative and the pornographic, the personal and the political, the abject and quotidian is exactly what makes him one of Australia’s most significant artists.

In 1993 *Dislocations* and *You are Here* were part of opening-up conversations about queer art in traditional gallery contexts, but today queer art is a mainstay of national and international art events.³ The 2024 editions of the Sydney and the Venice Biennales both featured deep streams of historic and contemporary queer art, and it is interesting to note the curatorial framing of these events. Both subvert the narrative of otherness while retaining a dialogue with it.

Artistic directors of the Biennale of Sydney Cosmin Costinaş and Inti Guerrero explained their choice of the theme *Ten Thousand Suns* as:

³ See also, *Queer* at NGV, 10 March -20 August 2022.

⁴ Biennale of Sydney, “Biennale of Sydney announces artists, locations and initial programming for 2024 edition: *Ten Thousand Suns*,” *Media Release 31 October 2023*, [https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/biennale-of-sydney-announces-artists-locations-and-initial-](https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/biennale-of-sydney-announces-artists-locations-and-initial-programming-for-2024-edition-ten-thousand-suns/)

an acknowledgement of a multiplicity of perspectives, cosmologies, and ways of life that have always woven together the world under the sun. A multiplicity of suns conveys ambiguous images. It evokes a scorching world, both in several cosmological visions and very much in our moment of climate emergency. But it also conveys the joy of cultural multiplicities affirmed, of First Nations understandings of the cosmos brought to the fore, and of carnivals as forms of resistance in contexts that have surpassed colonial oppression.⁴

Here the celebration of multiplicities and lineages of resistance takes us beyond a boundary/periphery, other/mainstream, outsider/insider perspective while still situating art practice as radical practice with the ability to queer current realities.

Adriano Pedrosa, the first openly queer curator of the Venice Biennale, and the first based in the global south, framed his exhibition around the theme *Stranieri Ovunque* (Foreigners Everywhere).

“The expression *Stranieri Ovunque* has several meanings,” he explains in the official introduction to the Biennale. “First of all, that wherever you go and wherever you are you will always encounter foreigners—they/we are everywhere. Secondly, that no matter where you find yourself, you are always truly, and deep down inside, a foreigner.”⁵

programming-for-2024-edition-ten-thousand-suns/

⁵ La Biennale Di Venezia, “Biennale Arte 2024: *Stranieri Ovunque* - Foreigners Everywhere,” *Media Release 18 July 2024*, <https://www.labiennale.org/en/news/biennale-arte-2024-stranieri-ovunque-foreigners-everywhere>

In this way he positions otherness and sameness together—everyone is somehow estranged, but some people externalise and represent the strangeness of others. He notes that etymologically in Latin languages there are direct connections between foreigner, stranger, strangeness, the uncanny and the queer. Within this context he has curated the central contemporary section of the Biennale around four marginal figures: the queer artist; the outsider artist, the folk artist and the indigenous artist.

The queer Biennale artists demonstrate a diversity of artistic strategies. Peruvian artist Violetta Quispe mines the Andean traditions of Quechua culture to present new perspectives on gender and sexuality, while Seoul-born, Los Angeles-based artist Kang Seung Lee, draws together multiple international threads of early HIV/AIDS art in his installation.

“Histories are very often transnational,” Lee told *ARTnews*. “By talking about the legacy of these artists, who are from different continents, cities, and locations, I wanted [to] create a queer genealogy that has not been recognized enough by mainstream history.”⁶

In both these instances the otherness/forgottenness of queer culture is being recontextualised and celebrated. But they seem like more than simple reclamation projects. They are charged with a vitality that allows for something new to emerge that connects with our lives now.

At Venice the quotidian queer is represented by US artists like Salman Toor and Louis

Fratino who both paint expressionist scenes of contemporary queer life, often in domestic settings, often including explicit but everyday scenes of queer lovemaking. They are part of a broader group of US queer artists dubbed by Tyler Malone as the “new queer intimists.”⁷ These artists are, he explains, forging a new “radical queer aesthetic” precisely through inhabiting this new intimate domesticity of queerness.

“The work of these artists feels subversive not because it depicts what might have previously been called a ‘transgressive’ sexuality, nor because it employs an aesthetic that earlier critics might have denigrated as ‘pornographic.’ ... But the truly radical aspect of these artists’ paintings is their tender depiction of quotidian queer life.... New Queer Intimists are breaking down the traditional barriers that denied queer existence a chance to embody the universal.”⁸

Any claim to embody the universal inevitably collapses the specificity of experiences, and runs the risk of reenacting past erasures, so while I appreciate the intent of Malone’s claim, I would prefer to celebrate the ten thousand suns of Costinaş and Guerrero, that allows queer life to shimmer alongside other traditions. What is evident in the work being done today by queer artists is the many different ways that they inhabit and queer both marginal and mainstream positions finding ways to make the quotidian strange and the strange quotidian.

⁶ Chris Erik Thomas, “Queer Artists Brought Pain, History, and Hope to the 60th Venice Biennale,” *ArtNews*, 28 June 2024, <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/artists/queer-lgbtq-artists-60th-venice-biennale-1234711049/>

⁷ Tyler Malone, “Doron Langberg and the New Queer Intimism,” *Jewish Currents*, 9 December 2019, <https://jewishcurrents.org/doron-langberg-and-the-new-queer-intimism>

⁸ Malone, “Doron Langberg.”



A Bold New Range of Queer Colours for Artists.

MISANDRIST MIST	PERFORMATIVE GREIGE	TRANS NATURELLE	STRAIGHT BUT QUEER
THE POLITICS OF WITH HOLDING	RELATIONAL FAWN	NON-BINARY TAUPE	QUEER ALLY
INDEFINABLE BEIGE	ECOLOGICAL OATMEAL	CLASSIC BI-CURIOUS	DEFINITELY OFF-WHITE
INDIGENOUS ECRU	PANSEXUAL TIMBRE	DIFFERENTLY ABLED	DEMISEXUAL SEPTEMBER
CLOSET DUST	ASEXUAL ROCK	NEURO-DIVERSE	GENDER-FLUID FLOW
QUEER OF COLOUR COLOUR	SAPIOSEXUAL CREAM	MONASH NONSENSE	PAN-ROMANTIC VEIL
QUEER PEDOLOGICAL PURPLE	POST HUMAN HETERO	SYNESTHESIA SLEEZE	AUSCHWITZ

Spiros Panigirakis: *Variables*, Sarah Scout Presents, 2022

Rex Butler

In one room of Sarah Scout Presents' small upstairs Collins St gallery, Spiros Panigirakis and an assistant fit a model with a series of seemingly eccentric clothes. At first, something like a blue cotton bib is placed around his neck. Later, a loose white cotton shirt is hung, or really draped, over him. Later still, a geometrically patterned shirt seems to be put on back to front. And towards the end, the model has a blue-and-white sheet with a graphic mapping of a garden attached to his back. The clothes appear either like wrappings or bandages that fold themselves tightly around the body or to have no obvious relationship to the body beneath, as opposed to conventional clothing with its loose yet comfortable fit.

In another room—and for a long time this appears simply mystifying or even indulgent—a group of young people sit around in a circle reading on their phones or as print-outs the great Czech author Franz Kafka's *The Trial*. It is, of all things, an old-fashioned reading group, and one can imagine them going around the circle with each passing their opinion on the particular passage of Kafka's masterpiece they are up in the session. "This is about the rise of fascism in Europe," we can almost hear one say, putting forward that classic reading of the text as an allegory if not a prophecy of totalitarianism. "I am not so sure about that," another might reply. "I think you're reading in too much and forcing it to fit your preconceptions. Let your mind wander and view it as a much more general depiction of the human condition."

Back in the first room, we find three desks. Two of them, it appears, are ordinary, but the third, painted in blue and more abstract looking than the others, is not just a desk but also a sculpture by Panigirakis. Strangely, he came across the original during a neighbourhood kerbside clean-up amidst COVID and decided to remake it as a work of art. He took its measurements with his ruler, found the wood to make it and pieced it together with screws and nails. And it's weirdly matched in the same room by something else that Panigirakis has decided to recreate, although it's even less obvious than the desk. It's the door to the room, complete with doorknob and filigree patterning, carefully screwed into its place on its hinges.

Now we watch in the video as Panigirakis and an assistant lift the blue desk up and attempt to take it into the reading room. The question is—it is perhaps the dramatic highlight of the performance—will they actually manage to get it through the door? After presumably trying several different orientations, they finally turn it on its side and manoeuvre it around the corner, leading with its front two legs. Then later, for whatever reason, they bring the desk back and first place it right way up, then on its side, and finally tilt it up against the wall. The reading group breaks up for the day, some more fitting of clothes is carried out, the desk is turned right way up again and put in a corner and *Variables* ends.

So what, one is tempted to say. What have all these things to do with one another? The fitting of odd bespoke clothes, a Kafka reading group and the manoeuvring of a desk out of a room, past a door the artist has made, and then back again. But then one remembers: the penultimate chapter of *The Trial* is the extraordinary parable "Before the Law," which is the story of a man who spends his entire life waiting to pass through a door that is guarded by a gatekeeper. This



Figures 1 & 2: Spiros Panigirakis, still from *Variables*, 20 min. video. 2024.



Figures 3 & 4: Spiros Panigirakis, still from *Variables*, 20 min. video, 2024.

door appears somehow mystical, transcendent, unknowable, the passage to another dimension or another world. At one point, the man asks the gatekeeper when he might be allowed in. "It is possible," the gatekeeper replies, "but not now." But then, in the immortal last lines of the story, just as the man is about to die after a life kept waiting and fearing that he will never know the secret of the door and what lies behind it, the gatekeeper bends down to him on his deathbed and whispers: "Here no one else can gain entry, since this entry was meant only for you. I am now going to close it."

I'm tempted to suggest that Panigirakis' act of trying to squeeze that desk he built out and back through the door he remade is a beautiful reimagining of Kafka's "Before the Law." Kafka's point, you see—it's something Jacques Derrida makes clear in his famous reading of the text—is that the door does not represent some kind of split between here and somewhere higher. We don't pass through the door and get to somewhere else, and it doesn't just happen when we are about to die and leave this world. No, the door opens a split between *here* and *here*, not somewhere else, and it happens at every moment of our lives. We are both the supplicant before the door and the door itself. And this is why Panigirakis made both the desk and the door so that one just fitted inside the other. It's even to be seen in his clothing, where we would say, despite first appearances, the undergarment, shirt and coat and the body beneath are a perfect match for one another.

And we for our part as spectators look on at all this from the hallway connecting the two rooms. But let us not for a moment think that this represents any higher space or that we have passed through the doorway to somewhere else. After all, the desk comes out into our space before going back into its room, the students mingle noisily in the

corridor after their session and the model walks in his clothes towards us. Remember, if Kafka's story tells us anything, it's that the law is not before us in some far distant future but amongst us so that we should look around ourselves now. We have *already* walked through the door and everything is *already* different. It is the difference, we might say, between an ordinary desk and Panigirakis' replica, which is the difference not so much between the world and art as between the world and itself. We might even say that in this case the door of the law is the door of art. It is art that makes *this* world also another. How queer.

Spiros Panigirakis, Variables is a 20 minute single channel video documenting a performance which ended his exhibition of the same name at Sarah Scout Presents, 11 March-23 March 2022. The link to the video is here: <https://vimeo.com/708954874>

Introducing excerpts from

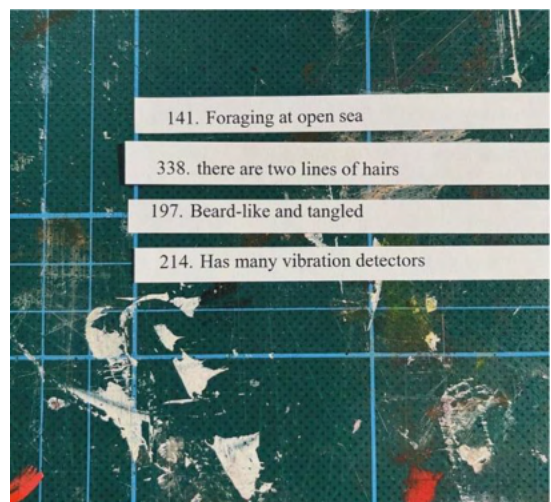
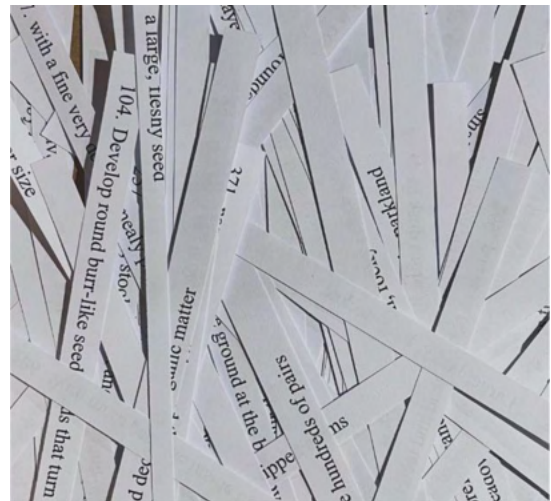
Wetland Lovers: Found Chance Text Works for Pipemakers Park

Benjamin Woods

Intended as experiments in queer, semi-erotic writing, the excerpts from *Wetland Lovers: Found Chance Text Works for Pipemakers Park* (Figures 3 to 6) explore anthropomorphic and cultural biases at play in scientific descriptions of fungal, bacterial, plant, animal and mineral life. To make these texts I collected found writing that taxonomically describes the water bodies and shrublands of Pipemakers Park, along the banks of the salty Maribyrnong River, on unceded Boon wurrung, Bunurong, and Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Country.

I collated 409 snippets of found text which I numbered, printed, cut into bits, and put in a bowl (Figure 1-2). I used chance methods to compose surprising and muddled movements that jump across sources. The excerpts included in this journal read as if perspectives might differ from them-selves in a continual and plural forming process, taking reading into a differently organised, textual swamp. The excerpts also inevitably trace the proliferation of normative languages that inform anglophone scientific nature-jargon that is filled with sex in particularly hetero-normative and phallogocentric ways. I think about these excerpts alongside queer elaborations of Luce

Figure 1 & 2: Benjamin Woods, *Studio process*, 2024.



Irigaray's philosophy of sexual difference.¹ To "write" the works, I employed writing tactics sourced from Irigaray's reworking of the interval as a generative threshold of relation and becoming between many forces.²

Like most of Naarm/Birrarung-ga's watery places, Pipemakers Park is impacted by over 150 years of colonial settler-state extraction, including agricultural, chemical and industrial toxification. Based on estimates from projects in other water-basin contexts in Naarm, it will take hundreds of years of steady decolonial processes to address the extent of continuing extractive colonial and capitalist practices.³ Research from Aotearoa finds that even though settler-states purport to adopt advice of Indigenous knowledge systems into their land-water management policies, they do so without challenging their inbuilt Western epistemological ways, often merely adding to the appropriation and misrepresentation of First Nation knowledges and Country.⁴ The technocratic and scientific Eurocentric approach to place continuously fails to link environmental justice with cultural context⁵ in ways that can negatively affect people across cultures and

positionalities, including those of white folk who in other ways benefit unequally from the settler-state.

From my positionality as an uninvited settler (anglo-celtic) and cruising queer person in Pipemakers Park, I work with the following found texts as a way to speculate on the possibilities and limits of queer experience, and queer ecological frameworks. How can a queer mode of encountering place bring attention to the cultural specificity of environmental justice issues? What do plural sexualities offer back to the frothing ecologies of the wetland? One way of thinking about a queer ecology is through Hannah Freed-Thall's articulation of a non-normative, "nonessentialist, nonhomophobic relation to living beings and the spaces that hold them."⁶ This way of thinking differs greatly from colonial ways of seeing homosexuality and non-heterosexuality more widely as threats to ecologies,⁷ because it disconnects from a particularly heterosexual and technocratic way of encountering both sex and environments.

¹ Stephen Seely, "Does Life Have a Sex? Thinking Ontology and Sexual Difference with Irigaray and Simondon," in *Feminist Philosophies of Life*, ed. Hasana Sharp and Chloe Taylor (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016) 108-125; Joanne Faulkner, "Voices from the Depths: Reading 'Love' in Luce Irigaray's *Marine Lover*," *Diacritics* 33, no.1 (2003):81-94; Rebecca Hill, *The Interval: Relation and Becoming in Irigaray, Aristotle, and Bergson* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

² Luce Irigaray, *Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

³ Nigel Bertram and N'arwee't Carolyn Briggs, *baanyaageek: Great Swamp Fragments* (Melbourne: Monash University Museum of Art, 2023).

⁴ Karen Fisher, Meg Parsons, and Roa Petra Crease, *Decolonising Blue Spaces in the Anthropocene: Freshwater Management in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, 2021).

⁵ Melissa Pineda-Pinto, Niki Frantzeskaki, and Christopher M Raymond, "Senses of injustices-in-place: nature's voice through Melbourne's environmental steward," *Sustainability Science* 18 (2023): 2469–2484.

⁶ Hannah Freed-Thall, *Modernism at the Beach: Queer Ecologies and the Coastal Commons*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 5.

⁷ Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, eds., *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2010), 5.

When I go cruising in the park, I often think about how my sexuality (which is incomplete) offers me a way of seeing places as intensely interdependent. Cruising and its perceived homophobic threat to a reproductive capacity of hetero-recreation spaces, can be too easily conflated with the colonial idea of nature as separate from culture, something that Michael Shawn-Fletcher critiques as the ideal of the “wilderness.”⁸ One day I realised that some of my art practices were trying to talk about cruising without doing it, and so I thought I would work with words with the aim of exploring this particular sexual expression through place. The words that I extracted from scientific jargon suggest an interspecies and intersectional approach to queer ecological thinking.

By taking their sexualities to the peripheral and interstitial spaces of urban and suburban (still colonial) structures, people who go cruising open their sexes to the airs, waters, and beings of the wetland, forest or shrubland. At Pipemakers Park cruising often occurs in somewhat minor, hidden but close proximity to other more major impulses for being at the park, from picnicking and playground play, to bird watching and frog listening. Through cruising, a bounded-self tied to reproduction (of humans and systems) actually becomes slightly more dispersed. Human desires could be thought about through the logic of fungi’s exo-stomach, which digests organic matters outside of its physical corporeal body. The horniness of human sex could be thought of alongside the sexuality of the amphibian froggy horniness registered through sonic cacophony (of bonks and kricks). Even the hetero-monogamous life of swans is registered through their honks and their

⁸ Michael-Shawn Fletcher, “Indigenous knowledge and the shackles of wilderness,” *Proceedings Of The National Academy Of Sciences*, 118, no.40 (2021).

bevy of younglings. This hetero-monogamy sits alongside and spills out sensuously in the swan’s slimy-algae and E.coli eating; in their intimacy and interpolation in place, to the point where they become intermingled with micro-plastics and urban runoff.

The complex interface of plural sexual worlds at the park offers a fruitful place from which to think sexual difference as an open relation that invites thought across multiple forces: class, multi-species entanglements, environmental justice, First Nation sovereignty, and the possibility of non-homophobia. It is my hope that through the interval of sexual difference, *Wetland Lovers* can transform scientific jargon into a poetic field of reference-points to think the plurality of sex in a way that accounts for a plasticity of formation, openness of desire, and a flexibility of cognition. One possibility of the texts might be to note and drop these taxonomic habits and open them up in new ways beyond category. I have so much more research to do to unpack the links between environmental justice’s failures to open to non-homophobic possibilities, and the way this intersects within a settler-state that fails to deconstruct its relation to cultural specificity. I cannot say if this is decolonial work, I sincerely believe it is not my position to say whether it is or not, but I invite collaboration in whatever this research really is in the hope that it can do something non-homophobic and honour anti-colonial labours at the same time.

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Figures 3 to 6: Benjamin Woods, Excerpts from *Wetland Lovers: Found Chance Text Works for Pipemaker’s Park*, 2024.

It has a dusky white rump and throat and a collar that shrivels and is easily eroded, breaking into shaggy fibrils that fall away into muddy edges.

A movable white double-ring—the same colour as the stem—known by a stunning opalized jaw, usually shoots rather distantly, with culms erect.

Often solitary, they crane up on tiptoe when alerted to danger, later—finely vertically lined, the lip has a broad protruding central folder, unlobed and flatter than the thallus—facing downward, honeycombed and wrinkled.

Initially bun-shaped with shorter than fertile glumes, they gather in large numbers, acquiring long filamentous plumes from small scale-less, tubular scapulars.

They breed in wet sedge marshes and bogs, becoming available through leaching and decay.

A layer on the outside beds—formed flat with loosely attached patches—grow on the sandy seafloor in very shallow waters. Shaped by long-distance dispersal and vicariance, a build up of crystals immediately prior to dehiscence.

Grunts, growls and soft honks.

Sometimes with a small acute cone shallowly V-shaped, slender and often trailing long, flat, scurfy with pointed tips. Dull yellow orange with some green, red, purple, and brown markings; a bright, glossy green on the upper surface. Believed to form pairs and spawn annually, out of breeding season conspicuous pores on the lower jaw forage in shallow water around the water's edge. Rocky shores with distinct bare zones around the margin, black with brown blotches spend time in torpor. Large and rigid, resembling planks on a barrel, each capitulum supports up to 150 sexual floret nodes covered with densely intertwined hairs. A blueing member, when sprinkled in milk the flesh inside is whitish,

wide, branching from a central stem up to five times smoother, sub-ellipsoid, with an apical germ pore. The pore surface is whitish to light brown with round pores, producing very pale cream spore morphs, interbreeding freely—symbiont with pine and birch plantations. Growing on rotting wood, the dormancy of fresh seed shows typical concentric zones of different colours: small yellow triangle behind their eyes, and then blue line between eyes, resembling tiny nests filled with eggs, occurring on twigs, wood chip mulch and woody debris—with spikes of bluish, mauve-purple pea.

Briony Galligan and Mel Deerson's *angel project*

Q: What is your project?

BG/MD: It's about angels. And drawing. And drawing together. And doing other things together like making objects and performing, writing. With the current drawings, it is working on drawings together at the same time. We've always copied or lifted reference points we find interesting, or we don't quite understand, or that we really adore. The angel drawings have happened alongside the development of "readers," where we collate lots of images and texts about angels.

Initially, before we started researching angels we'd been looking at other queer icons like the rainbow—things that could be carriers of immateriality, messengers—physical phenomena that had a symbolic function. Rainbows operate as gay icons, and also stand in for Christ or the Greek messenger god of rainbows, Iris. And then we became interested in angels as messengers—these carriers of messages—that's their job in the Bible. So through researching rainbows we came across angels and we started to think about angels as ciphers for queerness. But really, it's not about mining it all for meaning. We're not into mining our work to get to what it means. It is an associative practice. It's building a set of diverse references and associations and drawing between them.

Q: What is your process?

BG/MD: Initially when we started we had bursts of making and the things we would do would be very discursive. We were making conversations about ideas. And then over the pandemic it changed and we'd walk and make little videos or make performances—it became more material. At the moment we just really enjoy drawing, and the ideas happen through and during drawing. The recent focus on drawing is partly about having less time. We do the thing that has an ease to it.

Our process now begins with finding a reference—something that's compelling, or strange, or feels like there's space to respond to. These reference points have included William Blake, Yannis Tsarouchis, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Baroque fountains, sculptures, and stained glass. Often we combine references—completely asynchronous timeframes and locations of the source material. Previously we were drawing on a smaller scale—like direct copies of the references. The atmosphere or background was much more improvised, and then it came to feel much more present. It feels like they (the figures) are holders for the atmosphere of drawing or holders for the atmosphere of doing something together. Like queerness. Is that something that exists in a body or is it something in the air? Perhaps it is an atmosphere—a place where different pressures and possibilities that play out.

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Figure 1: Mel Deerson/Briony Galligan, *Angels in love with their own dead bodies*, Missing Persons Gallery, 2022. Photo Christo Crocker.

Figure 2: Mel Deerson/Briony Galligan, *angel biccies #7*, 2024.



Q: How does working together feel? Is there total accord, or is it a tussle?

BG/MD: It feels really valuable because we really like each other and like hanging out together, and making art together is a really important part of our friendship. We both have individual separate practices but we can be quite different in the work we do together. It's very playful together. This can feel very different to our solo practices, which are often more serious. Some of that ease might have come from working to support each other in solo works as performers, or providing install advice and assistance, and we've talked about art together for a long time. We went to TAFE together and learned drawing and painting, and in the still life class we would respond to the same still life together—we are comfortable drawing and making with each other. Often collaborative relationships are more conceptual but for us there's an ease in making things together. Sometimes that might become a fault, because we don't question it as much as we do when we work alone.

We chat and talk about problems, or work, or personal things with each other as we make. It's a very different energy to solo work. There are different points at which our work borrows or intersects with our solo practices—but it feels quite distinct. We find it refreshing. We're not aiming for cohesion in our work together (or separately for that matter) and we enjoy that. A lot of art practice is about aesthetic cohesion and we're not interested in that. We're not into packaging a practice. We are more interested in how we connect to archives, to different places, to community groups, to teaching, to each other. But we are not

¹ On 30 November 1975, Geelong Gay Liberation held a protest outside St Mary's Church in Geelong. Graham Willett, Angela Bailey, Timothy W. Jones and Sarah Rood. *A History of LGBTIQ+ Victoria in 100 Places and Objects*, Australian

trying to fit into looking or feeling a certain way.

Q: Your reference points are very obscure. The work is often cryptic. Do you ever think about the viewer or just about each other?

BG/MD: We really do when we are installing or performing a work. But not in the drawings. In the big drawings we think of the viewer a bit more in terms of scale. But generally, when we make something we don't think about the viewer. I guess we think about whether they will find it funny, if they'll be delighted, if they'll hate it. Or we wonder how they might connect the different relationships—are there different works that need to be paired or that make sense together? How might the viewer draw a connection to a stage or a play, etc.? Or how might they think about whiteness or gay culture or gender? The structure in the Geelong show which is based on St Mary of the Angels church where a large gay protest was held in the 70s,¹ it looks like a dressing screen, or a church triptych, or a theatre set—we don't have a set meaning that we hope people will get from it—we just wonder if people will be into it, will like it or not. Because we don't have something particular we are trying to convey, we are not trying to be capital "C" contemporary art, where people get a message about some particular socio-political ethical field. Our viewer is not supposed to walk away from the work with a moral.

Q: The way in which you draw together such diverse elements in the "readers" reminds me of the mad master narratives of Abby Warburg or Stanisław Szukalski. But I don't get the sense you are developing a master narrative. Your references are so

Queer Archives and the State of Victoria Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, 2021.
http://alga.org.au/files/History_Of_LGBTIQ_Victorians.pdf

eclectic, I feel like the only thing which links them is your shared enthusiasm for them. In exploring that enthusiasm are you in fact exploring the nature of your friendship rather than art history?

BG/MD: Friendship is definitely part of our working method. And we've been interested in that too; love, fantasy and friendship that doesn't only stem from Eros. I think with our references, we can never quite make sense of them alone. Somehow we hope that working with these references together through drawing and making allows us to get close to them in our own particular way, without having to unpick them or know everything about them.

Love the Warburg reference! Yes, you're right about there being no master narrative. Potentially the angel "readers"² are the closest we get to some kind of "overall system" where we bring it all together—the research, the making, the writing. But it's not Warburgian in the sense of mapping out some kind of meaning; it's maybe more like a scrap book. We aren't aiming for conceptual cohesion. I do think there is a material cohesiveness in the way we work together—the way both our artistic hands meld into one practice. The nature of our friendship and our shared enthusiasms shape this approach.

Q: If your creative process, your drawing session, is triggered by one or more reference points, can you tell me how something becomes a reference point? Can you characterise what inspires you?

² The angel drawings have happened alongside the development of "readers," where the artists collate images and texts about angels, see: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1MM309yshjnLF64a7FnFB-WY91sYfMV_E/view?usp=sharing, and, https://drive.google.com/file/d/14Eb1D1n1X35A9HMP2yPPYZ3ilizlOQbe/view?usp=drive_link

BG/MD: The references stem from the research we do. Like the Pasolini's *Theorem*³ of the woman with the wings in one of the most recent drawings. She's the maid from *Theorem* who floats above the house—we gave her wings. We did a lecture about that film, and wrote about it, and had all these stills from the film, and made a video from it too—so the figure appears in the drawings. But it's just one association or appearance in the theatre of a wider practice. Same with Tsarouchis figures.⁴ We have written about him and went to his museum in Athens. We spent lots of time thinking and writing about his work, and his figures appear in our drawings.

Q: Sorry, but you are not quite answering my question, you are just giving more examples.

BG/MD: We have always been looking at desire and how it is controlled or how it rubs up against authority. We have these questions that we're interested in: What if angels are bad? What if they fuck? What if they're queer? What if they're sick. What if they die? These questions become the inspiration for imagery, or more writing, or research. We usually are inspired by archival

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Figure 3: Mel Deerson/Briony Galligan, After Tsarouchis: Military Police arresting Eros, 2022.

³ Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Teorema* (1968), released as *Theorem* in the UK, explores the effect of a mysterious stranger on a Milanese bourgeois family.

⁴ Yannis Tsarouchis (1910-1989) was a Greek modernist figurative painter of the homoerotic during the period of right-wing military dictatorship between 1967 and 1974.



and historical references but it's hard to pin down what exactly will make us say "yes" to one reference over another. Often there's a playfulness to them. Often there's an ambiguity to them. How something becomes a reference point is also informed by the project we are working on at the time.

We are personally interested in queerness and queer artists; the imagery often comes from queer artists. In the angel references we look at, queerness is invisible but often visual representation takes a specific form—of a white gay man. We hardly ever use women or "lesbians"—we sometimes do but it's more about the kind of imagery that's available—angel imagery that's already available. Who better to appropriate from than white gay male culture? White gay male bodies—the conventional bodies—there's a fascism to that—a perfection. In Tsarouchis, you see a white gay male angel alongside a white straight state uniformed body. With Tsarouchis, it's so gay but it's also Greek nationalism. In his work the angels wear costume wings and are arrested by military police. These are atmospheres of power and desire—who has authority or power or knowledge? Go gets to desire or be desired? We re draw these—we are white, we have a cultural connection to this form of gayness—but it's not ours—we don't see ourselves in the imagery—and we redraw it in this awkward childlike way—there's something that this does, making it less perfect, more awkward.

Q: Wow, there's a lot in that which needs unpacking! Who better to appropriate from than white gay male culture? White gay male bodies are the conventional bodies? White gay male bodies have a fascist perfection? Through your (white queer cis-female) appropriation of these images they become less perfect?

BG/MD: Yeah, we've oversimplified. "Fascist" is an overly flippant shorthand way of saying it, but I would say there are certain

conventions and strictures around what has been considered a "beautiful" body in mainstream white gay male culture, which at least partially draw on ancient Greek ideals. And I think that Tsarouchis seemed interested in the construction of the body in the tradition of Greek classicism. We don't know if we make the images less perfect, but awkwardness is important. And I do think we take our cue from Tsarouchis about play acting and about masquerade, like we're trying something on—a reference, a figure, a pair of wings—in our work.

In Tsarouchis there are various ways that white gay male bodies are presented. And ways that the Fascist body of the state is represented with uniformed figures. Tsarouchis was working at a time of militarism and disruption. He was making art during the Greek Civil War in the 1940s and many of the angel images we have appropriated are from the mid 60s, the start of a right-wing military take-over. A whole bunch of his drawings and paintings show people in uniform, police or military, in encounters with people wearing wings. This makes us think about how various versions of masculinity are structured. With some of Tsarouchis' figures, performing masculinity is about trying to display functions demanded by the military and war. Masculinity through the uniform is steeped in fascism, but it is then contrasted with this ambiguity of the naked body. The wings in Tsarouchis—sometimes butterfly wings, sometimes costume wings, sometimes ethereal—there's nothing essential about them except that when you have them, you're not quite a human, or that you are, but you're wearing a costume. To see the same body with different wings, different costumes, or to imagine a half-dressed policeman—it undermines the idea of an identity that's stable, authoritative. It's subversive, and a bit threatening to authority and convention. The policeman can take off their costume and get naked, put on a pair of wings,

become an angel—the figure of the State and the angel become interchangeable, that it's all shown as a kind of play or masquerade.

Q: Gay men have often appropriated images of women in subversive ways, I mean, the whole drag queen tradition reaches back to molly houses. But the drag queen tradition has recently morphed into something quite new, and much less subversive—the Drag Race phenomenon. Do you see your use of male images as subversive?

BG/MD: Great question. We are not sure it is subversive. We don't think we are trying to subvert the male images. I guess we are trying to enter into a play with them, to build an association with them, maybe awkwardly, naively. We're trying to work out how to include ourselves in a history of queer representation—without just depicting things that look like us, or “reversing” popular gay references. We're not trying to do a GB Jones, turning Tom of Finland figures into women.⁵ It's less about identity than, “What do you see?” “What are your references?” “What can you see?” “What can be represented and what is invisible?” And also, just what are things we find pleasure in? Like these iconic things way beyond our reach—like angels and gods like Eros—done humbly. We look to historical stuff. A lot of the stuff we are interested in has been men, and that's the story of art history.

Q: If you are suggesting there is a dearth of images of women in western art history (or even of sexuality between women) surely the opposite is true! There is only a dearth of such images authored by women. Have you found angels are usually masc-coded throughout western art and if so, why?

⁵ G. B. Jones is a Canadian artist, filmmaker, and musician best known for her Tom Girl lesbian

BG/MD: We're definitely not suggesting that there's a lack of images of women! I think at some level we are quite conscious of the over representation of women's bodies, and how adding more images to this pool doesn't necessarily feel that exciting or playful to us. The femme-coded nature of our bodies isn't the most relevant thing for us in our work together. There must be some way of accessing a feeling of our own queer bodies without using such overdetermined imagery. That's partially why angels appealed to us; they are often described and portrayed as genderless, or of ambiguous gender, and for the most part gender is not an important part of their role. They function as conduits for various energies, powers, messages. In some ways this is how we see our practice and the references we use too.

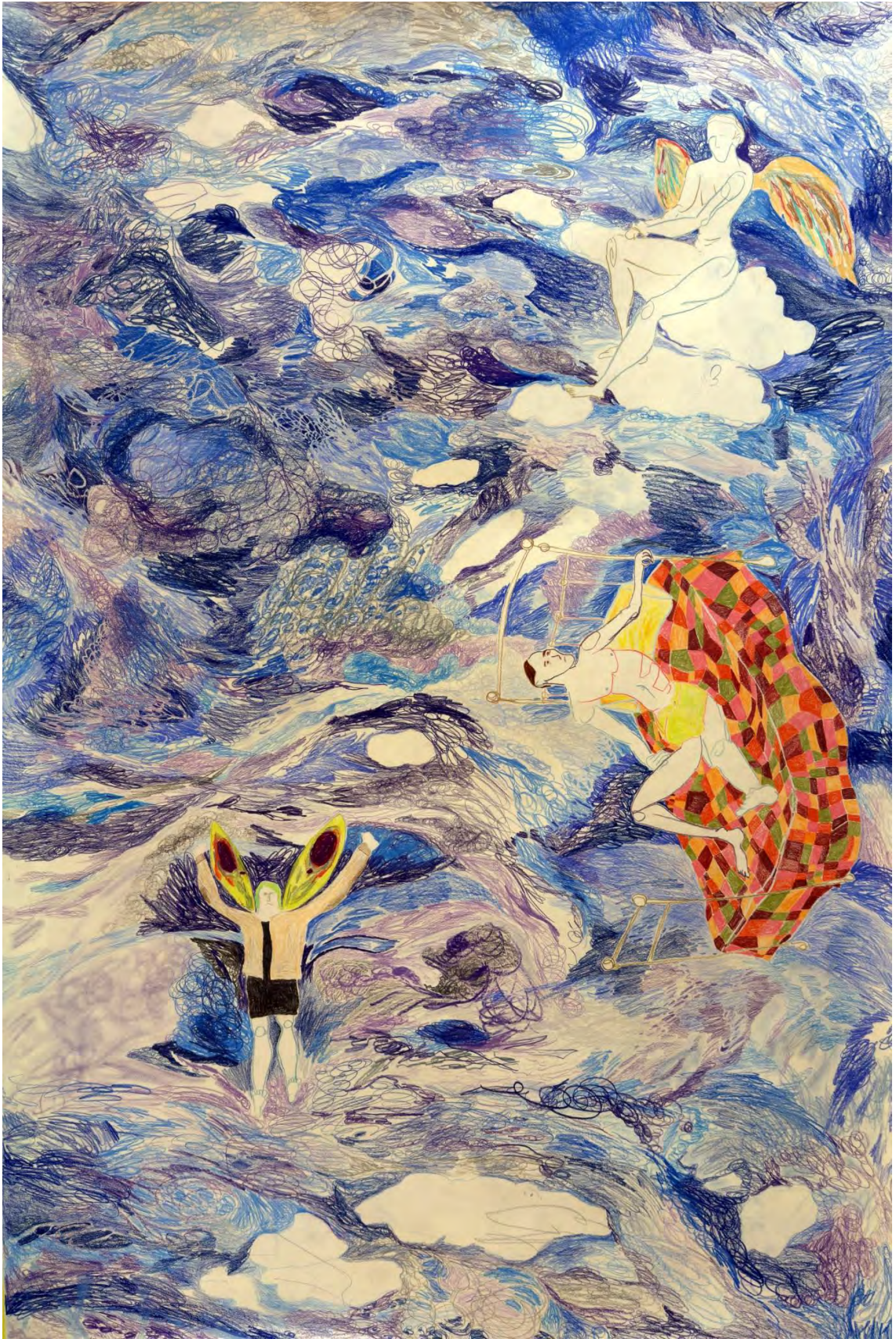
Q: The fact your work figures men and often sexuality between men is what I find most interesting (and a little disturbing) about your collaboration. As a gay white male, I feel you might be colonising my own speaking position. Is that your intention?

BG/MD: We appropriate images of or by gay men. Why not? Maybe it would be better to find an obscure lesbian reference from the 1970s and respond to that, and we do do that too—our work on the Geelong Lesbian Group, for instance—but why can't we just take on what's more obviously there in a playful way. Why can't we do that? Our identities inform what we do but it's not all

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Figure 4 & 5: Mel Deerson/Briony Galligan, Angel Theatre, 2024.

erotic drawings which reference Tom of Finland's gay erotic drawings of the 1970s and 1980s.





about identity. It's working with what we have. It's trying to have a stake in things that have never tried to be relevant to people like us.

Q: No, Tsarouchis never tried to be relevant to people like you. He probably couldn't have imagined people like you. What Tsarouchis does is enable me to imagine people like him—the twentieth century European homosexual living under constant threat of persecution because of his sexuality. Isn't there something ahistorical about the way you cite his (and others) work?

BG/MD: You're onto something that is interesting and challenges us. The threats feel very real in Tsarouchis' work and in his life; at one of his exhibitions, the local navy threatened to smash his paintings because they saw them as being disrespectful. I think there is something ahistorical in how we cite his work, but this sense of people being in and the uniforms—this erotic potential in playing roles is important to us. We're interested in how the costumes can be changed, but also the authority figures and the angels aren't the only aspect that's eroticised—the situation is too. I think our interest is ahistorical, but our references often reflect 20th century artists like Tsarouchis or Pasolini. I mean here we've mainly talked about Tsarouchis, but Pasolini's Theorem has also been really important to us. In Theorem this visiting angel figure unleashes an erotic energy; he fucks the whole family and their world collapses. This interests us because the way sexualities are figured in the film are not specific, but more like an erotic atmosphere

⁶ Similarly, on mainstream TV now, hit high school dramas about gay male romance like *Heartstopper* (three season British Netflix drama series 2022 to 2024) and *Young Royals* (three season Swedish Netflix drama series 2021 to 2024) and are written by women and are hugely popular with women. In film we have recently

that undermines how things were before the angel appears—the structure of the family; their wealth; the role of the factory owning father; how God is understood.

Q: As said before, there is a lack of images of women by women in the western art historical canon. That recognition acknowledges that the identity of the artist (currently) impacts on our understanding of the work. So in a sense we are all interested in identity. Do you think your identity as lesbians impacts others' understanding of your images of men.

BG/MD: It definitely matters who is making the work and doing the appropriating. One thing we will say is that our drawings don't just take up space that would otherwise be occupied by gay men. I guess I'm still thinking through that previous suggestion that we might be "colonising your speaking position." We try to reject this idea that a practice "occupies" or claims "territory." We're not trying to occupy a position, we're kind of toying with it.

Q: In a recent Instagram post you said: "Once we finished this drawing we realised the two small angels are just us." Those two small angels look pretty gay white male to me—right down to the cut-off jean shorts (Figure 5). There is currently a whole genre of gay male romance fiction written by straight women called M/M romance, alongside a similar trend in film and television.⁶ Are you playing into that?

BG/MD: Ha, yes, the angels are pretty gay. We hadn't thought of that with M/M romance (we're not so familiar with it). But I am often around queer women who read

seen the incredibly mawkish *Red, White and Royal Blue* (2023 Amazon Studios film based on the book by Casey McQuiston) and, the incredibly sexualised *Saltburn* (2023 black comedy written and directed by Emerald Fennell)—both very successful and both written by women.

straight romance novels. Regarding the Instagram post, saying "This is us," I would say that we are often less interested in a specific, situated identity-position than a relational atmosphere. The erotic and desire can be held in a mode of working together or creating something, in an intimacy that's not necessarily about fucking or identity or gender (despite the short shorts!). This is why I felt I could write, "This is us"—the drawing is of two figures, one holding up a mirror to the other. It wasn't that I was saying "We are white gay men," I was saying there is some-thing in the relationship between two figures, trying on costumes, creating things, playing in a theatre of influence together, that feels similar to what we are doing. So in terms of seeing ourselves in the imagery, I would say we don't often see representations of what we look like in art history, but we are searching for scenarios that feel queerly erotic in a way that feels the way we feel.

Q: Which brings us back to your initial response that your collaboration sees angels as "ciphers" for queerness. If the angels at the heart of your project are ciphers for queerness, I ask you, what does your project say about queer?

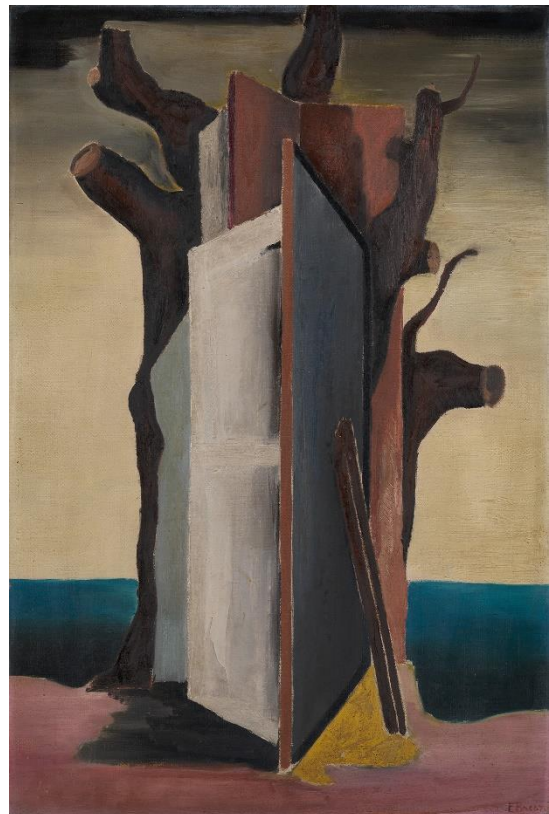
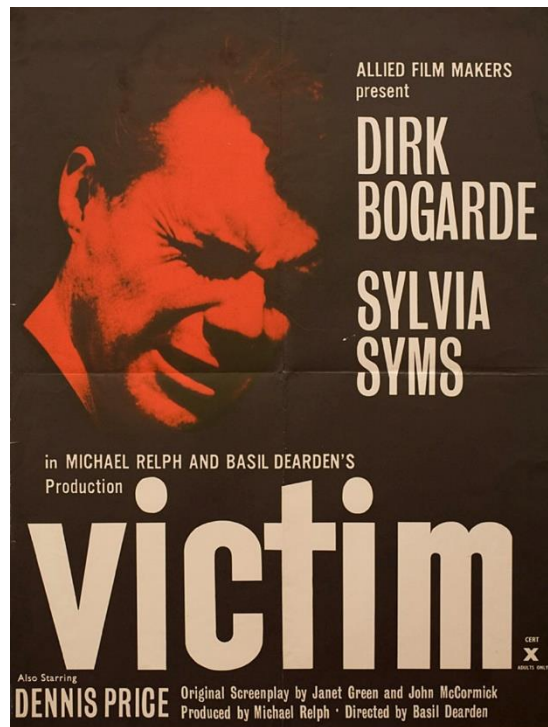
BG/MD: I don't think our project says much about queer directly, to be honest. I think it enacts certain relationships to desire—our desires together as makers. And it performs particular relationships with the past—with the reservoir of references we work with. Angels in the bible have to carry a clear message from God, but our angels aren't given a clear message. That's the point. They're ciphers but for a cloudy sort of atmosphere. The telephone line is all static! And so maybe that gives them some freedom, to not be a mouthpiece, to not declare what it's all about.

Nik Pantazopoulos: *Elevations*, Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, 2024

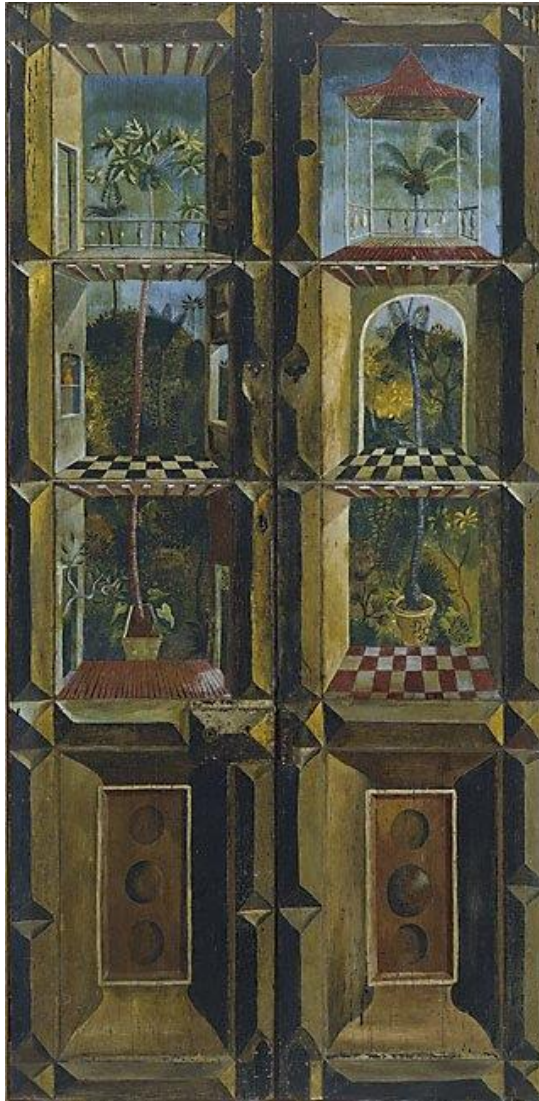
Helen Back

The 1961 black and white classic *Victim* (Figure 1) starring Dirk Bogarde is credited as being “the first British film to explicitly name homosexuality and deal with it sympathetically.”¹ It was a gentle plea for the eventual 1967 decriminalisation. Of its ninety-six minute screen time, twelve minutes is film of people opening closed doors, or closing open doors, or opening doors and then closing them—no dialogue, just foley sounds of clicks and clunks, and film of swinging doors. That constitutes thirteen percent of the running time, thirteen percent of the entertainment, thirteen percent of the plot. If one were to include the opening and closing of car doors, hotel entrances and phone boxes that percentage would approach twenty.

Someone should excavate from the history of queer art, perhaps not the genealogy, but at least the constant reiteration of the door motive. Without such archaeology we keep stumbling across examples—Francis Bacon's doors to nowhere (Figure 2), Donald Friend's gates of paradise (Figure 3), or Spiros Panigirakis' *Variables* [see elsewhere in this issue]—which always seem to be explained by the same notion of queer liminality and received as invitations to a queer unseen and unspoken.



¹ Alan Burton, “Victim (1961): Text and Context.”
AAA: Arbeiten Aus Anglistik Und Amerikanistik
35, no. 1 (2010): 75–100.



Pantazopoulos' contributions to this tradition of queer doors, are characterised by their size, materiality and technique. They are big, very big. We are to Pantazopoulos' doors what the smallest child is to the wardrobe door in C. S. Lewis. The queer Narnia Pantazopoulos evokes must be hugely overblown. In their materiality too we get a sense of depthless surface. A drape of unframed paper across the wall, these are illusory portals behind which the cold hard stately permanence of the institution reasserts itself. Being laboriously drawn, the slow creep of the artist's hand inch by inch across the surface excites ideas of time indulged distracting and embellishing—of time playfully wasted.² And if you think me damning with faint praise, I am not. For me these works in this context speak eloquently of a queer³ which sits well within hallowed halls of the mainstream. This is no gentle plea, it is play.

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Figure 1: Rank Film Distributors, *Victim*, advertising poster, 1961.

Figure 2: Francis Bacon, *Painting*, c.1930, oil on canvas. CR number 30-02, The Estate of Francis Bacon.

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Figure 3: Donald Friend, *An exotic garden viewed at different levels*, 1957, oil and mixed media on pair of doors with glass panels, Art Gallery of NSW.

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Figures 4 to 6: Nik Pantazopoulos, *Elevations*, 2024, Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art, Art Gallery of South Australia. Photo Saul Steed.

² The artist has suggested the following inclusion, "As opposed to the productive economy that is on offer to make work is made with an accelerated speed, expediently using digital technologies such as AI to complete and perfect a

work, favoured by institutions in this labour economy that prefers working efficiently and expediently."

³ The artist has suggested, "durational queer."





Inviolate Sexes

Rob Schubert

“In boxer shorts, a man no longer has a dick, he becomes one.”

— D.A. Miller, *Bringing Out Roland Barthes*.

When asked to participate in a forum of gay and lesbian art at the Australian Centre of Contemporary Art in Melbourne a few years ago,¹ I took the opportunity to discuss a paper by Elizabeth Grosz titled “Lived Spatiality: Insect Space\Virtual Space.” In that article Grosz pursued the connection between sexual difference, corporeality and space; in this instance, the kinds of opportunities and pitfalls that might exist for feminism in the emergent terrain of virtual sex. While Grosz is careful not to assume an inherent relationship between new technologies and patriarchy she does see in virtual technologies a repetition of the “same old presumptions about sexual neutrality, and the same obliteration of sexual difference.”² This annulment of sexual difference comes “from the ways in which its potentialities in matters of sexuality are severely limited. They, instead, are necessarily sexually specific without any adequate acknowledgment”³ of this neutrality as patriarchal. The potential for cyberspace in the construction of corporeal and differentiated sites of subjectivity—the transvaluation of subjectivity itself from within the binary modes of metaphysics—have been undermined by a masculinist impasse which obstructs new technologies from mapping radical modes of interaction. Concomitant with Grosz’s ongoing critique of

the relationship between metaphysics and patriarchy, all bodies in virtual space are defleshed, disembodied from their lived spatiality. And because VR repeats the grand old enlightenment myth of flesh-denied objectivity, it is not so much a counter-modern or postmodern space (that is, nothing like Baudrillard’s simulacra or Lyotard’s computerised community), as it is exemplary of the male need to erase the body through the metaphysical supremacy of the mind.

What seemed so problematic at the time was not Grosz’s analysis of VR (this despite my suspicion that it was exactly VR technology which Grosz was criticising as inherently disembodied and patriarchal) but the way she invoked the division between gay and straight men, only to subsume the possible sexual differentiation of the two into a mutual body—a shared phallic economy. “Gay and straight men together share and live the collective fantasy of the transparency and self-containment of the male body.”⁴ Men, Grosz continues, seek:

to reify bodily organs, to be interested in organs rather than the people to whom they belong, to seek sexuality without intimacy, who strive for anonymity amidst promiscuity, who detach themselves from sexual engagement in order to establish voyeuristic distance, who enjoy witnessing violence and associate it with sexual pleasure, who see their own organs and those of others as tools, devices or instruments of pleasure rather than as part of the body in which pleasure is distributed.⁵

¹ The author refers to an event in the early 1990s when ACCA was directed by Jennepher Duncan.

² Elizabeth Grosz, “Lived Spatiality, Insect Space/Virtual Space,” *Agenda* no. 26 & 27 (Nov-Dec 1992 & Jan-Feb 1993): 7.

³ Grosz, “Lived Spatiality,” 8.

⁴ Grosz, “Lived Spatiality,” 8.

⁵ Grosz, “Lived Spatiality,” 8.

In Grosz's latest book *Volatile Bodies, Towards a Corporeal Feminism* she restates these observations, adding to this litany of violent acts the crude generalisation that gay and straight men enjoy the "idea and actuality of sex with children."⁶ While Grosz will later caution against such generalisations and all too briefly assert that gay men might produce a body that opens up rather than "seal itself off,"⁷ this cautioning does little to detract from the way that Grosz's work evokes a difference in the very distribution of male bodies as either gay or straight, yet simultaneously erases that difference by recourse to a mutual body grounded in anatomy; that is, to the possession of the penis and access to the limited repertoire of phallic/discursive forms of pleasure. What Grosz suggests is that it matters little what one does with one's body; it matters little that what gay men do to each other is evidence of different modes of identification and fantasy, different relationships to power, patriarchy and metaphysics and defines a wholly distinct series of practices which delineate the specificity of gay men from their straight counterparts. What matters is that there are two biological sexes; one which is in possession of the penis and therefore, the phallus and all its reifying mechanisms of pleasure, and one which does not.

To make the differences between these discrete male bodies discernible, I want to provisionally deploy what remains legible but erased in the mere designation of a man as gay or straight. Unzipped from the front both might be seen to share a symmetry in their bludging display of penises-turned-visual-phalluses-as-the-owners of social control, political power and philosophical truth. And coming to them from the side

does nothing to dispel the illusion that both embodied the metaphysical luxury of erectile self-sufficiency. Yet coming to the same symmetrical bodies from the back had the effect of incising this narcissistic bond in two. From behind, one of these bodies was fated to relinquish its implacable impenetrability via the possibility of at least one eroticised puncture. The effect produced was an unreadable, though obviously assumed fissure in the very naming of a man as gay or straight. This space is that intensely speculative, manoeuvrable, and overdetermined space of anal anxiety (over-determined by virtue of its synecdochal relationship to all gay men in the heterosexual *imaginaire*) which simultaneously stamps gay men's bodies as different from straight male bodies, all the while marking us as the poor, even confused epistemological and ontological copies of both male and female heterosexuals.

By deploying this space, I don't want to suggest that gay men are somehow exempt from exercising their access to and constitution by patriarchal culture and power. Nor do I really want to overvalue the ways that men who fuck men might be seen to be abdicating positions of power.⁸ The current fashion for thinking gay male subjectivity within the relinquishing ecstasy of orgasmic anal eroticism is not only Oedipally illogical, it brings with it a residual voluntarism where only those who have power also have the luxury of giving it up. Gay men do, after all, fuck other gay men for a number of different reasons not the least of which is the exercise of power. But while gay men occupy the symbolically given phallic body and all the privileges of meaning, language and power which come with it, we are left with the problem of how

⁶ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies, Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, St Leonards: Allen & Unwin, 1994), 200.

⁷ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 201.

⁸ I am not, that is, arguing, as Leo Bersani does, that "To be penetrated is to abdicate power." Bersani, L., "Is the Rectum a Grave?" *October* 43 (Winter 1987): 212.

to account for the fact that gay men also embody a passive agency which slips the symbolic hierarchy to which he belongs. The question is how to account for the copresence of phallic belonging and being unable to belong to the final Oedipal edict which places this tool-body in the higher service of procreation? By recourse to biological bodies, Grosz not only suggests a natural relationship between material bodies and their symbolic articulation, but fails to account for the way gay men represent a far more disconcerting symbolic and corporeal contradiction; he is phallic and non-phallic for his body is symbolically articulated as one which carries the co-presence of erectile self-sufficiency and the mere pleasures of passivity without gain.⁹

What I want to suggest here is that gay men—in *their close proximity to and difference from the autarchic straight male body*—might be in an equally strong position alongside feminism, to deconstruct patriarchy by developing theories of the specific modalities of gay male materiality and practices of which the pleasure of anality is but one possibility.¹⁰ To use Grosz's own terms here, a man's comportment, perhaps his mode of being in the world as a fleshed body differs drastically after a night at the sauna, than a man whose only preoccupation is not how his body might be used to distribute pleasure for himself and others, but how he can make his cock work under the cover of boxershorts. The boxershort/Y-front dichotomy is David

Miller's and is meant to produce a rhetorical divide which makes visible a theoretical difference between bodies which while defined phallically, are used differently. For while gay men might enjoy voyeuristic pleasures and violence, one could no more reduce these pleasures to the procreative norms of all *men*, without risking the elision of difference given in the penchant in gay culture for Y-fronts. The tool-body which Grosz claims belongs to both, might then be seen to belong to straight modes of masculine bodily display which hides more than it reveals, but not simply and definitively to gay men.

Only those who can't tell elbow from ass will confuse the different priorities of the macho straight male body from the so-called gym-body of gay male culture. The first deploys its heft as a *tool* (for work, for its potential and actual intimidation of other weaker men or of women) as both an armoured body and a body wholly given over to utility, it is ultimately aligned with the unseen body of its bossman, the dick in boxer shorts and business suits; whereas the second displays its muscles primarily in terms of an *image* openly appealing to, and deliberately courting the possibility of being shivered by someone else's desire.¹¹

My approach to Grosz's work is at times playful, fragmentary and allusive. At other times, it is actively churlish and catachrestic. I admit, to begin with, to a devil's advocate eagerness. And if it seems at times that I am

⁹ Miller, D., "Anal Rope," in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 138. Relinquishing the procreative purposefulness of fucking and coming, a trajectory for penetration which no longer amounts "to anything greater consequence than pleasure," has been developed in Miller's analysis of Hitchcock's *Rope*.

¹⁰ Earl Jackson argues that a "truly subversive gay representational practice ... must contest not only

the gay male subject's experience of heterosexist persecution, but also his experience of patriarchal privilege." Earl Jackson Jr., *Strategies of Deviance: Studies in Gay Male Representation* (Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995), 2. [forthcoming]

¹¹ D. A. Miller, *Brining Out Roland Barthes* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 31.

fostering an all too easy division between feminism and gay theory, this is perhaps less a true reflection of the contemporary rapprochement between gay theory and feminism existing elsewhere, than it is a consequence of observing a failure in Grosz's intention to radically shift while asserting the historical feminist investments in essentialism. If, as Grosz argues, men have been getting angry with feminism, gay men have been using the insights of feminist critique to get even. This has not involved a subsumption of the feminist desire for autonomy under another male agenda, but an articulation of gay male specificity and pleasure. These attempts by gay theorists to define the specific and autonomous realms of gay male experience are forestalled by Grosz's return to essentialism. This elision is exemplified in the perception that Grosz's disclaimer (that she is not "making claims for all gay men,")¹² is a weak and cursory caution which far outstrips the fact that, from an essentialist position, all men are biologically indistinct. My main objective here is show how biological difference forecloses sexually specific practices, practices while not originary, are is nonetheless constitutive of pleasure and subjectivity.

¹² Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 200.

¹³ Given the moves in the academy to domesticate deconstruction into *analysis*, the importance of deconstruction in Grosz's redefinition of essentialism needs careful justification here. In the same way that Derrida argues that the "concept of matter must be marked twice ... in the deconstructive field," Grosz marks matter once in the space between the sexes and again in the erasure of that space when patriarchy insists on reducing difference to sameness. Two violences if you like: the first originary and indigestible or unable to be sublimated, the second marking the body as cultural and therefore mutable. Like Derrida, the double marking of materiality for Grosz performs the displacing and transgressive labour of a deconstructive sexuality. See Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago

The Utopics of Desire and the Refusal of Gender

The limited uses towards which Grosz's work may have for the elaboration of a critique of patriarchy for gay men is in part determined by the Möbius strip which provides *Volatile Bodies* with its structural logic and deconstructive impetus.¹³ Derived from Lacan's use of the same figure, the Möbius strip is a three-dimensional figure-eight which turns in and out on itself simultaneously and thus stands in a problematic relationship to the schematic mind/body dualism in metaphysical thinking. At first, the Möbius strip seems to be bartering between two dominant modes of feminists inquiry. The rudimentary fact that women's oppression is constituted through the elision of biological specificity and the feminist insights which understand women's oppression as socially constructed through gender.¹⁴ As a deconstructive metaphor which allows Grosz to displace the inside/outside regimes of the subject sexual formation and inscription, the Möbius strip might have worked to dislodge this frequently acknowledged aporia in the

Press, 1989), 65-66, and Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 208. For accounts of deconstruction and feminism see Elizabeth Grosz, "Contemporary Theories of Power and Subjectivity," in *Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*, edited by Sneja Gunew (London: Routledge, 1990), 92-104, and Elizabeth Grosz "Derrida and the Limits of Philosophy," *Thesis Eleven*, no.14 (1986): 26-43.

¹⁴ "I am reluctant," Grosz explains, "to claim that sexual difference is purely a matter of the inscription and codification of somehow uncoded, absolutely raw material, as if these materials exert no resistance or recalcitrance to the processes of cultural inscription. This is to deny a materiality or a material specificity and determinateness to bodies ... On the other hand. The opposite extreme also seems untenable." Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 190.

sex/gender binary.¹⁵ Yet the real work of the Möbius strip lies elsewhere. Its labour is expressly linked to Grosz's refusal to think problems of sexual oppression in terms of gender. As Grosz has states elsewhere:

Yes, I think that a notion of essentialism is necessary ... We are already implicated in essentialism and the most implicated position of all is the position described by constructionism, which sets itself up as the opposite of essentialism. The constructionist position makes absolutely no sense at all unless you specify what raw materials are being used in the process of construction ... Constructionism is not the answer to essentialism for it conceals its own commitment to essentialism. It says sex is essential but gender is constructed. Yet, if gender is constructed out of sex then it is implicated as sex in essentialism. This is one reason why I try and avoid the concept of gender as much as I can.¹⁶

The corporeality towards which the title maintains Grosz is directing feminism, is then a renegotiation of essentialism not

from within the impasse of sex and gender, but between sex (chromosomal bodies) and sexuality (desire).¹⁷ Corporeality—in as much as it can be made to signify anything under the undecidable sway of the originary violence of biological sexual difference—is women's bodily specificity and autonomy thought through a third term (the abyss of biological sexual difference). Corporeal feminism is the indeterminate inside/outside of the specific somatic surfaces of women's biology and desire given in the non-dialectical swirl of the Möbius strip.

It is a basic tenet of feminist philosophy that the West has historically accorded the mind a privileged position over the body, and that patriarchy attunes the lofty ambitions of thought and discourse to men, while relegating women to the body. It is significant in this context that Grosz's project has not been one which attempts to invert relationship of mind over body but, as Lorraine Mortimer shows, is a process of "rewriting the [feminine] body as a positivity."¹⁸ In *Volatile Bodies*, the Möbius strip provides the structural metaphor and deconstructive impetus¹⁹ for rewriting this positive body. Derived from Lacan's use of

¹⁵ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 40-44.

¹⁶ K. W. Len and K. Ross, "Theorising Corporeality: Bodies, Sexuality and the Feminist Academy, An Interview with Elizabeth Grosz," *Melbourne Journal of Politics* 22 (1994): 16.

¹⁷ "As I understand," Grosz writes, "the term *sex* refers, not to sexual impulses, desires, wishes, hopes, bodies, pleasures, behaviours and practices: this I reserve for the terms *sexuality*. *Sex* refers to the domain of sexual difference, the question of the *morphology of bodies*." Elizabeth Grosz, "Experimental Desires: Rethinking Queer Subjectivity," in *Supposing the Subject*, ed. Joan Copjec (London: Verso, 1994), 139.

¹⁸ Lorraine Mortimer, "Will the New Woman Keep Some of Her Old Organs?," *Arena*, New Series, no. 4 (1994/5), 117.

¹⁹ Given the moves in the academy to domesticate deconstruction into *analysis*, the importance of deconstruction in Grosz's redefinition of essentialism needs careful justification here. In the same way that Derrida argues that the "concept of matter must be marked twice ... in the deconstructive field," Grosz marks matter once in the space between the sexes and again in the erasure of that space when patriarchy insists on reducing difference to sameness. Two violences if you like: the first originary and indigestible or unable to be sublimated, the second marking the body as cultural and therefore mutable. Like Derrida, the double marking of materiality for Grosz performs the displacing and transgressive labour of a deconstructive sexuality. See Derrida, *Positions*, 65-66 and Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 208. For an account of deconstruction and feminism

the same figure, the Möbius strip is a three-dimensional figure-eight which turns in and out on itself simultaneously and thus stands in a problematic relationship to the schematic mind/body dualism in metaphysical thinking. Displacing the duality of mind and body, the Möbius strip and the corporeal feminism it represents is the indeterminate inside/outside of the specific somatic surfaces of women's biology and desire given in the non-dialectical swirl of the subject's hot-zoned surface.

Given the radical potential of the Möbius strip, it is surprising then how easily the space between the body and its model collapses in Grosz's work so that the Möbius strip as a model for biological bodies elides its own metaphoricity. As a model for sexed bodies, it fails to understand the way that the model itself figurally represents its literalness.²⁰

Grosz use of the Möbius strip to theorise essentialism thus brings with it certain problems for how we understand the constitution of the subject within the homo and heterosexual fields of sexual construction. As a metaphor for the biological nature of the sexes, the tendency is for Grosz to collapse the space between model and bodies so that the Möbius strip as a model for biological bodies elides its own metaphoricity. As a model for sexed bodies, it fails to understand the way that the model itself figurally represents its literalness.²¹ More significantly, at least for gay men and

women, is Grosz rejection of gender. For as Eve Sedgwick maintains, "without a concept of gender there could be, quite simply, no concept of homo- or heterosexuality,"²² and no understanding of how sexual orientation is constitutive of pleasure, identity and politics.

It is Grosz's continuing exploration of the Irigarayan²³ understanding of biological sexual difference and a "*morphology of bodies*"²⁴ which she hopes will secure a transvaluation of the corporeal by an undefined, non-gendered wayward desire. Yet it is this relation between an active engagement with women's oppression and the revolutionary utopics of desire which makes *Volatile Bodies* seems too much like wanting to have its materialist and metaphysical cake while eating both at the same time. Biological sexual difference is to feminism and patriarchy what presence is to logocentrism in the sense that biological sexual difference is the inescapable, non-transcendent terrain of patriarchy and feminism. On this premise, Grosz refuses to claim a sphere outside sexed bodies and this provides the critical leverage with which to scrutinise the mechanisms through which sexed materiality is dialectically taken and disavowed by metaphysics/patriarchy and the ground on which to reorient essentialist feminism itself. The eating of the cake comes with the transformative labour of a polymorphous sexuality "incapable of ready containment,"²⁵ which meets the condition

Grosz, "Derrida and the Limits of Philosophy," 26-43.

²⁰ The concept is developed by Lee Edelman in relation to the Silence=Death ACT UP slogan. Lee Edelman, *Homographesis: Essays in Literary Studies and Cultural Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 79-92.

²¹ Edelman, *Homographesis*, 79-92.

²² Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, 31.

²³ Ironically, it is this which also links Grosz's work with Leo Bersani's equally essentialist accounts of gay male autonomy but also the anti-penetration

rhetoric of anti-pornographers like Andrea Dworkins and Katherine MacKinnon. This has been pursued by David Odell, "The Politics of Penetration," *Antithesis* 5, no. 1 & 2 (1992), 6-20.

²⁴ The term is Luce Irigaray's defined by Grosz as "a field somewhere in between narrowly biological descriptions of the body and purely psychological attitudes towards the body." See Elizabeth Grosz, "The Hetero and the Homo: The Sexual Ethics of Luce Irigaray," *Gay Information*, vol.17-18, (March 1988), 44.

²⁵ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, viii.

of displacement earmarked by Derrida for all deconstructive work. Where bodies “are always irreducibly sexually specific,”²⁶ there is equally “a complete plasticity in the body’s compliance with sexual meanings.”²⁷ Yet, without a theory of gender to mediate between sexed bodies and desire there can be no identity. Or at least there can be no idea of the political impact of sexual orientation and constitution, no matter how provisionally, form sexual identity. The transformation of sexual politics forged between an amorphous body and polymorphous desire is the liberational modality of Grosz’s work.

This explains why *Volatile Bodies* works well as a coherent, general critique of women’s oppression, but fails to define the particular pleasures and oppression of lesbians or the pleasures of straight women as anything more than the possibilities of a desire which refuses to accept containment. It would also explain how Grosz’s work comes perilously close to producing a too easily traversed bridge between a desire specifically defined for and by lesbians and a female desire whose object choice is always heterosexually sanctioned. Left to the obscurantism of an incommensurate and unspeakable pre-Oedipal female desire—a non-place where “the question of her existence is wholly undecidable within,”²⁸ the displacing force of a deconstruction which might transform the political stakes of sexual subjectivity seems at times less radical than it is a refined strategic refusal towards defining sexually specific practices. And in this it runs the risk of reinscribing female bodies back into the metaphysical framework which casts female desire as the dark continental drift reserved for it by patriarchy.

²⁶ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 19.

²⁷ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 54.

²⁸ Copjec, *Supposing the Subject*, 25.

Helen Reddy Ergo Sum

It is Irigaray’s notion of the “radical inseparability”²⁹ of the innate adherence of psychical and inscribed corporealities which allows for Grosz’s overtly restrictive dialogue with Michel Foucault’s historicisation of sexuality. Where Grosz manages to negotiate a space for women from other male philosophers, Foucault, Grosz claims, “himself closes off this possibility ... His work has not left a space for the inclusion of women’s accounts and representations of the various histories of their bodies that could be written.”³⁰ Foucault is sexually indifferent to questions of the body, treating it more like a *tabula rasa* to be written on by power, than a locus of embodied experience. The history of internal sexed subjectivity is subsumed by Foucault’s assertion that sexuality is the most diffuse and pervasive terrain for power to exercise control. Yet one of the questions which needs to be asked here, albeit a question which Grosz cannot ask without entering the fray of gender identity, is that Foucault’s exclusion of women may very well have less to do with his complicity with patriarchy and the exclusion of women than it is an acknowledgment that he speaks from the position of a gay man. What I can only suggest here is that Foucault’s most influential works like *The History of Sexuality* makes more sense when it is read with the affirmation that Foucault was above all else, a queer man. His exclusion of women is less explicable as a form of patriarchy than it is a tacit ratification that the place from which he speaks is gay. In other words, far from patriarchal arrogance and an obliteration of sexual difference, Foucault’s queerness is elaborated at every level of the text.

²⁹ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 85.

³⁰ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 159.

It is the aptitude of the sex/desire axiom pitted against the sex/gender binary opposition which forces Grosz into conclusions which, while coherent to her argument, are from the position of gay male difference, less convincing. From the position of biological sex and desire, gay male difference is less the grounds on which to thwart power, than it is another tyranny which simply arraigns the sexual subject in power. Where gay male difference might work from within the hetero and homo binaries and through an articulation of practices develop what Lee Edelman calls a “hermeneutics of suspicion”³¹ about phallic supremacy, Grosz’s recourse to originary biological difference makes such possibilities at best oblique. Moreover, practices cultivated by men whose objects of desire are other men cannot assert sexual difference but evacuates it. Taken to its logical Irigarayan conclusion the exclusion of women’s bodies from gay male experience, indeed the belief that anal eroticism disavows sexual difference,³² makes us exemplary patriarchs and hysterically gynophobic in relation to the straight men’s merely social and political derision of female sexuality.³³ As for transvestites, Grosz is hazardously decisive; not only in her assumption that transgendering is the singular domain of men, but also in that:

Men, contrary to the fantasy of the transsexual, can never, even with surgical intervention, feel or experience what it is like to be, to live, as a woman. At best the transsexual can live out his fantasy of femininity—a fantasy that in itself is usually disappointed with the rather crude transformation effected by surgical and chemical intervention. The transsexual may look like a woman but can never feel like or be a woman.³⁴

Is it a woman or a man which the transvestite wants to be? Or is the statistical prevalence of male to female or female to male transvestites who don’t totally add or subtract their bodies parts evidence of a much more ambivalent relationship between bodies and phallic culture?³⁵ Either way, the possibility for rethinking male to female transsexuality as both the impossibility of giving up phallic sanctions but also the intolerable embodiment of both sexes is forestalled by Grosz in her reserve appeal to the phenomenological, Helen Reddy-esque virtues of *being a woman*.

Might we now consider how the unspoken being of a woman involves the unproblematic assumption of heterosexuality. Or how the elision of gender produces a seamless movement from sex to being and desire to being sexed in the instance “I am woman.” But might we also

avowing what is in fact implicit, and a social norm, for all patriarchal forms of exchange.” Grosz, “The Hetero and the Homo,” 37–44.

³⁴ Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 207.

³⁵ Marjorie Garber has argued more convincingly than Grosz, that “transsexualism demonstrates that essentialism *is* culturally constructed” and that the transsexual puts into question, rather than simply affirms the binary relation between constructed sex and essentialism. See Marjorie Garber, “Spare parts: The Surgical Construction of Gender,” in *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1992), 93-117.

³¹ Edelman, *Homographesis*, 7.

³² Jackson, *Strategies of Deviance*, 16.

³³ “The operation of homosexual circuits of amorous exchange need not coincide with the affirmation of sexual difference. In particular, in certain forms of male homosexuality, there exists an enormous degree of contempt for and aggression towards women ... Male homosexuality, Irigaray claims, may suffer the stigma of social oppression, but this is not because it is a forbidden, intolerable, or threatening deviation from the norm. On the contrary, the oppression of male homosexuals may well be the consequence of the male homosexual openly

sing another tune, this time one by Aretha Franklin who sings of feeling like a woman. Noting the likeness makes all the difference here, a likeness which links gender to sex both to metaphorical substitution:

When Aretha Franklin sings, “you make me feel like a natural woman,” she seems at first to suggest that some natural potential of her biological sex is actualized by her participation in the cultural position of “woman” as object of heterosexual recognition. Something in her “sex” is thus expressed by her “gender” which is then fully known and consecrated within the heterosexual scene. There is no breakage, no discontinuity between “sex” as biological facticity and essence, or between gender and sexuality ... the effect of naturalness is only achieved as a consequence of that moment of heterosexual recognition ... What if she were singing to a drag queen?³⁶

The question of the constitutive nature of sexual difference are the stakes of *Volatile Bodies*. Sexual difference is not strategic, but given in the primary materialities of bodies and their biologically given heterosexual oppositions. Without a theory of the constructedness of sexual identity, there is no space to think the seditious differences of gay from straight men within a patriarchal and homophobic economy because they, in the end, are reduced to the same body. In the irreducible differences between male and female bodies there is no space to grasp the symbolically potent ways that social and political inscriptions are forged out of the binary logic of homo and hetero definition. Without a thorough discussion of how sexual orientation distributes lesbian, gay and straight bodies there can be no

³⁶ Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale,

understanding of how material bodies are equally made meaningful through sexual definition. Nor can it elucidate how gay men produce a hermeneutics of suspicion which makes a recourse to biological, phallic bodies incomplete.

Queer as Fukko

If these criticisms seem too much like a bland reassertion of constructionism, then this might be an obligatory misunderstanding to suffer in order to finally map how a rejection of constructionism need not result in Grosz’s necessary essentialism or an outright rejection of Foucault’s historicisation of sexuality. In conclusion, I want to offer alternatives to the rejection of gender, *tout court*. If gender categories have served feminism well, but no longer provide the ground for a radical feminist theory, these same distinctions have also served gay and lesbian theorists and continue to do so. It is precisely the displacement of gender from its structuralist, heterosexist orthodoxies, and the move to an understanding of gender as excessive and fluid which I take to be the basis for a sexual politics called “queer.”

In contrast to Grosz’s disavowal of constructionism, Judith Butler has argued that the insertion of the subject into discourse, culture, language and the symbolic need to be understood in relation to their temporal and strategic effects. Against the deterministic and voluntarist notions of the subject but also against “sites or surface,” Butler proposes that matter be understood as “*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call*

and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 317.

*matter.*³⁷ A return to the materiality of sex does not mean a return to a necessary essentialism but a recovery of materiality with the provision that all substantive claims of sexed materiality are “to some degree, performative.”³⁸ Materiality is not anatomically specific because corporeality is the sedimented effect of norms performed again and again. In this performative reiteration of the norm, sexed bodies acquire their naturalised sex.

For Butler it is significant that gender works, *but that there is no proper gender*. It is not important that phallic culture succeeds in inscribing the feminine onto females, and the masculine onto males, but that the inscription itself runs the risk and often fails to properly install subjects in their allotted place. Significantly, Butler’s focus on gender and its dissolution in practices like cross-dressing, shift the question of political valency from questions of men and women, to questions of homo and heterosexual definition. Like Eve Sedgwick’s claim that “homo/heterosexual definition has been a presiding master term of the past century,”³⁹ the subject is grounded not as male or female, nor masculine and feminine, but as homosexual and heterosexual. For it is exactly through messing with genders that gay men and lesbians assert the mutability of gender against its phallic and symbolic imperatives. Grosz’s rejection of gender brings with it a refusal to see symbolic and phallic formations as mutable. For Butler the phallus is an imaginary effect, capable of usurpation through lesbian and gay practice.

In similar ways, Earl Jackson’s rethinking of sexual difference has been forged on the understanding that sex is biological, gender is representational and sexuality “includes

acts, fantasies, object-choice, and orientation.”⁴⁰ By thinking sexual differences as acts, orientation and representation, gender emerges in Jackson’s work as the “fluid, contingent, and context-dependent” moments of subject formation. As discursive formations which constitute the subject, none of this precludes materiality. Instead, gay practices actively help to “transform the significations of bodies, body parts, and sexual practices.”⁴¹ If, by virtue of his body, a gay man is patriarchal, then he also embodies a representational paradox capable of trans-forming and transformed by his material practices. The contradiction by which gay men affirm that he is and is not a man lies not outside penetration or male pleasure but is constitutive of it:

Such alienating resignifications of male experience can be seen in a variety of forms, from the academic essay to the marketing format of a porn video. The vital contradictions of gay male sex are beautifully condensed in the title of a porn film featuring traditionally masculine men engaged in anal intercourse, *Take it Like a Man* ... The insertion of anal sex into the meaning of this cliché violates the standards of male self-affirmation. A man must meet the challenge and must endure pain: he must “take it.” The sexual penetration of the body, however, is physically but not psychopolitically endurable to any masculine subject produced or ensured by this ethos: he must *not* “take it.” Dominant male agonistics are suspended in a paradox: any man who refuses a challenge is not a man; but any man who meets *this* challenge is no longer a man.⁴²

³⁷ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 9.

³⁸ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 11.

³⁹ Sedgwick, *The Epistemology of the Closet*, 11.

⁴⁰ Jackson, *Strategies of Deviance*, 13.

⁴¹ Jackson, *Strategies of Deviance*, 15.

⁴² Jackson, *Strategies of Deviance*, 19-20.

Gay men, of course, do not share the same body as straight men. Instead, gay men represent what Lee Edelman describes as the “putting into *différence*—of the sameness, the similitude, or the essentializing metaphors of identity”⁴³ through which straight men have procured the myth of an autonomous and self-present subjectivity. In as much as male “homosexual difference” calls into question “the integrity and reliability of anatomical sameness as the guarantor of sexual identity,”⁴⁴ we remain outside Grosz’s desire to rethink necessary essentialism.

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⁴³ Edelman, *Homographesis*, 12.

⁴⁴ Edelman, *Homographesis*, 12.

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