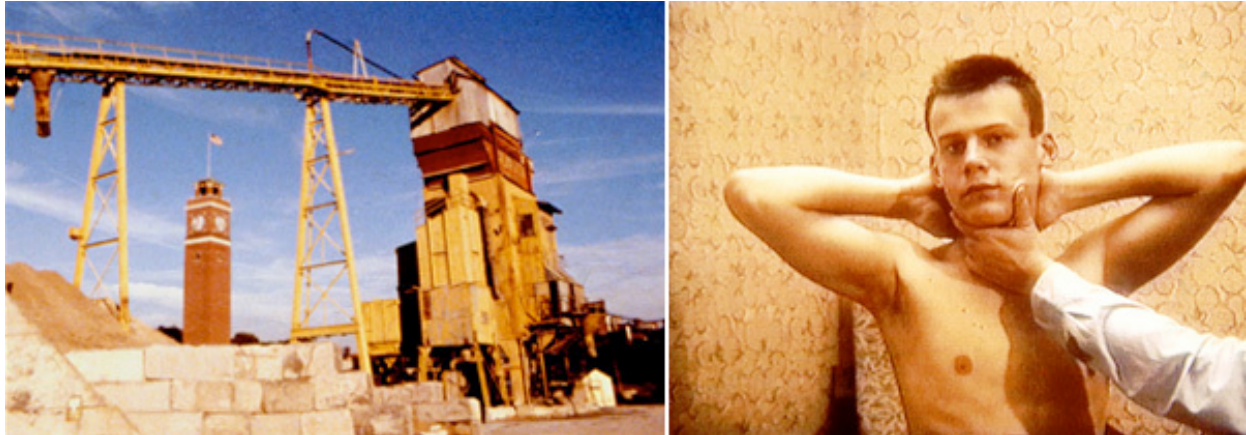


Porn Yesterday

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Left: **William E. Jones**, *Massillon*, 1991, still from a color film in 16 mm, 70 minutes. Right: **William E. Jones**, *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography*, 1998, still from a color video, 19 minutes. Images courtesy William E. Jones.

THE DYNAMIC OF WILLIAM E. JONES'S work lies in the tensions produced between, on the one hand, deep-running vortices of emotion and longing and, on the other, the angular severities of social control, unearthed and drawn out from the otherwise obscured historical matter of gay men's subjective lives and shared fantasies. Among the source materials for his five long-form pieces, numerous short films, and printed publications are 1970s pornography, legal data, pop music, and personal memories: Extraordinary and unexpected facets emerge from the obsessive jewel-cutting that Jones performs on this raw ore.

Massillon (1991), Jones's first feature-length film, revisits his hometown of Massillon, Ohio, represented in two dialectical registers: rigidly lensed shots of municipal buildings, tree-lined highways, and other local landscapes, and Jones's voice-over, coolly measured and calculated, relating both autobiographical anecdotes and a history of antisodomy laws. Recalling a time when the distant glimmers of gay liberation made little impact on a boy coming of age in a declining Rust Belt city, Jones's words evoke a process of sexual awakening that transpires within a thick cloud of unknowing, defined as a persistent search for information and enlightenment through subterranean clues, vague rumors, and covert networks. These range from lingering suspicions about two seemingly straight friends who openly joked about blowing each other to recountings of a furtive truck-stop fuck, for which the blunt odor of shit emerging from the hole-in-the-ground toilets bears a comparable weight to Proust's madeleine—wafting through Jones's memory not so much for any perverse pleasure but rather as a marker of our socially determined degradation.

These epistemological challenges become centered around a more specific object of desire in *Finished* (1997): Quebecois gay porn star Alan Lambert, who committed suicide in a public square in Montreal in 1992 at age twenty-five, a few years after Jones first encountered his photo in a phone-sex ad and became inexorably drawn to his image. In hunting down and piecing

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together a biography for Lambert, Jones reconstructs him less as a person than as an incommensurate collection of evidence: magazine photo shoots, the frozen title sequences of his video releases (arranged alphabetically: *Bare Bottoms*, *Beach Dreamer*, *Boot Camp*, *Boot Camp II* . . .), footage shot at sites in Canada and Los Angeles where Lambert lived and worked, information gleaned from interviews with former coworkers (identified only by initial letters, like the subjects of old diary entries or Freud's clinical essays), and Lambert's rambling, semicoherent suicide note, written in the form of a self-aggrandizing socialist manifesto. *Finished* becomes ultimately about the impossibility of moving beyond these surface ephemera, but occasional flashes occur: Jones notes that the Lambert video *A Matter of Size* was released in France under the title *La Folie de grandeur*—a pun that can be translated back as "delusions of grandeur."

Though *Finished* notably abstains from using footage of Lambert in action, Jones recuts porn films and videos to compelling effect in a number of other works. In *V.O.* (2006), he selects non-sex scenes from precondom titles as a means of reviving their documentary value, rereading the source materials as collusions between indexical records and utopian aspirations; similar operations reveal, more darkly, the politico-economic underpinnings of Eastern European productions of the '90s in *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography* (1998). However, Jones goes hardcore in *Tearoom* (2008), an hour-long found object of bizarre but significant provenance: silent, color 16-mm police surveillance footage shot from behind a two-way mirror in a men's room in Mansfield, Ohio, in the early '60s, explicitly capturing a heated trade in sexual favors between everyday men from a range of classes and races. Captivating for both its historical rarity and its proto-Warholian cinematography, *Tearoom* is a Jones film degree zero, paradoxically exploring repression as both a brutal historical injustice and an incomparable formal device.

— Ed Halter

"The Films of William E. Jones" runs February 26–March 4 at Anthology Film Archives in New York. For more details, click here: <http://www.anthologyfilmarchives.org>