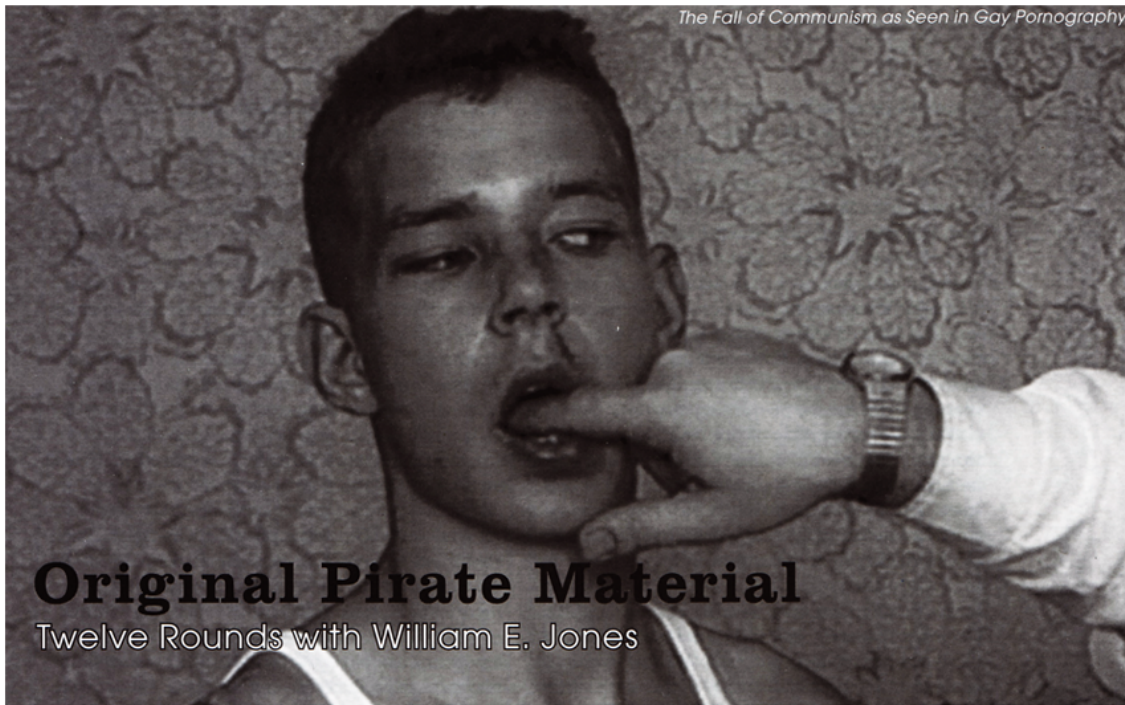


Sicinski, Michael, "Original Pirate Material: Twelve Rounds with William E. Jones," *Cinema Scope*, Issue 31, Summer 2007, pp. 29-35

cinema scope

EXPANDING THE FRAME ON INTERNATIONAL CINEMA



1. *Tearoom*, the most recent work by experimental media artist William E. Jones, is actually only a "work by William E. Jones" in the same respect that *Perfect Film* is "a film by Ken Jacobs," or *Poetry and Truth* is "the latest film by Peter Kubelka." These are all entirely accurate statements, but they are also statements ever so slightly undercut by the works themselves, found objects whose "makers" are essentially presenters of pre-existing cinematic artifacts. In each of these cases, the work performed on the films by their second makers is a radical shift in political sensibility and possible reading strategy. Jacobs' film gives us an unedited reel of news footage from the day Malcolm X was assassinated, and in its new form, shows us quite directly how the news industry immediately sets to work in making momentous historical events visually legible in ways which are politically advantageous for entrenched power. Kubelka's film displays the micromanagement of the performing body inside the structure of a television commercial, the way a piece of chocolate penetrates a female mouth and that mouth is endlessly coached in order to elicit a market-researched flavour-reflex. One of Kubelka's early masterworks, *Schwechater* (1958) was a modernist subversion of a beer-publicity assignment; *Poetry and Truth* demonstrates commerce's capacity to subvert its own internal ironies. *Tearoom* stands proudly alongside these achievements; it is one of the most soberingly revelatory political films of recent years and represents a breakthrough in Jones' career. The film unearths a cinematic document of vital importance to the history of gay culture in the US, which would be enough to cement its significance. But it also represents a radical willingness on the part of a major artist to efface his own aesthetic identity in favor of a "gay history without names."

2. CINEMA SCOPE: A look across your filmography places your latest work in a revealing light. The earliest works, *Massillon* (1991) and *Finished* (1997), are (among other things) personal essay films, in which your actual voice is very present and explicit. *Is It Really So Strange?* (2004), your documentary about Latino Morrissey fandom in Los Angeles, features your own voice and image, but also cedes a great deal of space to interviewees. In *v. o.* (2006) and your recent video shorts, your commentary is predominantly conveyed through editing decisions and sound/image juxtapositions, and eventually we arrive at *Tearoom*, which is an artifact you present virtually untouched. What (if anything) do you make of this trajectory?

WILLIAM E. JONES: *Massillon* and *Finished* related to a certain avant-garde tradition, but their first-person narrations gave them a sense of intimacy that some spectators found easy to identify with. This gave the films a currency among people who weren't necessarily versed in film modernism. Writing in the first

person imposed its limitations, though, and I admit that I got tired of the sound of my own voice. In recent years I have wanted to approach historical material, and I wasn't convinced that talking about my search for it, or my reactions to it, was the best way of contextualizing it. In my first works, I imposed formal strategies upon my material, but in the later works, I am more open to what form the material suggests. The turning point for me in this respect was *Is It Really So Strange?* which I could have made into an experimental film. Instead, I edited it in a more conservative way, and the result was something more accessible to the people I represented.

Perhaps another way of thinking about my practice as a filmmaker is that my films have in a sense become more and more artless. I started by making films with an obvious sense of artistry, and my latest work is essentially a found object. I suppose "obvious" is the key word, since what I am doing with my material has become subtler, and perhaps also more difficult for spectators and programmers to place. One of my favourite reactions to the work came from a friend who had just seen *v. o.*: "It's like your other films, but I can't explain why, because you didn't shoot it, write it, or narrate it." The idea of having a film style that cannot be located in specific formal strategies appeals to me.

I didn't plan anything as definite as a career trajectory, but I have had a consistent ambition to disrupt not only habitual patterns of consumption, but also my own habits as a filmmaker. In the text above I am describing a pattern that may not (or cannot) continue. My latest project, a documentary on Fred Halsted, the director of *L.A. Plays Itself* (1972), could easily lend itself to a mode of filmmaking that I seem to have abandoned.

3. *Tearoom* is comprised entirely of unaltered film footage shot in 1962 during a long-term sting operation by the Mansfield, Ohio, police department. In the opening shots, the cops establish the scene (a pair of underground public bathrooms in the city square), an introductory passage detailing the number of steps down into the men's room, the height and length of the compartment behind the mirror and sink, and a waving cameraman alerting us, the viewers, to his presence. After this, the remainder of *Tearoom* provides just under one hour of visual documentation (with slight camera movements and some thematic/category-based groupings, presumably edited by police personnel) of virtually everything that can possibly happen in a men's bathroom. First, it's just pissing and shitting, hand-washing and checking hair in the mirror. But before long, the footage shows various men, mostly

middle-aged or older, having sex: handjobs, blowjobs, anal sex, the works.

Jones provides a great deal of historical data and specific context on his website, and this supplementary material is a crucial component of *Tearoom*. Like so much of the residue from "objective" surveillance practices over the centuries, from Galton's police photos through the Rodney King video or camera footage from "smart bombs," what we see is never really self-evident. Without an understanding of the juridical framework that determined the film's hermeneutic purpose, certain other, more contemporary meanings threaten to eclipse *Tearoom's* status as an archival document. As Jones makes clear, the sting was successful. Based on the evidence collected on film, these men were convicted of sodomy, an offense that carried a mandatory sentence of at least one year in the Ohio state pen. The material, then, is about as close as one can get to an absolute artifact of the Foucauldian state surveillance apparatus. These representations destroyed lives. To lose sight of this is not only to misinterpret *Tearoom* but to lapse into unwitting complicity with the institutional homophobia that produced it, in particular its uncanny ability to cover its own foul tracks.

And yet, to deny the fleeting beauty and fragility of this footage, its afterlife as a bulwark against the forced erasure of human lives, would be equally perverse. With his exposure and preservation of this footage, Jones has turned it into something almost redemptive. These men—men who look like our fathers and grandfathers, uncles, and family friends—are, for the most part, gone. And this footage not only captures (against their will) the sole evidence of their desires, but for some of them it may be the only evidence of their entire existence. It documents their passage through a single time and place, their couplings with other men whose names they possibly didn't even know. They are preserved at a series of instants, not utopian, and certainly not absolutely before shame. (Their personal emotional circumstances we cannot know.) But these instants are captured before the Law could circumscribe their meaning. These moments contain ecstasy too. The Mansfield police produced this film because they, and the culture that authorized them, hated gay men, and perhaps held a particular hatred for those "unmarked," closeted gay men and bisexuals who walked among them, sat with them at O'Malley's Bar or next to them at a baseball game. Years later, Jones allows us to remember the circumstances of their entrapment. But he also allows them to come back to life, to be safe and even beautiful in a future where they are no longer under siege. Jones' *Tearoom* is a loving preservation of a kind of gay heaven.

4. **SCOPE:** Maybe you could say something about how you see your work as an extension of certain lineages (both separate and connected) of gay historical research and archival work and/or media excavation. This may speak to one of the things that makes your work so interesting, and often, as in a case like *Tearoom*, so hard to peg. You seem to work in "gray areas" or "between chairs," partly because you're looking at/for parts of history that have been either too suppressed or too quotidian to be seen. Do you find that this has made your work more legible to certain audiences, and less so to others? For instance, what would be your ideal screening situation for a work like *Tearoom*?

JONES: American culture at the present moment is so heavily censored that the only interesting place to be is on the margins. Distribution is spotty for unconventional work, and venues place me in a variety of ways. It is difficult to call what I do a career. Unfortunately, people hardly ever get to see my films more than once. Most fans of *Is It Really So Strange?* know nothing about my other work. Still, articles on *Finished* have appeared in both *Adult Video News* and *Artforum*. I don't think any other filmmaker can claim that. The ideal screening situations for *Tearoom* are completely impractical: police department locker rooms, courthouse rest rooms, and under Central Park in Mansfield, Ohio. But I also think *Tearoom* would be appropriately out of place in a big theatre, at a museum, or at an experimental film festival.

The historical amnesia and discontinuity that afflicts modern society in general is especially extreme across generations of gay men. I can best approach this question in the context of my current project. A number of obstacles present themselves right away. Fred Halsted and almost everyone who knew him intimately are dead; convincing the surviving relatives of a gay porn director to help commemorate his achievement is difficult to say the least; research in the archives requires poring over many sources that have not yet been indexed and have only recently been catalogued. I enjoy the research, since it has allowed me to get acquainted with the world of politically engaged, independent gay journalism. This range of publications has vanished, and I am not convinced that the internet can provide an adequate replacement for it. Halsted's contempt for authority and his tendency to make outrageous, albeit sincere, statements to interviewers gained him a position in that world, but in a later period, these provocations would have fallen on deaf ears. Halsted invented himself at a very special cultural moment. He came out of nowhere and took advantage of unprecedented opportunities for sexually explicit gay filmmaking. He made and lost

several small fortunes, and we can see in his experience a reflection of wider (and to a great extent, calamitous) trends in society.

5. This may as well be the point at which I temporarily halt the main objectives of this article, similar, I fear, to the way that a particularly obnoxious commercial interrupts a television show. The story begins several months ago when I received some unauthorized VHS tapes of William Jones' works from a mutual friend. This friend is one of a handful of generous souls who take the time, for reasons I'll never fully understand, to send me bootlegs of museum-circuit obscurities and second-hand critics' screeners. I ended up watching and writing web reviews of *Tearoom*, and two short works, *Film Montages (for Peter Roehr)* and *More British Sounds*. These reviews caught Mr. Jones' attention, in large part because the videos had not as yet screened publicly anywhere in the world. The jig was up. When all was said and done, Jones was quite cordial about this potentially embarrassing situation, despite the fact that amidst the other reviews was my singularly boneheaded first impression of v. o. Jones wasn't shy about letting me know that he thought my take on that film was really rather stupid. But perhaps because he intuited that my deep admiration for *Tearoom* would gradually create space in my thinking for the sly, covert maneuvers of his earlier pieces, and despite my detecting a hint of entirely justifiable wariness, Jones didn't write me off.

6. The two short videos mentioned in the above paragraph, *Film Montages (for Peter Roehr)* and *More British Sounds*, premiered at L.A. Filmforum this past December. The pieces are linked by their reliance on appropriated and reconfigured material, but Jones' compositional strategies for each piece diverge significantly. *More British Sounds* is the simpler of the two, a classic "mash-up" in true Freelance Hellraiser style. Jones conducts an uncivil union between two works which display surprisingly complementary fantasies of the political sphere while (on the surface, at least) emerging from very different modes of masculine address. The audio track is from *British Sounds (a.k.a. See You at Mao)* (1969), an out-of-circulation 16mm agitprop film by Godard's Dziga Vertov Group collective. The film, and the group's work in general, largely remains in ill-repute among critics and fans alike as a hecťoring, virtually unwatchable screed. (It's actually quite good, but hard to stomach, sort of what might have happened had the BFI commissioned Glauber Rocha to remake *Weekend* as a documentary.) The images are taken from the 1986 gay anglophile porn film *The British*

Are Coming. As with the Godard, this is another inspired selection by Jones. Either directly or obliquely, in works like *Finished* and *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography* (1998), Jones has commented on the relative lack of humour in most industrial gay porn, and he should know. (He edits the stuff for a living for Larry Flynt, which prompts me to think of Jones as an opposite number to Nathaniel Dorsky, both men having absorbed cinematic modernism to the core of their being but locating themselves quite differently with respect to that vocabulary.)

I've shown the Godard film to some of my classes, and Jones makes most extensive use of the sequence one of my students dubbed "the asshole speech," a show-stopping right-wing rant that just goes on and on, getting more and more outrageous. Jones' use of material from *The British Are Coming* emphasizes boot-licking and other labour-intensive acts of humiliation, and when combined with Godard's Marxist discussion of class antagonism, a fascinating frisson emerges. Sex looks like work instead of pleasure, and the fact is these porno guys are hard at work. Meanwhile, the right-wing condemnation of freedom and perversion is undercut rather than illustrated by the porn sequences. With this small yet elegant gesture, Jones cracks both film-texts open and reveals their contradictions. Pornography is ambivalent, its industrialized sex-utopias providing undeniable pleasures in spite of what Adorno (just prior to clutching his chest and fainting) would have called their "total administration." By the same token, we can now not only see the obvious joy that Godard, Jean-Pierre Gorin, and their collective took in crafting the "asshole speech" and its histrionics (which, as Jones points out, aren't so funny today). Jones also allows us to witness the stern, impermeable masculinity of a certain stripe of '60s radicalism (the rock and roll Maoists) as a kind of denial not just of femininity—this critique has been leveled before and rightly so; just watch *Letter to Jane*—but as a barely disguised circuit-breaker against homosexual desire. In their book *Speaking about Godard*, Harun Farocki and Kaja Silverman trace anality as a master trope in Godard's cinema, but one that is always heterosexually inscribed. Against this, we could do well to consider Gorin's later interview statements that, even more than documenting a particular mode of political discourse of cinematic modernism, the Dziga Vertov Group films are the record of a love affair between two men. You don't need any of this to appreciate Jones' mash-up. But perhaps there's a reason why it fits together so perfectly.

7. SCOPE: Lots of contemporary works appropriate existing films, but *v. o.* and *More British Sounds* allude directly to video piracy, since these are works only available on the illegal tape trading circuit. Whether it's sex or art, do you think at this stage of Christian capitalism that almost anything worth pursuing involves breaking some law?

JONES: Yesterday I presented *More British Sounds*, *Film Montages (for Peter Roehr)*, and research about current projects to a seminar of grad students. The last topic we discussed was Boyd McDonald. He lived like a monk without concern for fame or career. He spent his time making anthologies of sex stories, if not actually having sex. Collecting and taxonomy and their transmutation into art are not mere sublimation. They are erotic activities. It's only when the person in question collects porn—as opposed to dishes or records—that most people take notice of that. McDonald was exemplary. Forsaking contemporary consumer culture to become a connoisseur of filth is an ideal for living.

I take exception to the legal slant of your question. The notion of piracy has been conflated with private, critical, and artistic uses of material under copyright. I don't see how trading copies of works with no domestic distribution is illegal. Corporate America has wielded the notion of intellectual property like some sort of religious dogma. The owners of the mass media have claimed exclusive rights to our minds, and according to them, it is not within our power to respond or comment. We should be asking how their authority became legitimate.

What I am saying relates to sex as well. The sort of men who would have carved glory holes in public restrooms years ago are now patiently waiting to see if they can get married. As far as I am concerned, if you have to ask permission, it isn't worth doing.

8. SCOPE: Your two recent short works, *More British Sounds* and *Film Montages (for Peter Roehr)* seem related to *v. o.* in terms of their construction from appropriated or pirated materials. But *Film Montages* is more in keeping with *v. o.*'s sense of remix-as-tribute. *More British Sounds*, in some ways, seems like a very direct critique of Godard. Could you elaborate on what you see as relationships and divergences between these two works?

JONES: For the body of work to which you refer, I decided to limit myself to films not distributed in the US, with the exception of a couple of gay porn films I found indispensable to the project. Like many people who care about movies, I have an extensive collection of VHS bootlegs. I wanted to put this collection to use before it became impossible for me to play the tapes. I also wanted to produce works that are una-

bashedly fetishistic, unauthorized or unofficial, even clandestine; these are attributes I find attractive in films I watch.

In the case of the Dziga Vertov Group films, I think it is extraordinary that anything by Godard, perhaps the most famous director in the world, would not be available in the country that prides itself on being the centre of the world. As Jean-Marie Straub once said in another context, "This society isn't worth a frog's fart."

I have a soft spot not only for *British Sounds* but also for *The British Are Coming*. I sometimes wonder which is the more radical film. I am amazed by Godard's inability to imagine homosexuality, at least in his films. (I can't speak about his personal life.) I don't know if this deficit makes him a bad radical. I was happy to see Juan Goytisolo in *Notre musique*; perhaps Godard is finally figuring some things out.

The collision of the soundtrack of *British Sounds* and the picture track of *The British Are Coming* has a curious effect. Scenes of class warfare get played out in a sexual arena, across different historical periods and cultures. Regrettably, the super-reactionary's discourse has lost its shock value since 1969, because his speech sounds like the pronouncements of the US administration since 2001. The phrase "magnificent sacrifice of men and money in defense of our freedom" suggests Iraq war apologia, and when I hear the line, "Let them starve, let them die," I can't help but think of global warming. *More British Sounds* is as much a comment on the unappetizing impasse of contemporary politics as it is a comment on Godard. It presents us with the pornographic imagination that capitalist development has brought us. In that sense, it is most closely related to *The Fall of Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography*.

SCOPE: *More British Sounds* actually harks back to *Finished* in unexpected ways. Over the course of your investigation into the life and death of Alain Lebeau/Alan Lambert, you discover what appears to be a radical Marxist politics (which seems to make the pin-up boy all the more alluring), only to learn that Lambert's worldview was crypto-apocalyptic and incoherent. In a way, you find the reverse in Godard—a somewhat more cogent political program but a disavowal of gay sexuality. Does *More British Sounds* in some way speak to the Godard you wish you had, or the one you'd like to make?

JONES: A flair for inventing provocative aphorisms shouldn't be confused with a cogent political program. I find the explicitly stated politics in Debord's films more convincing, but Godard's films are more interesting to look at. Their films have at least two things in common: wonderful plagiarized texts and lots of images of breasts. Unpredictable things hap-

pen when political thought gets embodied in movies. Powerful critiques of American society are found in John Ford's films of the '30s and Samuel Fuller's films of the '50s. And they were a couple of right-wingers!

9. *Film Montages (for Peter Roehr)* is a subtler work than *Sounds*, which is not to say it is necessarily a better one, although I personally find it richer across repeat viewings. It also destabilizes to the point of near head-on collision the interplay between pornography and analytical formalism that thrums energetically throughout so much of Jones' work. This 11-minute video is initially coyer than other pieces in the filmography, but eventually goes much further in terms of giving up the goods. Jones adapts a compositional structure from minimalist music, wherein a basic repetitive structure expands by intervals; each single shot repeats four times at first, then eventually six times and finally eight. These looping passages could best be described as interstitial segments from gay porn cinema of the '70s—some anonymous films, others better known, such as Joe Gage's *Handsome* (1980) and J. Clinton West's *Dreamer* (1975). Jones moves us from an opening sequence of absolute darkness, with only the piercing dance of freeway lights cutting into the night sky of the screen, through to an establishing shot of a Hess service station at night (a lonesome cousin to the glowing, almost metaphysical Sinclair station near the beginning of *Kiss Me Deadly*), into the most logical formal progression possible under the circumstances. We see the studded gleam of leather daddies in motion, moving against each other as desiring forms that consume both one another and all available light.

The repetitions allow us to observe small details of the comportment of a variety of gay bodies, the unique micro-gestures of forms of lust that, in their very recording, inscribe a kind of historical specificity. We see everything from pans up a lanky torso in bondage to a pair of nimble hands across leather enacting a kind of Bressonian exchange, along with moments excerpted from the sex scenes themselves. These segments, with kissing, groping, and slight repositioning, are the extractable dead time between the "real action," but Jones allows these transitional phrases (if we'll allow for a moment that cinema has a grammar) to exude awkwardness, tenderness, humour, and perhaps most importantly the momentary lapse in professional pornography's disciplinary grip on the performing body. The men in this section are between tasks, and so they do, for a fleeting second, adopt the relaxed demeanour of Bresson's models or Ozu's actors, intentionally distracted by a



mundane task. Jones' video pays explicit homage to Peter Roehr (1944-1968), a German experimental filmmaker and multimedia artist whose looping technique is adopted, from the sound of it, rather strictly here. (One of Roehr's films, a loop of naked men wrestling, suggested a queer trajectory Jones wonders whether Roehr's work might have taken had his career not been cut short by an untimely death.)

At the same time, *Film Montages* finds Jones entering into a specific by-way of avant-garde film and video, the motion study, one which has had a particularly fruitful engagement with porn. One obvious antecedent is Scott Stark's *NOEMA* (1998), although Stark's work is quite different on several counts. For one, he uses only contemporary hetero porn, so not only are the sexual politics half a world away (allowing Stark to play his piece for laughs, despite the rigour and intellectual seriousness of the piece); the relationship to cinema as a form of light and texture, and its uneasy translation into the glassy harshness of video, come to the fore in Jones' work much more significantly. With regard to the particular ways in which transitions and interstitial material form themselves, and can become objects for contemplation when removed from their original contexts ("the prison-house of narrative," at the risk of cheap modernist melodrama), Jones' film has a true sibling in Morgan Fisher's 2003 masterpiece (). Like *Film Montages*, () is composed of in-between snippets and passages, and as with the Jones film, Fisher's approach unleashes high-modernist pocket-aces from a sea of surrounding story-noise. But Fisher only gives us one glimpse of each individual shot.

This makes sense, since () is more about creating new, stronger articulations between unrelated images through montage. But Jones' repetitions, in this context, feel luxurious, seductive, like the hook of a slow jam that breaks the moment when the needle skips.

10. Aside from *All Male Mash Up* (2006), the last remaining Jones film I have yet to see, this move backwards arrives at v. o. As I stated above, I really didn't get v. o. at all the first time around, so much so that even though I've formed a very different and altogether more favourable opinion of Jones' gay porn/Euro-arthouse remix featurette, I remain hesitant to put all that much more stock in my current thoughts than in my initial ones. Upon first seeing v. o., it seemed to me that Jones was applying the soundtracks to a number of films by directors from the European canon and others who could safely be classified as criminally underrated masters to images from '70s auteur porn (especially the films of Joe Gage and Fred Halsted) that in no way needed "elevation" by association with Renoir, Oliveira, or Buñuel. Jones' closing credit sequence, which listed the porn titles low on the screen and the canonical ones high, threw me off. I missed the irony. Not only was Jones well aware of the critical rediscovery of the masters of classic gay porn; he was one of the artists spearheading it, much the same way Ken Jacobs and Ernie Gehr helped to rehabilitate the "primitive" cinema of the pre-Griffith era.

Upon second viewing, I realized I'd missed the boat. v. o. struck me as, above all else, a subjective

record of a unique viewing sensibility, an omnivorous cinephilia that, of course, acknowledged the historical and material distinctions between Joe Gage and Manoel de Oliveira, but refused to allow those distinctions to calcify in terms of an aesthetic of reception. The fugitive street-modernism of Halsted *had* to find a place of some kind alongside Raoul Ruiz and Aki Kaurismäki, on the video shelf and in our film-historical image bank. In fact, *v. o.* started to strike me as Jones' approximation (intended or not) of a Rivette film. The middle section in particular, featuring the long subway cruising between "Sucker" and "Fuckface" in "Clonetown," has all the secret-world atmospherics of the Rivettean universe, the frightening and liberating discovery of a hidden layer of life alongside or underneath the mundane. What's more, Jones made this universe all by himself, out of "pirated" material. That is, the underground world of bootleg tape trading and gray-market rental allowed for the very existence of *v. o.*, a film loosely chronicling the pleasures of the gay urban underworld. Conceptually, *v. o.* now seemed like the ideal object.

11. **SCOPE:** *v. o.* is, I think, your toughest work, but it seems like a kind of passkey to your aesthetic. Sound/image relationships form, come together and fall apart, and it's obvious that you put them together, that we're not really getting the "version originale," or the "voix originale." But as with *Massillon, Finished*, and a number of your other works, a certain sense emerges that, if you really poke at it, it always threatens to dissipate. The best way I can think to put this is, outwardly your work implies prose, but in structure it tends to function more like poetry.

JONES: I probably wouldn't have made this assertion myself—poetic is a word I rarely use—but I don't disagree with it, and I have no objection if you expand on it.

12. Yes, poetic. Not in the grandiloquent manner of the Romantics (who themselves were, in a sense, recuperated, brought back down to earth, by the cinema of Stan Brakhage). Perhaps more in the sense of the para-academic semio-poets, people like Bruce Andrews or Robert Glück. "Poetry" meaning that in Jones' newest work, pornography, which like most mass culture abides by a mandate of frictionless transmission of a specific and somewhat predictable message (someone fucking someone else), is broken open. Its horizontal language is rearranged, revealing new possibilities for vertical meanings, compressed energies, interstitial and even illicit desires. Poetry, and poetry now, because right now, Jesus, consumption, heteronormativity, and war without end—these comprise the prose of the world. 📺