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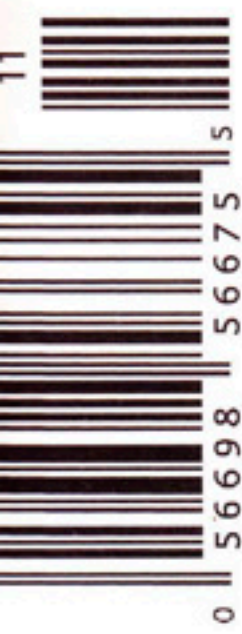
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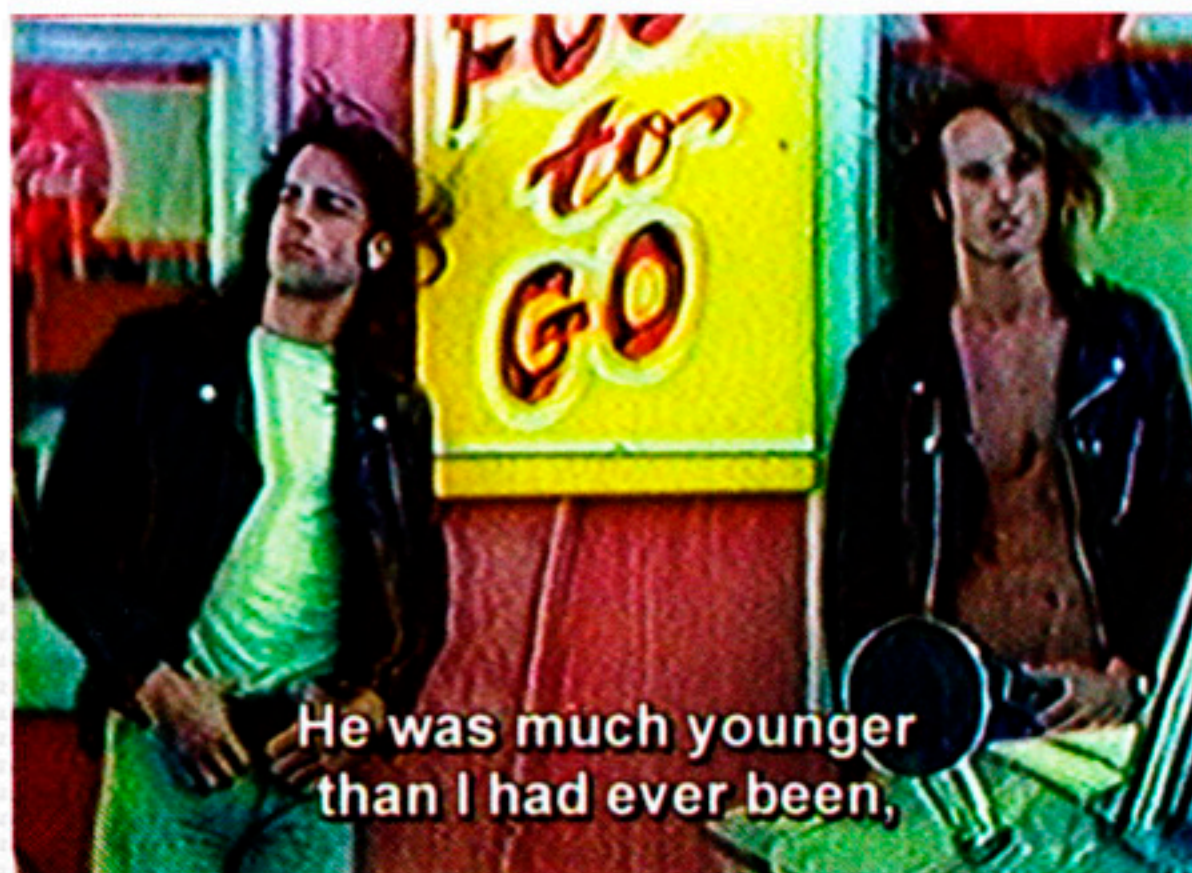
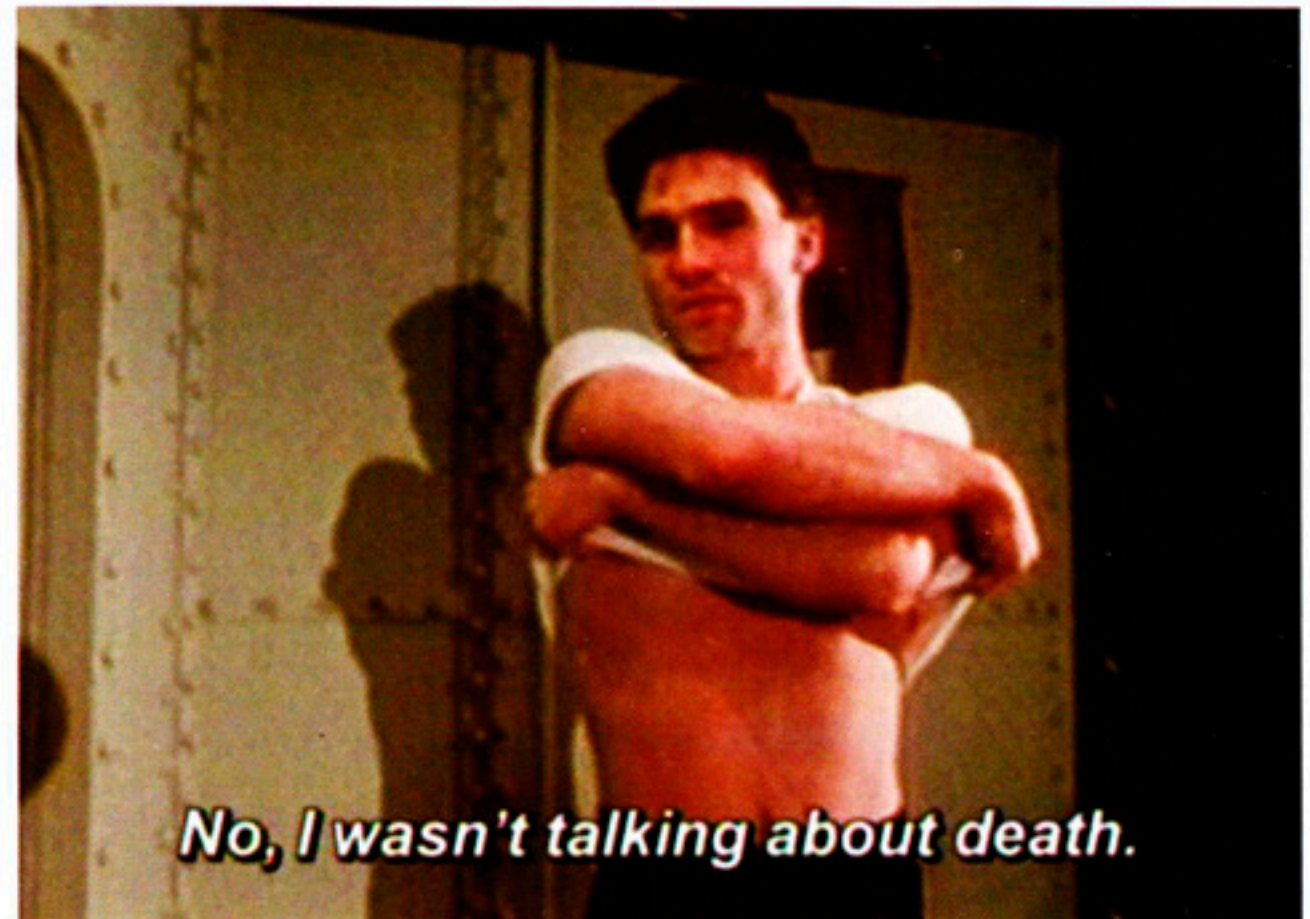


American Cinematheque, Los Angeles CA December 10, 2006

Assembled from “non-pornographic” (read: fuck-less) sequences from gay male porn of the 1970s and ’80s by legendary directors like Tom de Simone, Fred Halstead, and Joe Gage, *V.O.* (2006)—the latest work of avant-garde documentary filmmaker William Jones—continues the appraisal of pornography as text. In Jones’s earlier *Finished* (1997), his autobiography-tribute to porn star Alain Lebeau/Alan Lambert, and *The Communism as Seen in Gay Pornography* (1998), a portrait of capitalism’s creep into Eastern Europe. By cutting and assembling the moments from between the porn clips (i.e., dialogue, inserts, reactions shots, etc.), Jones demonstrated that sex can be a distraction from what is interesting (and instructive) about porn: namely, how the bodies and as venerable documents of queer history—as records not only of bodies wanted and able, but also of the politics and culture surrounding their coupling.

However, *V.O.* (cine-slang for “voiceover”) marks a departure for the artist, if only for the reason that his sonorous first-person narrations, which have fuelled his previous films, are nowhere to be heard. Ironically, the absence of Jones’s voice in *V.O.* serves to amplify his presence, for he has cleverly—*wickedly*—borrowed a new tongue with which to speak of porn, sex, politics, and desire: that of cinema itself. Now, atop appropriated wide shots of toned bodies in tight white briefs, closeups of men both mustachioed and baby-faced, and inserts of hands caressing cocks under jeans, Jones lays in sound, dialogue, and song lifted from films by directors like Jean Renoir, Luis Buñuel, Guy Debord, and Werner Schroeter, in order to articulate (and translate) what is happening onscreen. In effect, Jones “re-scripts” the porn clips, rewriting their purpose, and rethinking the relationship of porn to cinema with a capital C.

V.O. is indeed a compelling argument for canonizing smut-peddlers (!), and the dissonance of Jones’s source materials makes for pairings so rich and resonant that an index would serve the film better than a quickie review. For example, Jones scores a sequence of strung-together reaction shots with a voice that informs us, “What’s at stake is bound to come to mind. Complete the space by means of reverse shots.... The neighborhood is a tissue of looks.” Even disregarding the gays/gaze pun, one cannot ignore that the conversation Jones has instigated is not limited to the action onscreen. Placed alongside closeups of



doe-eyed men, the “neighborhood” seems more a state of mind, and the space it occupies, quantifiable by a camera—by *an act of looking*. Film not only records desire, it *is* desire, a fact which we may have understood before, but now we can see played out in the open.

For all of its fierce intelligence and acute criticality, Jones’s film is also a wistful and romantic tribute to a time when the codes of gay male desire were as yet unplagued. Ghosts are always more clearly visible in hindsight, and because the footage which makes up *V.O.* predates other acronyms that would soon make the scene—HIV, AIDS, NEA—one cannot help but think of the film as a kind of electric haunting. It is here that Jones invokes Saint Genet to be our guide from the other side by laying in an eerily prophetic sound bite. Over a scene starring bootlicking “navy men,” an interviewer asks Genet if love, for him, began with a boy. “Vous avez dit *l’amour*?” asks Genet, “J’ai entendu *la mort*.” (“You said *love*? I heard *death*.”) Death may be ever-present—stowed inside love, a body, a voice—but when, at the end of *V.O.*, Genet’s voice returns to tell the viewer that “the greatness of art begins to appear only at the end of life,” one is reminded that film is not a simple record of the living. It is also—if only for a few flickering moments—a medium of resurrection.