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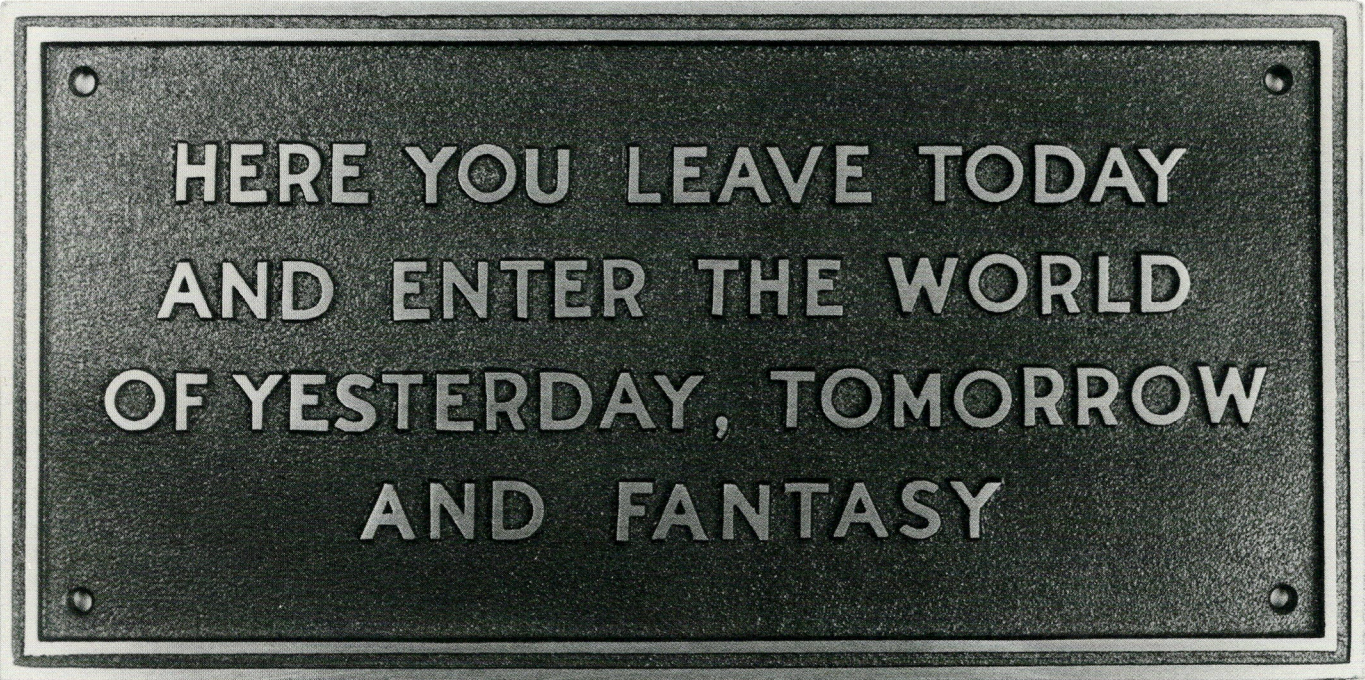
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# Art issues.



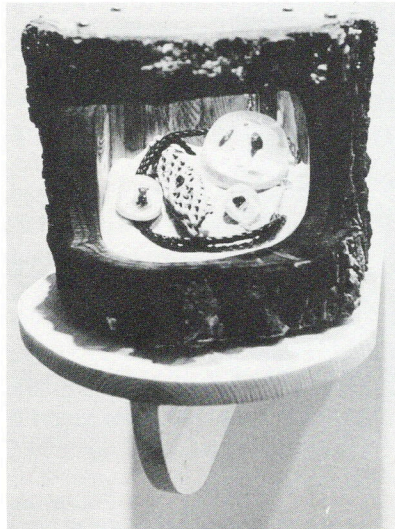
HERE YOU LEAVE TODAY  
AND ENTER THE WORLD  
OF YESTERDAY, TOMORROW  
AND FANTASY

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## Whose Nature?



Bruno Cuomo  
*Sleeping Beauty*

"We constructed 'Against Nature' along personal lines. Who are we? We're gay male artists obsessed with the ways in which sexual desire informs, distances and empowers the recent history of art made by guys like us." So begins the introduction to the exhibition "Against Nature: A Show by Homosexual Men," curated by Dennis Cooper and Richard Hawkins and installed at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions. Two words in the above passage are crucial to an understanding of the work and to the organization of the show itself: "Against" and "Desire." The title is taken from J.K. Huysmans' nineteenth-century novel, *A Rebours*, which has been alternately translated as "Against Nature" and "Against the Grain." Briefly outlined, in the novel, the character Duc Jean des Esseintes seeks to replace the experience of nature with the artificial: "Yes, there is no denying it, she [Nature] is in her dotage and has long ago exhausted the simple-minded admiration of the true artist; the time is undoubtedly come when her productions must be superseded by art." As Hawkins states in his catalogue essay: "Inherent in artificiality is the confession of a lack of faith or a necessary avoidance of nature, and an attempt to construct a way of working that incorporates that admission." Within the context of this show, however, that "admission" becomes a direct attempt on the part of homosexual artists to redefine the term "natural" through their art (as well as through their sexual identities) as a social rather than organic condition. By doing so, they aim to place themselves conspicuously outside of and "against" existing media images of that nature, and secondarily, identify a specific art practice by and about homosexuals and homosexuality.

Three things are troubling in this: (1) the assumption of the very existence of a "homosexual" art or aesthetic sensibility;<sup>1</sup> (2) the self-imposed "ghettoization" of that artistic practice, as distinct from other artistic practices, by its explicit labeling; and (3) the exclusion of art by homosexual men (and lesbians, by association) which does not directly address the issue of sexual difference. The phrase "guys like us" implies a "them," acknowledging and empowering structures of control and repression. By its very premise, the show maintains the differences imposed on homosexuality both internally and externally.

Although it was not Cooper's or Hawkins' primary intention to produce an "AIDS" show, much of the response to the show and these issues has attempted to politicize the arguments by a reading of this work through the media(ted) relationship between homosexuality and AIDS. It is important to understand that AIDS informs all the work in the show, as well as most any work created today that deals with any form of sexuality. (Whether or not an artist intends it, response to work which includes representations of sexuality is necessarily linked, in the audience's mind, with AIDS, as may not have been the case just three or four years ago.) For example, Jan Breslauer in the *L.A. Weekly* (January 20, 1989) implies the show's failure was a refusal to address the issue of AIDS directly. She accuses Cooper and Hawkins of having "*chosen* apoliticality," and suggests that "the task instead should have been to reformulate the artistic agenda itself." She goes on to state: "Art that is truly concerned with gender and sexuality cannot be apolitical. It must enable those concerned to resist the roles and methods that have imprisoned them in the past by resisting artistic traps. In fact...*all* art must do this if it's to remain authentic." The flaw in this thinking, outside of the problematic reference to "authenticity," is that Breslauer wants to replace one kind of agenda (the social mainstream's historical and recent denial of homosexuality as a valid form of lifestyle or expression—AIDS has threatened to repeat the discrimination of the McCarthy era) with another: a prescribed, programmed and exclusive subject to be addressed by a specific group. Implicit within this argument is the belief that not only are homosexual artists required to produce work that addresses homosexual-

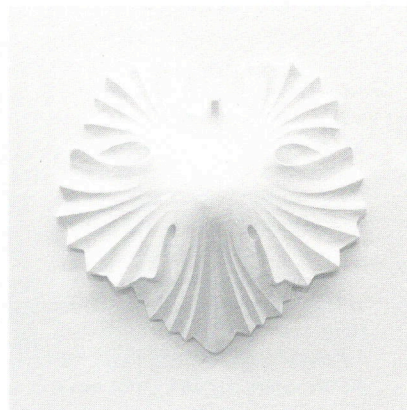
ity, but it further demands that *that* work ought to address homosexuality's relationship to AIDS. Such aesthetic calls to arms as this, and within Tim Miller's *Manifesto* (part of the "Crimes Against Nature" reading at Beyond Baroque which accompanied the exhibition), sacrifice the individual to a collective cause, maintaining and exploiting the very label "homosexual." It is important that artmaking retain its ability to remain the outlaw—like the homosexual of the past—to scream and refuse to adhere to such demands. We ought to respond to Breslauer's and Miller's demands by acknowledging that it is not specifically an art issue to demand responsible action by the government and certain segments of the medical and scientific communities, but a very human and real survivalist response demanded of every individual, exclusive of their relationship to art production or sexual orientation.

The notion of "desire" cited in the introduction perhaps provides for a more specific response. One man desiring the company of another man requires an overthrow of convention. By reading the work through different interpretations of that desire, instead of as a reactionary or political move, we can begin to individuate, rather than generalize, gay sexuality and its representations. Thus, there is desire through the specific memory of an act: Nayland Blake's stained and systematically tagged handkerchiefs entitled *After Veronica* (1987), reminiscent of previous and poetic moments of ecstasy, or his *Burnt Sade* (1988), seeking to memorialize a piece of censored sexual literature in the form of a reliquary. There is also desire through longing and loss: Mike Glass's *Untitled* (1988), three Ekta-color prints with accompanying text recounting an infatuation with, and unrequited love of, a beautiful, presumably straight, boy. Or Stachy Kybarras's video of friendship and loss by AIDS entitled *Danny* (1987), in which the character of Danny, after breaking with his desolate Pittsburgh past and relocating in Florida, is forced to return to his parents' livingroom couch because of the medical establishment's inadequate medical care, where he is nursed by his mother and tolerated by his father.

There is desire through the gaze: Marc Romano's *Hydrocal Stucco Work* (1988), four different cast "fig leaf" decorative wall mounts, combining in one gesture the human body, nature and architecture. Unlike other representations of genital modesty in art history, this manifestation is not prudently flat but gently bulging—what is hidden is erotically revealed. There is desire through underlying codes of language: Doug Ischar's *Household Misappropriation: Camouflage So Good One Is Shot At By Other Hunters* (1988), a photo-and-text installation combining (homo)erotic images of WWII men-at-play-and-war postcards with medical, pseudo-psychiatric and semiotic definitions of homosexuality, passages lifted from gay romance novellas, and large photographs of a slightly overweight man performing banal household chores. Or Larry Johnson's color photograph of text, *Untitled (The friends you keep and the books you read)* (1988), which muses on the fact that it is not who you are that counts in this world, but the associations you have, and the literature you consume, thereby reducing your needs to a prescribed choice of lifestyle.

There is desire expressed through the desire for commodity: Bruno Cuomo's boutique presentation of paperweights and bolo ties entitled *Sleeping Beauty* (1988). HIV+ blood and semen are encased in resin and lovingly yet dangerously wrapped around one another, alluding to the rattlesnake reference of the title, not to mention the obvious connection between desire and death. And there are the opposing forces of the desire for control and the desire for excess: the former performed by David Bussel's *Untitled (Safe/Risky)* (1988), proclaiming black-and-white sex "safe," full-color sex "risky;" the latter by Carter Potter's endlessly self-reflective glory-hole stall, *Basic Plumbing* (1986), reminiscent of the Los Angeles sex club of the same name, here presented with a clear plastic wall and mirror on the other side—the narcissistic search for one's double satisfied.

And finally there is the work which *does* directly address homosexuality's relationship to AIDS. Michael Tidmus's *Health and Morality: A Desultory*



Marc Romano  
*Stucco Work*

*Discourse* (1988), a five-part computer program organizing various newspaper quotes into an overview of the media's response to AIDS, provides proof of its responsibility in prolonging the crisis through misinformation and market manipulation.<sup>2</sup> Isaac Julian's videotape *This is NOT an AIDS Advertisement* (1987) superimposes the word "NOT" over images of water, trees and male couples, and instructs the viewer to "Feel no guilt in your desire." Both these works attempt to separate sexuality from the AIDS crisis: Tidmus through a recollection and representation of "public" opinion, and Julian by emphatically refusing to allow the individual to be made responsible for the crisis. The real issue of homosexuality's relationship to loss and illness is better delineated by Richard Hawkins when he writes that the connection is a doubling: "(1) historically (the idea that homos are sick, perverts, miscreants, crimes against nature) and (2) the very present physical one of AIDS, which has played with our identity, the way we see ourselves and others see us."

We have no use for the building of new conventions and requirements. "Against Nature," despite the sincere efforts of Cooper and Hawkins, would have been better with the inclusion of work dealing with broader issues of (homo)sexuality, and the show for the most part suffered in part by its specificity, its "one-dimensional" track, for the work was forced to be read in relation to the show's thesis. But that is not the point. The point is, exclusive exhibitions like this one—in the manner of many feminist projects in the nineteen-sixties and seventies—may release issues into larger contexts, thus allowing the differences implicit in the work both to maintain their specificity and reveal their commonality. For in the final analysis, this show points to the impossibility of defining—visually or linguistically—difference itself (homosexuality)—because the show relies internally upon the concept of sameness, "guys like us." ■

<sup>1</sup> It must be mentioned that, in spite of the fact that homosexuality is and has been more accepted by the art community than by the general public, the representation of sexuality within artmaking has for the most part been heterosexual. Only recently have images such as Charles Demuth's watercolors of men at the baths been shown and published by the Whitney Museum. And David Hockney has unfortunately been given and has taken the role of the acceptable "other" with his quaint images of domestic bliss. Neither these two examples, nor past representations of homosexuality in, for example, Grecian vase painting or erotic monoplates, seem to establish a position other than marginal footnotes to art history. Rather than trying to recontextualize or "rewrite" past histories, one could learn from certain contemporary images, like Bruce Nauman's neon sculpture *Sex and Death by Murder and Suicide* (1985), which investigate the implicit relationships of power and sexuality in a more complex and subversive way.

<sup>2</sup> Although anyone responsible enough to be informed on the issues will find the text familiar, this presentation serves to contextualize other references, such as those to Nazism or other historical "plagues." See also Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1988).



**Doug Ischar**  
**Household Misappropriation: Camouflage So Good**  
**One Is Shot At By Other Hunters**