AIDS activists produced an array of campaigning imagery that was designed to educate and politicise in response to the homophobic representations of AIDS. In so doing, a very specific identity of the male homosexual was created. This paper explores the way in which the more metaphoric contemplations of the Melbourne artist Mathew Jones were judged on the basis of their contribution to this project and found wanting. I argue that the reception of Jones’s artistic work was inevitably mediated through a discourse of activism and, as a result, the representational possibilities for this gay artist were severely narrowed.
When Mathew Jones exhibited the work *silence = death* (1991) at Gertrude Street Gallery in Melbourne, one reviewer proposed that the government support that the exhibition had received would have been better spent on medical research. This response was indicative of a more general tendency to judge the work according to the effectiveness of its contribution to the activist and education campaigns around HIV/AIDS. Jones’s work, *Call Now* (1993), displayed in the Access Gallery at the National Gallery of Victoria, had the opposite problem. This work was considered too effective. The gallery and the artist both sought legal advice as to whether the text in the work could constitute an offence: one of inciting its audience to act in a manner contrary to the law. These responses refused both works a place within the metaphoric realm that art in the space of the gallery is more usually permitted to inhabit.

This outcome demands a close examination of the events that surrounded the exhibition of these two works. In seeking an explanation for such reductive responses to the works, I argue that this reaction is indicative of a fundamental dilemma faced by those whose artistic output engages with a dominant pre-existing symbolic field. The difficulty for Mathew Jones was that his work was not only a response to, but also an attempt to enlarge on, that symbolic field. His work engaged with the forms of identity being constructed in the course of the radical activism that emerged in the gay community in the late 1980s and 1990s. That activism was in turn an inevitable and necessary response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Although not all sections of the gay community took to the streets, the discourse of activism produced a gay identity conceived as one of active citizenship: the male homosexual engaged in a political struggle side by side with others in the gay community. As a result, representational possibilities for individual gay artists were narrowed since the reception of their work was inevitably mediated through this discourse of activism. This restrictive code of meaning and narrow aesthetic licence was imposed on artists in the gay community irrespective of whether they intended their work to engage directly with issues of HIV/AIDS or to adopt an activist stance.

In 1987, the New York–based AIDS activist and theorist Douglas Crimp edited a special issue of the journal *October* that responded to AIDS from the perspective of art practice, theory and activism. He proposed the necessity of an activist art practice and sought to demonstrate ‘that there was a critical, theoretical, activist alternative
to the personal, elegiac expressions that appeared to dominate the art-world response to AIDS. In Australia the influence of Douglas Crimp could be seen eighteen months later in the rationale for ‘Imaging AIDS’, a project that combined the exhibition of visual art with the publication of a collection of essays and a separate exhibition of material generated by HIV/AIDS information and education campaigns. The exhibition was held in 1989 at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art and the Linden Gallery in conjunction with the Midsumma Gay and Lesbian Festival. The multiple aims of the project adopted Crimp’s framework with a particular emphasis on the encouragement of ‘a socially and politically engaged arts practice’ and the demonstration of the ‘positive responses to HIV/AIDS’ by the gay community.

The publication did, however, contain some cautionary words about the limitations of representations that demonstrated ‘positive responses’. In a catalogue essay, Mark Peel argued that ‘less direct self-representations’ were needed to ensure that challenges to structures of power were maintained. This tension between the direct and authoritative communications required of education and activist campaigns and more metaphoric forms of representation shadowed the very public assertions of identity associated with AIDS activism. The complex issues raised received little critical engagement. With the benefit of hindsight, in 2002 Douglas Crimp acknowledged that he could have been more receptive to these ideas. In the collection of his writings on AIDS, Melancholia and Moralism, he indicated that there was one change that he would most have wanted to make to these works and that was to have engaged more productively with the critique of the literalness of the slogan ‘silence = death’ which had become the rallying point of AIDS activism. This critique argued that the slogan’s statement of equivalence operated within the same discursive framework as homophobia. It is the contradictions between the literalness of activism and the metaphors of art that provide the backdrop for my examination of Mathew Jones’s work, for while his activist identity engaged in challenging the structures of power, his artistic work sought to challenge the power of discourse itself.

Mathew Jones exhibited the work Tableaux (1988) in the ‘Imaging AIDS’ exhibition. This consisted of a photograph of a sculptured male body with a grid imposed over the torso. The grid had a number of connotations: GRID being the first acronym of the epidemic (standing for ‘gay related immune deficiency’), later renamed AIDS or ‘acquired immune deficiency
syndrome’ in acknowledgement of its manifestations beyond the gay community. It might equally have invoked Foucault’s ‘grid of intelligibility of the social order’ that he used to describe the functioning of power, emerging not from one source but from everywhere.¹⁶ For as I demonstrate, the discursive constraints on expression were enforced both from outside and from within the gay community. Arising from his own engagement with identity politics, speaking into a discourse of HIV/AIDS activism and attempting to escape the constraints of both, Jones’s art projects over the next few years would confront all these meanings and more.

**SILENCE = DEATH (1991)**
The symbolic nature of the struggle against HIV/AIDS has been widely documented.⁷ The phrase ‘silence = death’ was at the centre of AIDS activism in the 1980s and 1990s. It emerged from the gay community and achieved art status when it appeared in an installation entitled ‘Let the record show’ in the window of New York’s New Museum in 1987. Its message was then adopted as an organising rationale and, together with a pink triangle, it rapidly became the logo of ACT UP, the activist organisation that formed in New York and whose strategies were adopted across western population centres. ACT UP and Gran Fury, a core of visual activists within ACT UP, exploited the power of representation in relation to a disease that could not be seen, and which was initially concentrated within a group that was itself struggling to attain visibility.
Wresting control of the representation of the disease through the imagery of AIDS activism was a necessary strategy when the metaphors of AIDS were so frequently homophobic. At the same time, critiques of this strategy were emerging. Initiated by Lee Edelman in 1989, this critique focused on the literalness of the motto ‘silence = death’, its indexical relationship with AIDS activism and the frequent conflation of AIDS with the identity of the ‘homosexual’ of the period. Edelman argued that the necessity to engage in the real politics of HIV/AIDS, and the claims of legitimacy and authority that this required, depended profoundly upon the ability ‘to speak literally’ and that this could in itself reinforce the discursive conditions of homophobia. His analysis was offered tentatively, for as a gay man Edelman questioned the usefulness of his own inquiries, concerned as to whether it was appropriate to engage in ‘intellectual arabesques’ in relation to the horrors being experienced by his own community.

The response to Mathew Jones’s 1991 exhibition silence = death at Gertrude Street Gallery suggested that Edelman’s concerns as to how any intellectual criticism of the cornerstone of AIDS activism might be received were well founded. As a member of the Melbourne-based ACT UP group—one of many formed in major metropolitan centres that adopted the name and direct-action techniques of their New York counterpart—Mathew Jones took a critical interest in issues of representation and identity. His work was not so much an expression of a gay identity as a product of his experiences of ‘being’ a gay man at this time; for the identity that Jones explored in his work was not an essentialised or stable identity but one that was produced through lived experience. Nor did his work function solely as a chronicle of the times: that would presume too passive a role. As we shall see, his art carried considerable agency.

The silence = death work became the focus of an ongoing exchange in Australian art magazines and journals over the next two years. The number and content of these articles demonstrated the investment that had been made in the representation of homosexuality and the expectation that a gay artist should ‘speak out’ about AIDS. Mathew Jones described silence = death as his refusal to speak. This he conveyed by arranging prepared but otherwise blank canvases around the gallery, some facing outwards, others towards the wall. A number of canvases took on a sculptural quality, bulging with wadding. The blank space of the canvas was a deliberately empty space, intended as a provocation for
the viewer: ‘this silence, or gap of meaninglessness that people rush to fill up ... a place for me and other gay men—to fill up, or write in, or to keep empty’.13

The silence of the canvases contrasted with the remaining elements of the exhibition. Around the room ran a series of plaques containing the equivalences: homosexuality = aids; silence = death; discourse = defense; defense = disease; disease = discourse. A photographic essay, entitled ‘silence = death, or the lifecycle of the contemporary homosexual, actual photos by Mathew Jones’, accompanied the work. These photos appeared to parody the life stages of the contemporary homosexual. The sequence commenced with the discovery in a newspaper that ‘homosexuality = AIDS’, a period of AIDS activism in the shadow of the United States flag followed ultimately by a death under a sea of AIDS-related publications, self-help books and medical texts. The statement, ‘we rally to the slogan because they have forced us to, but keep the silence as a place where we refuse to use their terms’, appeared at the end of the photographs.

Jones soon found it necessary to elaborate on his intentions and to speak about the thoughts and analysis that underpinned his refusal to speak in the work itself. He explained that: ‘the exhibition takes issue with the AIDS activist slogan silence = death ... this pressure to ‘speak out’ often forces us (gay men and lesbians) to implement discourses which are ultimately homophobic, to become involved in a game where the rules are set by others.’14

The use of the word ‘game’ attracted further complaint when it was read as a reference to the activities of ACT UP.15 But the ‘game’ and its ‘rules’ were more likely references to language and the inevitable constraints that it presents. The work was clearly influenced by Edelman’s article and this provided the equations that encircled the space. Edelman used these equations to argue that the logic achieved through translating differences into statements of equivalence and scientific inevitability can just as readily be employed in a homophobic cause as an antihomophobic cause such as ‘Gay Rights = AIDS’.16

Douglas Crimp’s criticism of the art world’s response to HIV/AIDS as being ‘elegiac’ and overly concerned with the individual stories of AIDS ‘victims’ encouraged an opposition between the personal, individual stories of AIDS and what he regarded as an appropriate collective or activist response. It also had the effect of dismissing individual explorations of identity that differed from the collective
expressions of identity enacted through campaigning work. The literalness of the art that spoke the truth about AIDS denied a voice to art that sought to explore and complicate reality. This was the complex terrain that Jones’s work attempted to negotiate and against which it was judged. I do not wish to suggest that the responses to silence = death were particularly naïve or ignorant, but rather that they provide evidence of the almost impossible restrictions on speaking positions for gay men at this time and the equally impossible constraints on the reception of the work.

In a review in a Melbourne daily newspaper, the exhibition was described as ‘obscure and meaningless’, and criticised for its failure to supply information about AIDS and its lack of any empathy with the ‘tragic victims of AIDS’. The review concluded that ‘surely the funds would have been better spent on medical research’. In other words, the reviewer had required of Jones’s work that it elegise and educate and activate on AIDS. The work was judged as a contribution to AIDS activism and found wanting. However, the photographic essay explicitly stated that it was the ‘life of the contemporary homosexual’. The headline ‘installation focuses on the life of the AIDS victim’ implied that the subject matter of the exhibition was the story of an AIDS victim—and if it wasn’t, then it should have been. While this was perhaps the most extreme example of the reception to the exhibition being over-determined, it was not the only response that required Jones’s work to speak within the prevailing discourse of HIV/AIDS activism.

After the Gertrude Street show, the silence = death exhibition travelled to the Institute of Modern Art, Brisbane, where it again functioned as a provocation. In a paper presented at a forum accompanying the exhibition, David Phillips chose to invoke Simon Watney’s claim that ‘strategy is everything’ in the politics of representation of AIDS. In applying this test to Jones’s work, however, Phillips too had required of Jones that his work function as a response to AIDS. The work was in fact more concerned with the impact of AIDS and AIDS activism on identity construction. This constraint, together with the demand that Jones’s work eschew a private response and adopt a collective intervention, once more imposed Crimp’s activist framework on all artistic production. In these terms, the work’s failure to take a literal position was, according to Phillips, a strategic error, for it enabled the terms of homophobia to return and the blank paintings to be read once more in metaphorical terms. It was certainly the case that the metaphors of AIDS were
extremely difficult to dislodge, with some viewers reading the blank canvases as representing conventional tropes of illness in the form of hospital beds, stretchers and massage tables.\textsuperscript{20}

The insistence on the literal went hand in hand with the form that representations of identity could take. Douglas Crimp made the observation that while queer theories attempted to destabilise and de-essentialise sexual identity, it seemed that when lesbian and gay rights are under threat and lives were ‘at stake’ activists needed ‘to insist on stable and essentialist sexual identities’.\textsuperscript{21} In other words, in the face of the AIDS epidemic the only option was to adopt a form of strategic essentialism. This essentialism required that one spoke in truths, employed literalness and relied on stable identities: that one engaged in what Edelman described as the discourse of ‘facts and figures’.\textsuperscript{22}

Yet an activism that relied on the notion of stable and fixed identities faced the danger of reinforcing homophobic understandings of identity. The rhetorical form of the slogan ‘silence = death’, a statement of equivalence, is easily transposed into homosexuality = AIDS. Equating homosexuality with AIDS was indeed not uncommon and was not restricted to the hysteria of bigots. In the previous year, Mathew Jones had exhibited photograph installations in ‘Australian Perspecta 1991’ at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. These photographs were of men taken at ACT UP rallies and demonstrations with the background removed, blown up so as to remove any signifiers of location or identity. The work was shown as a contemplative piece in which Jones posed the question: ‘what makes this a picture of a gay man?’ Yet one review of the exhibition referred to the work as depictions of men with AIDS.\textsuperscript{23}

David Phillips posed the question: ‘can gays represent themselves from a place outside of these dominant discourses?’\textsuperscript{24} He concluded that this was not possible, and the responses to silence = death would suggest that this was indeed the case. For silence = death spoke, if indeed it spoke at all, of the impossibility of a self that was not a product of the external constraints imposed by the reality of HIV/AIDS. That this impossibility was reinforced by the critical reception of the work further demonstrated the weighty test of active citizenship imposed on all homosexual expressions of the period. This might be understood as an instance of Foucault’s grid of power, as even those who were familiar with Jones’s intentions sought to police the meaning of his work.
As we have seen, criticism of Jones’s work *silence = death* focused on its failure to make a literal intervention: one that took a position in relation to the issues of HIV/AIDS. To remove any possibility of ambiguity it was suggested that the available space be filled with information or a visual counterpoint to the then prevailing images of people with HIV/AIDS. In the case of *Call Now*, the very possibility that audiences would make a literal reading of the work caused difficulties for the artist and denied Jones the opportunity to explore his ambiguous responses to a very public event.

*Call Now* appeared in the ‘Dislocations’ show at the Access Gallery at the National Gallery of Victoria during the Midsumma Gay and Lesbian Festival of 1993. The curatorial intention had been to present the body as the ‘site of conflict’. In the catalogue essay this conflict was described as inherent in the identification with patriarchal power that homosexual men are presumed to have through their visibility as men, but at the same time their invisibility, and powerlessness, as homosexual bodies.

These contradictions were brought to the fore in the circumstances that provided a context for Mathew Jones’s work *Call Now*. In May 1992, a jury had acquitted Robert Murley of the brutal murder of Joe Godfrey. Murley successfully argued that he had been provoked and, in stabbing Godfrey repeatedly, had acted in self-defence: he claimed that the sixty-five-year-old Godfrey had made a sexual advance towards him. His defence was ‘homosexual panic’: that he had a particularly hostile attitude to gay men arising in part from the fact that he was often regarded as one. The trial was covered at length in the gay press and elsewhere, and the ‘not guilty’ decision prompted much debate and protest.

Jones had already interrogated the circumstances of this trial in a work at the Centre for Contemporary Photography, *Here’s looking at you kid*, and in a publication that accompanied the exhibition. In this article, Jones explored the way that the trial had played a part in constructing a gay identity, for there was actually very little evidence that Godfrey was gay or, as Jones wrote, ‘there’s just as much evidence that Murley was as gay as Godfrey’. And while Murley’s homophobia was acknowledged as pathological, it was somehow normalised in the course of the trial. The judge’s comments that Murley’s facial features were such that it was quite understandable that people might regard him as a homosexual seemed to convey that Murley’s reaction to this
‘mistaken identity’ was equally understandable. As a result, Mathew Jones had experienced ‘Joe Godfrey’s death and also the trial, the press coverage and the activist response as all profoundly constitutive of my identity as a gay man’.  

Some months later, when Mathew Jones became aware of the possibility of a personal encounter with Murley, this sense of identity, formed through political action during the trial and collective resistance to homophobia, ‘collapsed’. Jones had been researching the case by reading the court transcripts during his lunch break from his job in a bookstore. One afternoon, back at work, he was searching through the telephone directory, a task required when he had to contact customers to advise them that an order had arrived. The name he located appeared in the directory right alongside that of Murley—the defendant in the homosexual panic case. This provoked a strange panic of its own for Jones—what does one do?

The work that Jones exhibited in the ‘Dislocations’ exhibition attempted to explore his own crisis of identity that the possibility of this confrontation had provoked: a panic created by the possibility that he might actually be able to talk to Murley’s parents or Murley himself. He realised that no matter how that conversation had gone it would have inevitably disturbed his existing perceptions of the trial, the man and Jones’s own gay identity that was constructed through this instance of homophobia.

The work played into the visual tropes of an activist art statement—a graphic image with text that consisted of the name Robert Boyce Murley, an address and telephone number and the words ‘call now’. The work itself had a very specific resonance of the 1990 Donald Moffett work that read: ‘Call The White House, 1(202) 456 1414 Tell Bush we’re not all dead yet’. The use of advertising techniques and spaces by AIDS activists was seen as an extremely effective fusion of artistic practice and campaign work in a different way from other activist politics. However, in invoking the visual language of advertising and combining this with the assertive cries of the activist, the imagery necessarily invokes a certain authority. Juan Davila noted this tendency in his response to Jones’s silence = death work when he argued that while the slogans of ACT UP aim to be subversive, in practice they substitute one ‘authoritarian message’ for another.

At least one person did read the work as a command to act. A gallery staff member ‘called now’ and enquired whether the person who answered the phone was aware of the existence of the work.
National Gallery of Victoria then obtained advice as to the likelihood of legal action if the work was considered to be an incitement to harass.\(^\text{36}\) When the work was shown, an asterisk was placed next to ‘call now’ and the viewer was referred to smaller text in the lower portion of the work that read ‘rhetorical only’.

**RHETORICAL ONLY?**

Jones’s intention in making *Call Now* was to explore his own uncertainty when confronted with the possibility that he could ‘call now’ and the disjunction between the sense of identity that arose in that moment and the collective political identity achieved through activism. Once the work took its place in an exhibition as part of the gay and lesbian festival, ‘call now’ was read as an authoritative message, an order to act. The assumption was that the artist was presenting a rallying cry. Jones’s work was understood as a contribution to the activist response to the Murley trial which ‘being’ homosexual demanded. He was once more caught out attempting to make a personal response to events that were regarded as constituting the collective gay identity and therefore playing a part in constructing his own.

I have not set out to criticise the strategy of activism adopted in relation to the AIDS epidemic, but rather to illustrate the way in which this functioned as a dominant discourse. The impossibility of representation existing outside of this discourse ensured that self-expression by members of the gay community was constrained from within and without. The dominance of this discourse was, in part, evidence of the success of the activist strategy that set out to destroy the metaphors of AIDS and replace them with facts and information. However, the literalness of much of this work created an environment where identity became fixed and meaning reductive, so much so that the attempts by Mathew Jones to explore his discomfort with the constraints that this form of communication implied were futile. His work was inevitably judged as a contribution to an activist project. As a result, *silence = death* was criticised as an unhelpful contribution to AIDS activism, and the reception of *Call Now* was over-determined by the activist strategies of the gay community.

The destruction of the metaphors of AIDS left little space to explore the consequences of the literalness of the campaigning strategies that had taken their place. When Douglas Crimp called for the art world to adopt an activist alternative to the elegiac and personal responses to AIDS it was
not clear that he considered that this was the only possible alternative. However, so successful was Crimp’s activist form of artistic expression that when an exhibition of works was held in the National Gallery of Victoria in conjunction with the gay and lesbian festival, it was considered necessary to remind the viewer of the rhetorical function of art.

Grateful thanks to Mathew Jones for permission to reprint silence = death.

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ENDNOTES
3 The aims specifically read: ‘to promote awareness, and critical analysis, of the many issues surrounding AIDS in Australia; to encourage a socially and politically engaged art practice; to provide a visual arts component for the 1989 Midsumma Festival which recognizes the impact of AIDS on, and the positive responses made by, the gay male community, while also addressing the need to place AIDS in a wider context and examine the issues from a diversity of perspectives; to contribute to fundraising efforts and generate volunteers for AIDS support work’ in Stephanie Holt & Chris McAuliffe (eds), Imaging AIDS: a collection of essays published in conjunction with the Imaging AIDS exhibition, Imaging AIDS working group in conjunction with the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne 1989, 5.
4 Mark Peel, ‘Deliberate acts, unnatural acts: representing AIDS to Australians’ in Holt & McAuliffe, 32–6, 36.
5 Crimp, Melancholia and Moralism, 18–9, n 24.
7 For details of these events see Douglas Crimp & Adam Rolston, AIDS demographics, Bay Press, Seattle, 1990, 12–5.

9 Edelman, 316.

10 For example in 1991 Jones questioned the demands that many placed on ACT UP to be ‘representative’, and asserted that this was an inappropriate expectation given that ACT UP was not intended to be ‘legitimate’. Mathew Jones, ‘Act Up or do nothing’, *Agenda* 16, 1991, 3–4.


14 Unpublished statement, quoted in Davila, 34.

15 Phillips, 21.

16 Edelman, 308.

17 Heathcote, 14.


19 ‘[P]ainting here also implies a privatisation of experience and response as distinct from a collective intervention’, Phillips, 19.

20 Mathew Jones, *Over My Dead Body*.


22 Edelman, 311.


24 Phillips, 18.


28 Jones, ‘Here’s looking at you kid’, 47.

29 Jones, ‘Here’s looking at you kid’, 46–7.

The actual listing was KA Murley and the address that appeared in the court document was that of Robert Murley’s parents. Jones, interview with author.

This poster was placed on billboards and reprised in 2001 during the George W Bush presidency. See Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism*, 18.

Juan Davila described the exhibition as Jones’s ‘refusal against the orthodoxies of the gay pictorial discourse’. Davila, 33.


John McPhee, Note for file.
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