

h o w c a n t h e y b e s o s u r e ?



how can they be so sure?

Lutz Bacher, Margaret Crane / Jon Winet, Doug Ischar, Hillary Leone / Jennifer Macdonald

23 february - 8 april 1990

L A C E

Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions

1804 industrial street los angeles ca 90021 213-624-5650

LACE, as an artist's organization is committed to presenting work which reflects current aesthetic, critical, political and theoretical issues. **How Can They Be So Sure?** develops current systems of critique employed by artists which integrate political and personal concerns. The artists common approach, one which applies subjective motivation to the traditionally ephemeral installation format, serves to re-embrace the materiality of art making while re-investing the object with subversive potential.

Liz Kotz thoughtfully addresses the artists' position in her catalog essay complimented by Wayne Smith's insightful catalog design. The LACE Exhibition Committee and Doug Ischar worked together in selecting the artists and determining the direction of the show. Nayland Blake of New Langton Arts and artist Tony Greene contributed to this dialog. LACE Exhibition Coordinator, Jinger Heffner organized every aspect of **How Can They Be So Sure?** with acumen and concern. Interns Nicola Voss, Chalece Millar and Laurie Brown aided in the process. Jim Rumary and Chuck Bedgar of Nega Strip printed the catalog with their usual competence and care. On behalf of the Board of Directors of LACE, I want to thank all of the people mentioned above and particularly the artists of **How Can They Be So Sure?**, without whom this exhibition would not have been possible.

j o y s i l v e r m a n
e x e c u t i v e d i r e c t o r

how can they be so sure?

e s s a y b y l i z k o t z

in titling this exhibition *How Can They Be So Sure?*, we liked both the questioning tone and the uncertainty of who the "they" refers to. The phrase seemed to reflect something elusive and yet central to each of these works. Its ambiguity suggested a stance which problematizes questions of cultural placement and address in the context of multi-layered critical engagements.

Each of the five conceptual installations assembled here re-appropriate contemporary and/or historical popular cultural materials from an investigative, yet indeterminate, stance. Each involves an interrogation of repressive and restrictive discourses, mechanisms of power often masked under the guise

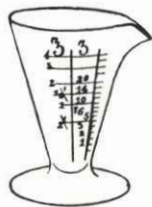
of the paternal, the beneficial, the healthful. But this is not a theme show, nor one organized around a pre-established theoretical rubric. Rather, the exhibit assembles provocative works by artists involved in very different projects, responding to a wide range of political and representational concerns.

In addition, these six artists share a commitment to the critical excavation of personal experience, developing subjectively grounded practices which explore beyond the well-charted terrains of 1980's 'political' or deconstructive art. But by abandoning one-dimensional stances of opposition and dissent, such practices almost inevita-



bly relinquish a certain clarity of position and analysis. By embracing self-implication and ambiguity they risk inarticulateness. Yet, I think such risks are justified, as they offer the possibility of re-integrating discrete areas of critical engagement, and re-examining the complex relations between resistance and repression, pleasure and domination. It is important, however, that such practices not be read in terms of a commonly held polarization: that of exhibition vs. activist art production. Rather, the kinds of work on view here suggest the opportunity for a mutually supportive dialogue with today's vitally important - but necessarily more tightly focused - public/activist art engagements.

Of the artists included in *How Can They Be So Sure?*, **Lutz Bacher** has had the longest involvement in installation art production. Dating from her involvement with San Francisco's Photography & Language group in the mid-seventies, Bacher has explored systems of representation of the human - particularly the female - body. Her installation *Huge Uterus* (1989) works by recovering and dissecting elements of the medical apparatus, exposing the viewer to their semiotic and ideological work-



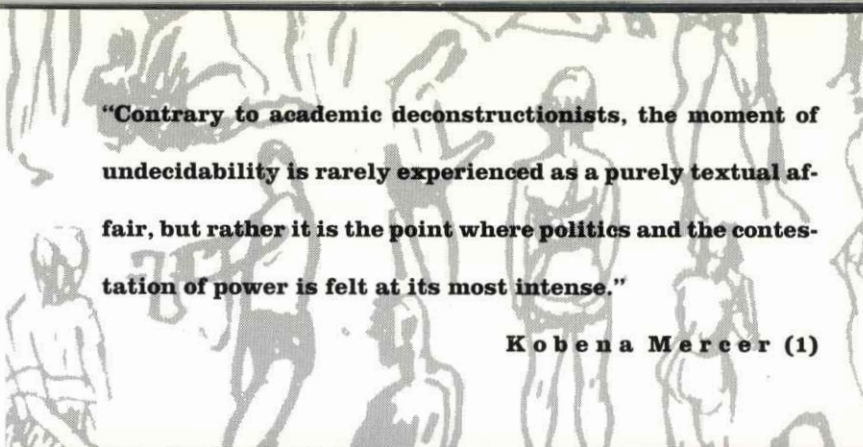
ings. Crossing two ostensibly antagonistic technologies of "health," a videotaped record of a six-hour long operation on her uterus and a popular self-help audiotape designed to prepare patients for surgery, Bacher problematizes their very different levels of invasion and intervention.

Played concurrently, the self-hypnosis exercises form a perverse soundtrack to the surgical removal of numerous tumors. Juxtaposing the tedium and discomfort of the actual surgery with the artificial and even irritating "soothingness" of the self-help visualizations, the piece explores the power of such technologies to re-map relations between mind and body, and to construct definitions of "health" and "pathology." In *Huge Uterus*, the up-turned television replaces the body on display, opening up the representational machinery of medicine to examination and diagnosis.

Combining black and white photojournalistic imagery with highly idiosyncratic texts, the multimedia installations of **Margaret Crane & Jon Winet** examine the ways in which contemporary mass media construct and position 'individual' identities in contemporary western societies. Using a graphic

style derived from newsweekly magazines and presentational modes reminiscent of both museum and trade show, *This Is Your Life* (1990) develops a tensely ambiguous viewpoint in which frankly pessimistic observation collides with the opportunity for subjective - even subversive - response. In this way the photographs may be read as both the jaded meta-signs of simulationist theory as well as the indices of pleasurable sensual experience of looking. The text itself combines the cautionary tone of apocalyptic prophesy with the fantasy enticements of its TV show namesake.

Bringing together highly stylized and generic representations from a vast range of sources, they sketch out multiple and conflicting paths through a kaleidoscopic model landscape of signs. What kinds of positions, reversals, movements or pleasures are possible? How do you "link the incompatible"? Constantly shifting subject positions and modes of address challenge the viewer's mobility and adaptability. Like Poe's *Purloined Letter*, where what is most effectively hidden is precisely that which is most visible, Crane/Winet's installation explores social realities obscured not by concealment but by the very overabundance of information.

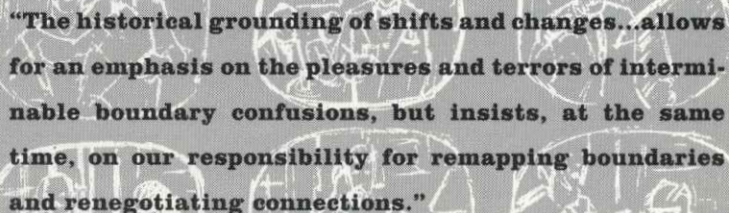


"Contrary to academic deconstructionists, the moment of undecidability is rarely experienced as a purely textual affair, but rather it is the point where politics and the contestation of power is felt at its most intense."

Kobena Mercer (1)

"Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectic image is therefore a dream image. Such an image is presented by the pure commodity: as fetish. Such an image are the arcades, which is both house and stars. Such an image is the prostitute, who is saleswoman and wares in one."

Walter Benjamin (2)



"The historical grounding of shifts and changes...allows for an emphasis on the pleasures and terrors of interminable boundary confusions, but insists, at the same time, on our responsibility for remapping boundaries and renegotiating connections."

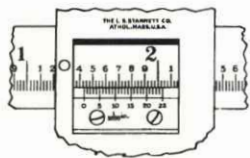
Biddy Martin & Chandra Talpade Mohanty (3)

Doug Ischar's installation *Handshake* (1989) presents a carefully crafted exploration of homoeroticism, colonial authority and education, revolving around the ambiguity of the teacher-student relationship. Through assembled contemporary and archival photos and two subdued homoerotic narratives, the installation sets up parallel trajectories between worlds of *fin de siècle* tropical colonialism and the historical/contemporary classroom. Yet the highly mediated encounter suggests continuities and correlations without resorting to flattening analogies or reduction. It probes the kind of messy intermediate space between distinct yet connected regimes of control, pathology and pleasure.

Pulled along by segments of two first-person narratives — Paul Gauguin's 1893 memoir *Noa Noa* and a 1920's adventure travelogue — the contrapuntal composition charts intersecting territories of gay male desire and cultural paranoia. The vintage photographs offer a partial inventory of a contemporary "gay" sensibility, recalling "the primitive" and "boyhood" as sites of fantasy and longing. Yet each image suggests its own story, its own internal ambiguity, setting off many possible responses or resonances. Assembled together, they

allow for both metaphoric, emotional, and material associations to emerge and play off each other. While its faux-archival trappings evoke the carefully conjured sentimentality of an inaccessible past, *Handshake* (subtitled "Jurisdiction in Marginal Waters") traces the endlessly shifting relations between desire, authority, and construction of self.

Hillary Leone's two installations *Position Papers* (1989) and *Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down* (1989, with Jennifer Macdonald) explore AIDS within the context of disease, mourning, and the mutability of human experience. Constructed out of sandpaper and braille text (containing untranslated information on experimental treatments with DHPG), *Position Papers* reproduces and communicates the subjective experience of being denied access to understanding. Physically beautiful and inviting to touch, the raised dots defy decoding, ultimately threatening to wear away at the fingertips of those who insist on reading them. It produces an experience that is simultaneously painful and pleasurable, moving back and forth between absorption, identification and reflection. Linking the historically contingent struggles of people-with-AIDS for access to health care information with philosophical is-

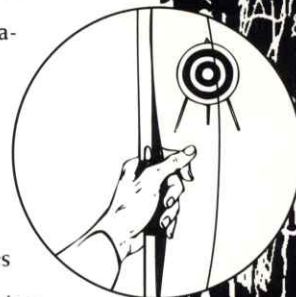


sues about the indeterminacy of knowledge and signification, the multi-layered design allows different levels of analysis to reverberate. Theoretically-informed and syncretic, the piece develops powerfully visual and even tactile strategies to articulate the inter-relation of semiotic and political mechanisms.

In *Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down*, Leone and Macdonald evoke the contingent and mutable character of grief in a physically fragile medium. Consisting of a large sandbox imprinted with the braille-encoded names of people who have died of AIDS, the piece becomes an extended metaphor about loss, about not being able to hold on. The braille characters commemorating those who've died, laid in sand, are themselves delicate and mutable, and, like the text of *Position Papers*, largely unreadable and inaccessible. Yet it is the fragility and temporality which is key here; any touch, even accidental, could destroy the all-too-provisional "memorial." Unfixed, impermanent, it suggests the mutability of memory and mourning. Quiet and contemplative, the piece evokes a range of emotional responses and associations; from different angles the landscape of names reads like an archi-

tectural model, an archaeological dig, cemetery plots, or sandcastles at the beach.

Situating themselves at the edges and the intersections of representational systems, the installations presented in *How Can They Be So Sure?* challenge critically and aesthetically constricting compartmentalizations. Working across institutional and discursive boundaries, these works engage many of the issues which have occupied contemporary art criticism: sexual representation, disease and pathology, colonial representation, subcultural stances, mass cultural appropriation. They explore hybrid and syncretic positions, able to assemble and hold contradictions in politically meaningful and aesthetically powerful ways. Conceptually and theoretical rigorous without being rigid, they offer provocative models for multi-dimensional and critically-productive art practices. ■



1. Kobena Mercer, "Skin Head Sex Thing: Racial Difference and the Homosexual Imaginary," forthcoming in *October*, Spring, 1990.

2. Walter Benjamin, "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century," *Reflections*, Schocken Books, 1986, p. 157.

3. Biddy Martin and Chandra Talpade Mohanty "Feminist Politics: What's Home Got to Do With It?" *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, Teresa de Lauretis, ed., Indiana University Press, 1986, p. 193.

l u t z b a c h e r

" h u g e u t e r u s "

t

his project includes the six hour real time video record of the recent operation on my uterus. During the video/operation the surgeon writes explanatory notes like the one that serves as the title:

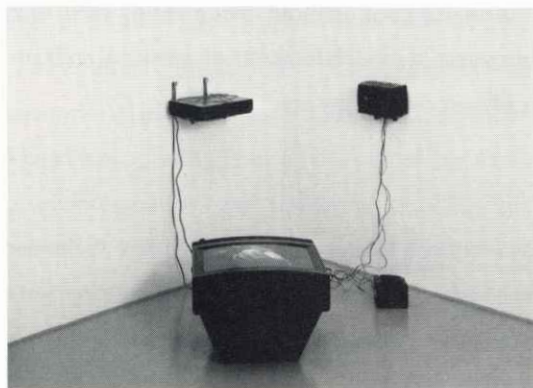
L U T Z B A C H E R 8 / 1 1 / 8 9
H U G E U T E R U S
W I T H M A N Y T U M O R S
N O C A N C E R
T H E T I S S U E I S
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F O R T U M O R S
R E M O V E
T U M O R S
T H E U T E R U S I S
A N O R G A N T H A T
H E A L S W E L L
N A T U R A L L Y

inset:

"Huge Uterus"
Installation View, courtesy
Simon Watson Gallery

opposite:

"Huge Uterus"
Video Still



The other image/narrative component of this installation is a visualization/preparation for your operation – a sound tape that plays on an autoreverse boombox with detachable remote speakers:

"As the anaesthetic begins to make you even more relaxed external words and sounds simply serve as a background murmur interpreted as signals to relax. They're not recorded. You will not respond to them. You are very relaxed and calm..."

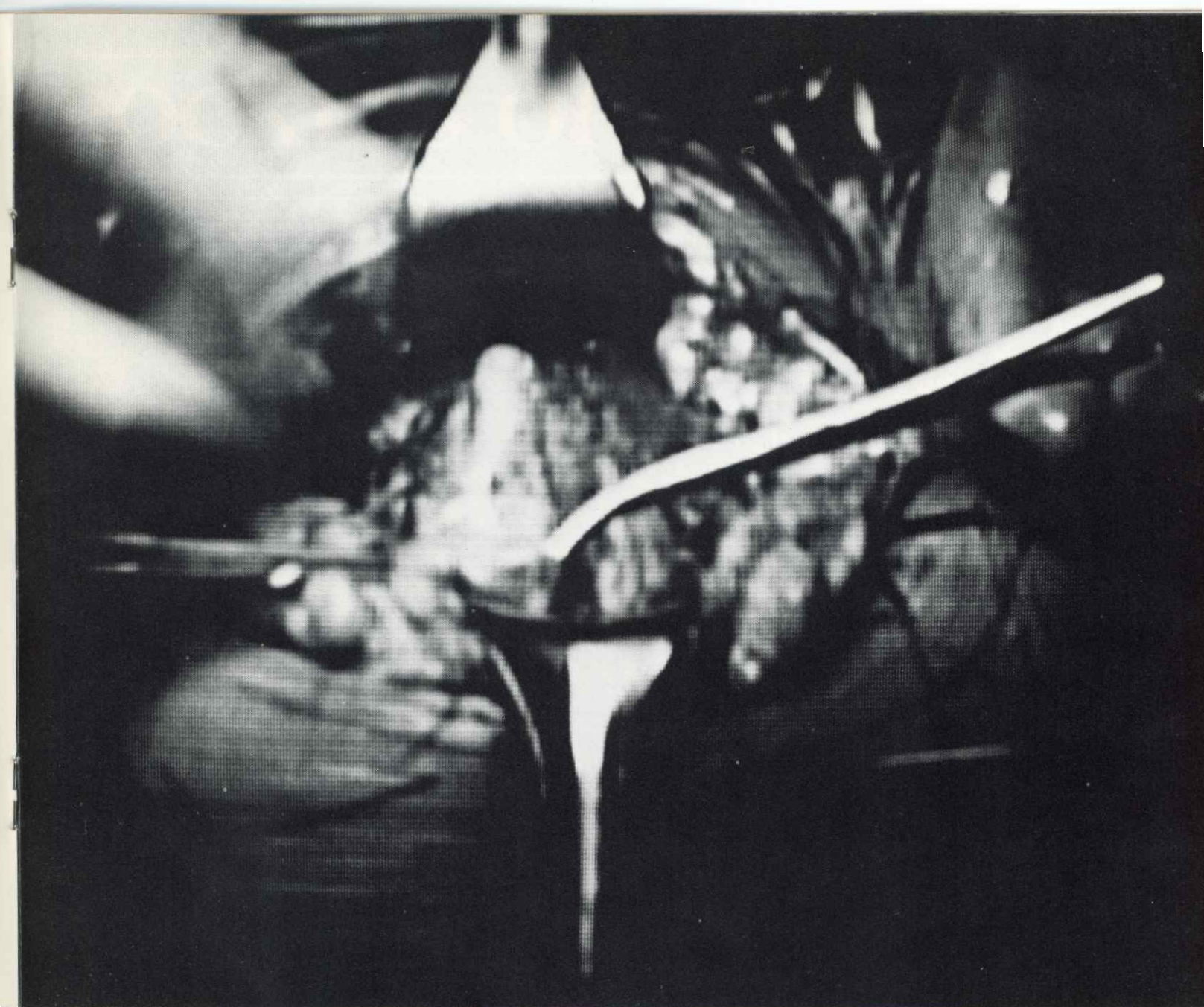
"...as you relax the incision is being made accurately and skillfully. Your body accepts this. The skin and other tissues are parting willingly..."

"Let yourself now for a moment imagine that you can step out of your body and begin to visualize the procedure as it would look from outside your body. See each step as though you were in the operating room looking over the doctor's shoulder, almost as if you are watching a technician repair an automobile or a television, objectively watching and seeing everything going perfectly..."

These tapes play on equipment that is configured as body/monitor/hookup.

All of the apparatus (monitor, deck, speakers, wires) are visible in the actual installation. VCR deck and audio tape deck are mounted on adjoining walls and their electrical wiring hangs free and visible and connected to the video monitor and speakers which are placed on the floor side by side in front of their decks.

The video monitor should be lying on it's back on the floor.



m a r g a r e t c r a n e & j o n w i n e t
" t h i s i s y o u r l i f e "

t

his Is Your Life" depicts the world in which the explanation of the cause no longer matches the effect. The installation contrasts the current landscape of hope and expansion abroad with the reality of shrinking civil liberties at home. It continues our ongoing investigations into the positioning of individuals in contemporary society.

During our five years of collaboration, we have focused on mining the abundant sources found in the language and images of modern life. Truth (or it's stand-in) is always stranger than fiction. Process and productions have evolved over time from an early emphasis on work of a personal and emotional tone to a growing use of found sources leading to a more outward directed perspective.

"This Is Your Life" is the most recent installment in our exploration. It's like the trailer for the movie that runs through your head. You know the one...set in the remote location where private life and public experience bleed through the boundaries. The one populated by an eclectic cast of remote public figures, anonymous crowds from the evening news,

people you know and people who you saw a long time ago when you pulled up to a stop sign. The sound track is the radio left on all night and the script inspired by the surprisingly psychotic digressions that pepper popular news magazines.

Like sands through the hourglass, so go the days of our lives. It's your life and our life, too. With this in mind, the images in this installation are, rather than appropriated from media, reclaimed from the archives of photographs Jon has taken, more often than not, on assignment for publications. Public life becomes private expression and subjects are transformed variously into ourselves and the other.

The other isn't somebody different. He's the one who lies until he's blue in the face. He assumes all sorts of disguises. For instance: On the night in question, it took fourteen squad cars. Sparks shot from his wheel rims. He roared through Old Town, the storybook testimonial to old money. She began to wonder, "should I call 911 or a pediatrician?" We all know from experience how rare it is to extricate yourself at exactly the right moment.

o p p o s i t e :
"Pockets of Resistance"
detail from
'This Is Your Life'

POCKETS OF RESISTANCE

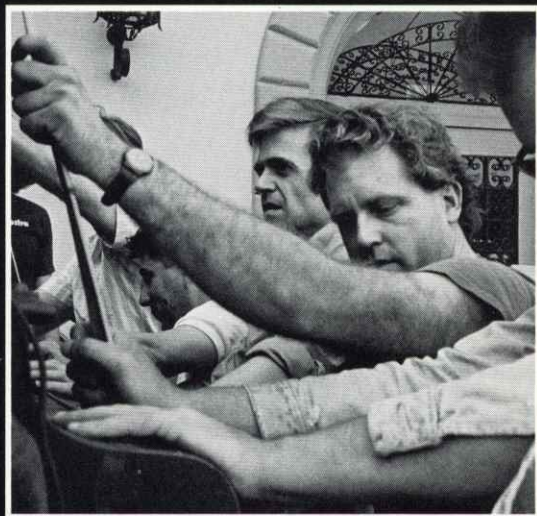


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HE exhilarating prospect of reform floats in an illusive atmosphere of blue smoke and mirrors. Definitions shift across continents. They change over night. Despite the near-freezing weather, we slept in subways, parks and doorways. Some were drunk on black market liquor, others drunk with freedom. But around here most of us are just getting more and more stingy. This is the time

to learn the true name of all things. The poverty of abundance calls for significant reduction. The experience of realism risks the flight into frenzied automatism and illusion. You envision yourself frolicking all summer long in the Renoir-like illumination of rivers and pavilions. The halcyon paradise grows incendiary as it dissolves. While civilization is busy mining nature, we provide the raw material of culture. This is the grizzly hoax. Resources are depleted. The result is

agitated fatigue. Blame it on those who are locked in an iron triangle with defense contractors and Pentagon procurers. They seek dominion over all those considered others. We have their number and, when push comes to shove, resort to a quick strike response. Out in back, we fabricate hope from lead. We drive it across the desert. This is a testament to the do-it-yourself spirit.



FUTURES ARE BOUGHT LARGELY ON CREDIT

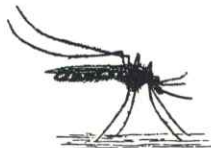
doug ischar

"handshake: jurisdiction in marginal waters"

h

andshake" may be read as an extended memoir of a single year - my first - of university teaching. The large 'View of Houston' recalls late 19th photographic views of great first world industrial cities. But in this case it is the financially faltering postmodern city which is viewed, it's gleaming towers rising amidst the refuse of a University of Houston photography lab. Beneath this photograph lie a sequence of three transparencies which zoom in on a young male university photography student, recording his production, his 'progress.'

The framed groupings of prints form a discursive subtext to these photographs. It is a subtext of intertwining homoerotic desire and nostalgia for the exotic in which proscribed longings and paranoid dread ultimately merge. Young and aging men are the principal players here in a context constantly shifting between metaphor and material analogy, between images of the colonial tropics (the Marquesas Islands) and images of school, between the pleasure of erotic looking and the pleasure of abstracting analysis.

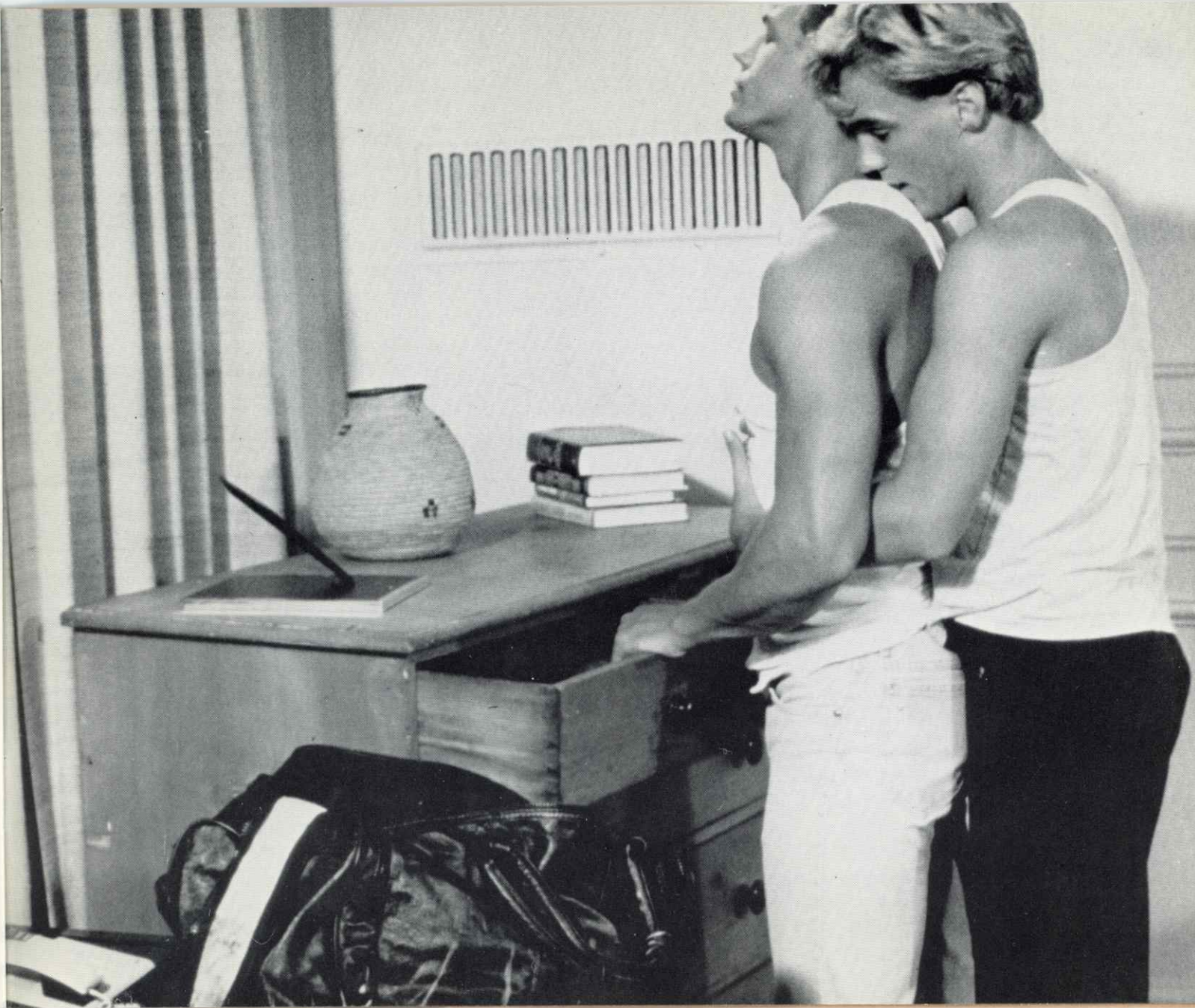


The two parallel text narratives are also from colonial sources; in both the players are one Western man and one native 'boy.' The upper narrative is from a typical early twentieth century adventure/travelogue, Frederick O'Brien's *White Shadows in the South Seas*, 1920. The lower narrative is from Paul Gauguin's memoir of his first trip to Tahiti, *Noa Noa*, 1893. Although homoerotic (or homoaffectional) desire flows at cross currents in these two stories (My Dog's for McHenry vs. Gauguin's for his 'natural friend') both end in rejection on the basis of perceived pathology.

The small illustrations which accompany the text panels are intended as burlesquing devices, at odds with both the sentimental pathos of O'Brien's tale and the self-aggrandizing romance of Gauguin's memoir.

"Handshake" is prison slang for mutual masturbation.

For David Larson



hillary leone & jennifer macdonald: "ashes, ashes, we all fall down"

hillary leone: "position papers"

p

osition Papers" and "Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down" dismantle and reconfigure signifying systems – political, social, and scientific – that mediate meaning. In both, AIDS becomes a point of departure for a broader excavation of the visual/political field.

"Position Papers" contains an essay in braille that chronicles and critiques the FDA's role in approving new drug treatments for AIDS, using the drug gancyclovir (DHPG) as a case study. DHPG arrests the progression of CMV retinitis, an infection of the retina that, left unchecked, causes blindness and death in some 40% of persons with AIDS. The essay, which

explores the FDA's decision to delay the drug's release, is not available to the viewer in an effort to address the difficult struggle people with AIDS face in getting the facts about their illness. Approved in June 1989, DHPG is only the fourth drug to earn full marketing approval for AIDS

and its complications. The pressure from AIDS activists and frontline physicians that led to the drug's approval also led to significant changes in the FDA's policy on experimental treatments for AIDS.

Taking its name from a nursery rhyme written during the time of the plague, "Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down" endeavors to combine the public

and private needs of recording loss. In the space of a child's sandbox, "Ashes, Ashes" offers the viewer a fragile and indecipherable moment: a braille text in sand that contains the names of many who have died of AIDS and its complications. The piece challenges the



memorial's role in institutionalizing loss. In giving shared loss a public voice, the conventional memorial necessarily obscures the ineffable and illegible responses that grief inspires. It is these responses to loss, ones that have no fixed shape or duration, that this installation explores.

opposite:

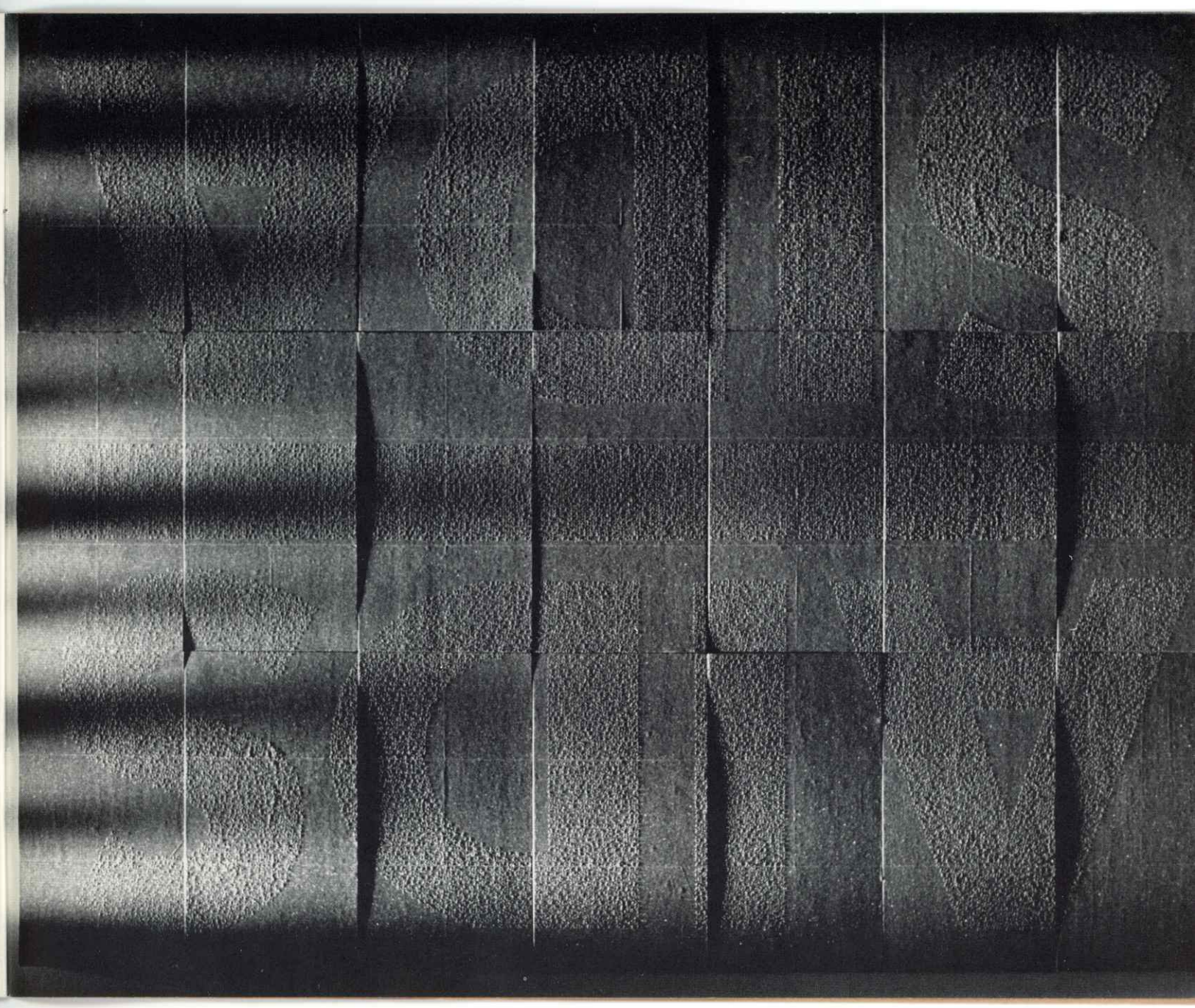
"Position Papers"

10'6" x 8'3", Braille-embossed sandpaper,

inset:

"Ashes, Ashes, We All Fall Down"

5' x 5', Sandbox containing
braille text in sand



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