

The Sodomite Invasion

*Experimentation, Politics and Sexuality in the work of
Jimmy DeSana and Marlon T. Riggs*

SELF GUIDED TOUR

January 25 - April 25

Guest Curator: Lorenzo Fusi

Both DeSana and Riggs died of AIDS-related illness (in 1990 and 1994, respectively), and had relations to Vancouver thanks to the personal involvement of some Canadian artists (AA Bronson, for example), and the activity of the local art and LGBTQIA+ communities, that were self-organising and mobilising at the time in response to the AIDS crisis. These artistic and socio-political relations eventually created new bonds and reinforced the connection between Vancouver and the New York/Toronto axis on the one hand, and San Francisco and the West Coast (Seattle for example) on the other throughout the '80s and '90s. Such triangulation (the pink triangle immediately comes to mind) situates the show geographically and temporally.

The title of the show is borrowed from the Sodomite Invasion Review, a short-lived Vancouver-based magazine published between 1991-1992. The name of the journal parodied the disdained response of the local Conservatives to the announcement of the (III) Gay Games and Cultural Festival in Vancouver (1990). They feared that the Games would transform the city into the Sodom of the North. Terrified by the prospect of receiving in town thousands of queer athletes and allies from all over the world, moralists and conservatives started an aggressive defamatory campaign against *Celebration 90: III Gay Games and Cultural Festival* that lasted for months in the local press. Notwithstanding their fierce opposition, the Gay Games were eventually held in Vancouver on August 1990. This was the first time that the Games were hosted outside San Francisco.

At the apex of the HIV/AIDS pandemic it was ever more important to project a healthy (in the body and mind) image of the gay

community, a community that was at risk of being solely identified with or reduced to either an infecting agent or infected body. Taking positive action against this reductive perspective was part of the political agenda of the Games: it represented its subtext. Surely, the Games were also about open-air parties, cruising in the parks, and hedonistic display of flesh on the beach. But they were too a means for elaborating trauma, overcoming the internalised stigma originating in the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and ultimately responding to the crisis with a defiant act of presence in the public arena.

Although the organisers of the Gay Games in Vancouver were accused by many of not being sufficiently inclusive (having almost entirely reduced the representation of a very diverse community to the muscular image embodied by the healthy white gay athletic male) the event must be however considered as an act of resistance: a political action.

At the apex of the AIDS crisis being publicly queer was more than ever a political statement, because the virus – as noted by Mervyn F. Silverman (former Director of the San Francisco department of Public Health) during an interview with Dr Paul Volberding of the famous Ward 5B of the San Francisco General Hospital¹ - was from the outset first and foremost **a political disease**². In fact, it did not take long until we realized that AIDS was NOT just a disease. It was a very powerful socio-political discriminatory construct, as argued by artist/activist David Wojnarowicz who in *Postcards from America: X-rays from Hell* acutely observed: "WHEN I WAS TOLD I HAD CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I'D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL."³

Poignantly, Wojnarowicz's seminal work is currently on view at the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver at the same time of our exhibition at the Griffin Art Projects. I sincerely invite everybody to go and see that show as well, prior to or after visiting *The Sodomite Invasion*. Interestingly, the Belkin Art Gallery also showcased on the year of the Gay Games, the photographic work of Peter Hujar who was first Wojnarowicz's lover and then his confidante and intimate friend. That exhibition was closely followed by another show including the work of two other New-York based artists closely associated to HIV/AIDS crisis: Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Donald Moffett.⁴ It seems to me, that this occasion represents the perfect juncture for celebrating all these amazing practitioners who too soon have left us, with so much work still to be done to fight stigma and discrimination.

In preparation of the Gay Games and in addition of the thematic shows organised at UBC's Fine Arts Gallery (as the Belkin was then known), the LGTBQIA+ community in Vancouver reacted to the homophobic rhetoric of the conservatives by devising several projects and initiatives across the city that included the world Sodom in their titles, including *Sodom North: Bash Back* (8-9 August 1990) a video festival organised on the occasion of the Games by the Satellite Video Exchange Society (now VIVO).

The program included *Tongues Untied*, one of Marlon Riggs' best known features, released only a year prior to the festival. This is an experimental film shot in a semi-documentary style looking at the lack of representation and expression in the American society of the black gay community. The postulate

and key message of the film was that the black gay man was not only made invisible and disempowered by both white and black heterosexuals, but also unacknowledged by their white counterparts. *Tongues United* was denouncing the systematic disappearing of the black gay man. It was a hymn, a lyrical tribute to the black gay man, a celebration of brotherly love, and an "affirmation of black gay life".⁵

The hourlong film by Riggs was indirectly funded by the National Endowment of the Arts and included in the documentary series *Point of View* produced and distributed by PBS. Similarly to his colleagues Andres Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, or per the case of the seminal exhibition, *Witness: Against Our Vanishes*, curated by Nan Golding discussing the topic of AIDS at a crucial time in the history of the disease (Artists Space, New York, 1990), Riggs was attacked for spending taxpayers' money for producing deviant content or, to quote Republican presidential candidate Patrick J. Buchanan, in pornographic and blasphemous art too shocking to show".⁶

The year 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the release of this seminal and controversial film that, according to Riggs, was meant to "shatter the [...] brutalizing silence on matters of sexual and racial difference" in America⁷. To celebrate Riggs' career, the Griffin Art Projects is partnering with The Cinematheque, the historical Vancouverite *cinema d'essai* that originally organised a retrospective of Marlon's work soon after his death in July 1994. Furthermore, the first room at the Griffin gallery is dedicated to the life and work of the late Marlon T. Riggs. This is the first exhibition display entirely devoted to this seminal documentarist and activist. In this room, the viewer

will find the trailers of a selection of Riggs' videos and films played in a continuous loop, providing an overview of his work. These excerpts highlight Riggs' socio-political concerns and personal interests, beside clearly illustrating his aesthetics and signature style. Starting from *Ethnic Notions* first released in 1987.

The documentary *I Shall Not Be Removed* (a compassionate and personal portrait tracing Riggs' life and career by Karen Everett) is also presented in this space, alongside ephemera and memorabilia that document Riggs' relations with the local scene in Vancouver. Lyle Ashton Harris (one of the most prominent American artists operating at the intersection of sexuality, gender and race) visualises with his photographs Riggs' presence and absence in this space.

The relevant film program presented at The Cinematheque includes Riggs' most important titles, starting from the Emmy-Award-winning documentary *Ethnic Notions: African American Stereotypes and Prejudice* (1987) and concluding with *Black Is Black Ain't* his last filmic work accomplished and released post-mortem by his closer collaborators (1995). The film, which includes footage of Riggs still working on the project from his hospital bed, only days before his death, reflects on the complexity and richness of the African American identity. It is an exploration of the very same definition of Blackness in America. What is it that we can consider Black and what is it that it is not?

There is no easy answer the film tells us, because there is not a singular overarching construct of Blackness that encompasses

the totality of the experiences and lives of the Black people in the country. Using his grandmother's gumbo recipe as a metaphor, Riggs maintains that in the big pot of Blackness there is a bit of everything, and although many ingredients are at odds with each other and many flavours seem to be dissonant, in the end they all work harmonically together, making the taste and texture of the gumbo even richer and more satisfying.⁸

Similarly, Jimmy DeSana's last work was left unfinished in the hands of his friend, colleague and long-time collaborator Laurie Simmons, who to this day manages his Estate. The exhibition in Vancouver includes the dummy of *Salvation*, the tellingly-titled photobook he was working on at the time of his death due to AIDS-related illness in 1990. The original dummy includes notes handwritten by Simmons who was left with the task of completing the project after DeSana's passing.

Simmons never really finished the job. Initially because she needed some emotional distance from the work and had to elaborate the loss of a close friend and mentor. Eventually, she also realised that DeSana had left her with too much room for interpretation. After a while, she started doubting her memory and recollection of the conversations they had about the book project, until she ultimately decided against completing and publishing the book. Although Simmons was left with his archive, in DeSana's absence, her *Salvation* could have only been an interpretation, an approximation, of what Jimmy really wanted. This is the first time that this material is presented publicly.

Although there are many blanks in *Salvation*, it is possible to

visualise where DeSana was going artistically and conceptually with this project. The images highlight the artist's restless experimentation by the end of his life within the medium of photography.

During this later phase, one can find several communalities with the work of Mark Morrisroe, who too died of AIDS-related complications at the age of 30, only a year earlier than DeSana. Both artists around the time of their deaths were represented by and had exhibitions at the ground-breaking Pat Hearn Gallery in New York and were surely aware of each other's artistic achievements and research.⁹

DeSana's late work, like Morrisroe's, seems to verge more towards abstraction, or to be more precise, focuses less on representation and is more suggestive. The presence of the human body (which was so preponderant in his earlier signature work) rarefies. The work is now characterised by a radical or irreverent (mis)use of photographic printing and image-making techniques. Most of the experimentation at this time takes place in the darkroom, and not behind the camera. DeSana cuts and pastes new and old images, often collaging and re-photographing his own work, and prints in a quasi abstract-expressionist painterly fashion. The palette gets darker, rich with undertones.

Take, for example, his last show at Pat Hearn Gallery (1988) where his richly pigmented and often polarised images act like symbols: as if they were vanitas or memento mori. Here simple iconic basic shapes, such a chair, are magnified and enlarged

until they become the centrepiece and sole object of attention in DeSana's compositions. There is a sense of stillness, a quintessential simplicity, in this body of work.

Occasionally references to traditional African statuary and masks appear, somewhat in the tradition of Man Ray and the Primitivist myth created by Western Modernism. It is difficult to say whether this is a final tribute and love song to Blackness (most of DeSana's lovers throughout his life were Black men and he himself often wished to be one, according to his friend Laurie Simmons) or if he was just collecting by means of his late photographic work what was essential for the afterlife: the most treasured things to be included in his funeral kit. Surely, his love for the Black man does not translate, as per the emblematic case of his contemporary Robert Mapplethorpe's *The Black Book* (1986), into a constructed and eroticised taxonomy or fetishist depiction of the Black male body as a projection and object of desire¹⁰. In fact, for all his love for the Black man, he is almost entirely missing in DeSana's published work.

DeSana's presentation at the Griffin Art Projects also offers to the viewer the opportunity to familiarise themselves with another important body of work (featured in the photobook entitled *Submission* firstly published in 1979 and presented in this exhibition) that speaks directly to Mapplethorpe's interest in S&M and the underground gay leather scene. Both artists were working on this controversial subject matter around the same time. However, it is still debatable which one of these artists came first to graphically depicting in their work these sexual fantasies and desires.

Jimmy DeSana's work shows an irony and complicit (but humorous) attitude towards fetishism that is almost entirely missing in Mapplethorpe's work. Maybe, unlike Mapplethorpe, he was not taking himself (yet) so seriously as an artist. Or maybe he was just gifted with an exceptional sense of ridicule and a taste for desacralization. He could just see that some of his images, for how they were sexually charged, they were just bizarre. Comparing, the erotic monumentality and classicism of Mapplethorpe almost feels conservative. DeSana's is surely not as polished, but maybe as per the case of Marlon Riggs, this is the reason why the work still feels so fresh and relevant to this day.

Works Cited

1. A unit that became a national and international example in providing healthcare for HIV+ patients.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rOauL9VDpSk>
3. In *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, ex. cat., Artists Space, November 16, 1989 – January 6, 1990, p. 7.
4. The Peter Hujar exhibition was held at Grey Art Gallery & Study Center, New York University Jan 17, 1990 – Feb 24, 1990 and Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia Aug. 1, 1990 – Sep 15, 1990. *Strange Days Here Come* (Felix Gonzalez-Torres and Donald Moffett) was held at Fine Arts Gallery, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, British Columbia Nov. 16, 1990 – Dec. 22, 1990.
5. <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/06/25/movies/tv-film-about-gay-black-men-is-under-attack.html>
6. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1992/06/15/the-director-with-tongue-untied/4ba20897-fa8c-4506-bffc-cc56e2fb1dd4/?noredirect=on>
7. The present show was ideated and formulated in 2019, during my residency at the Griffin Art Projects.
8. From Wikipedia: Gumbo (French: Gombo) is a stew popular in the U.S. state of Louisiana, and is the official state cuisine.
9. Jeannine Tang, Lia Gangitano, Ann Butler (Eds.), *The Conditions of Being Art: Pat Hearn Gallery & American Fine Arts, Co., CCS BARD AND DANCING FOXES PRESS*, 2018.
10. To this day, the most poignant and articulated response to Mapplethorpe's representation of black masculinity can be found in Glenn Ligon's *Notes on the Margin of the Black Book* (1991–93).

LORENZO FUSI

Lorenzo Fusi (b. 1968) is the Artistic Director and Curator of the I Yerevan Biennial. He was the Artistic Director of PIAC (Prix International d'Art Contemporain) of the Fondation Prince Pierre de Monaco (2014-2020), and the Visiting Academic Curator at the Alberta University of the Arts, where he directed the Illingworth Kerr Gallery between 2016-2018. Previously, he was the Director of Open Eye Gallery, one of the oldest not-for-profit photography galleries in the UK. Prior to this appointment, Fusi was the International Curator at the Liverpool Biennial, for which he curated the 2010 and 2012 renditions, titled Touched and The Unexpected Guest. Between 2001 and 2009 he was the Chief Curator at Palazzo delle Papesse Contemporary Art Centre, to then become the Contemporary Art Curator of the Santa Maria della Scala museum hub in Siena (Italy). Fusi regularly lectures at universities and has a portfolio of around 100 curated exhibition projects and as many publications and almost 200 commissions.

ABOUT US

Established in 2015, Griffin Art Projects was founded by Brigitte and Henning Freybe who began collecting art in the early 1970s. Griffin considers the methodologies, thematic and narratives that shape and direct both visual culture and creative work, and collecting practices. Griffin also supports and develops solo and group projects and thematic exhibitions of works, collaborating with established cultural producers, guest curators, artists, writers and art educators in the region, nationally and locally to produce exhibitions, public programs and publications on contemporary art in the region.

Griffin Art Projects explores new currents in contemporary art and contemporary collecting practices in order to examine how collections evolve and are formed. Griffin creates a platform for sharing these artworks with a broader public as a unique new non-profit public visual arts organization model led by the support of leading key philanthropists and received its non-profit status in the spring of 2018. There is no other organization like it in Canada, in its combination of non-profit public outreach which is free for all to participate in, support for artists through residency and studio spaces as well as featuring the work of private, public and corporate collections and collectors.

Griffin Art Projects is a non-collecting institution that has quickly become a vibrant contributor to the North Vancouver cultural landscape and visual art practices in the region through its exhibitions, residency and public programs.



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