

William E. Jones'
Tearoom

Friday, February 18 at 7:30 pm — Yerba Buena Center for the Arts

presented in association with **Frameline**

and with **SFMOMA's** exhibit ***Exposed: Voyeurism, Surveillance, and the Camera Since 1870***

William E. Jones In Person

William E. Jones' *Tearoom* consists entirely of footage created in 1962 by the Mansfield, Ohio police department documenting clandestine sexual encounters between men in a public restroom. Ultimately, this footage led to the arrest, prosecution and incarceration of approximately thirty men. Employing a surprisingly impressionistic pastel color palette and a curious "non-style" of cinematography evocative at times of Warhol, this material is presented by Jones more as "document" than documentary—in silence, with minimal editorial intervention, and devoid of direct commentary. This blunt non-interventionist presentation allows a slow accumulation of details and reveals profound intersections of race, class, sexuality and heterosexist power, uncomfortably placing the viewer in the position of voyeur and surveillant, while paradoxically suggesting empathy—even identification—with the on-screen subjects. Asking more questions than it answers, *Tearoom* presents a complex and disturbing picture of institutional power in mid-century America. (Steve Polta)

Tearoom (1962/2007) by William E. Jones; video, color, silent, 56 minutes, tape from the maker

William E. Jones: I was working on my video *Mansfield 1962* [2006] at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio and at the same time I had been researching these cases in the archives. I had seen a bit of footage on the internet, and I thought there was more footage somewhere, but I was not sure. Someone at the Wexner Center gave me an email address for the filmmaker Bret Wood, who got the footage from a former Mansfield Chief of Police, who had been keeping it in his garage for many years. I wrote to Wood, and within a few days he sent me a copy of the footage. I watched it immediately, and it was really incredible. I knew in a general sense what the footage would be, but I had no idea what it would look like. First of all I saw it was in beautiful color. It also had a sort of eccentric quality to its filmmaking. There was all this stuttering, these little takes and repetitions. They looked almost like artistic gestures, but they were not. At least they were not intended as such. The images of all these men meeting and having sex had a great sense of pathos, because I knew that these men had been prosecuted and sent to jail. The whole experience was really overwhelming. I had a feeling that I wasn't going to do much to the footage anyway, but I did attempt to put the footage into some form that looked like art. I made a version like that, and it was simply too much; the aesthetic decisions I made seemed arbitrary. I also thought about contextualizing the footage with titles, giving a little bit of extra information, but I never managed to do anything that was convincing, until the last version, in which I changed almost nothing. There are just opening and closing titles, and I moved the last reel—establishing footage that shows the space of the restroom—to the beginning.

Dietmar Schwärzler: *Although—or because ?—it's footage of the aggressor, it's in a way sexy, also sexy for the eyes and the brain. What was your main approach towards the footage?*

WEJ: The authority figures who arranged this surveillance operation, who later sent the men to jail, and who controlled what this footage meant for society had an agenda, mainly the eradication of homosexuality from their fair city. My goal was to appropriate their film as something other than a pure instrument of domination, to make the film be about the men who are its subjects. I hope people can see more than oppression in *Tearoom*.

DS: *The camera wasn't installed unmanned. There were two cameramen, Bill Spognardi and Dick Burton, names that sound to me like names of porn stars. Do you know something about these two men?*

WEJ: I know very little, except that Spognardi was the main cameraman, and Burton was his assistant. From the way the camera moves, one can surmise certain things, e.g., that some subjects interested the police more than others. "Interest" is a funny word. The police are interested in a person suspected of a crime; a cameraman is interested in men having sex. There is no photography without desire. This may be simply a desire to know, but rarely is this desire innocent. *Tearoom's* spectators understand this immediately. During screenings, there are many laughs when an attractive man enters the restroom, and the camera begins to move frenetically. Were the police cameramen gay? Not in any sense we would relate to. As I mention in my essay on the cases, I think that in the Mansfield, Ohio of 1962, only a straight man could allow himself to be involved in the outrageously perverse scenario of waiting in a closet unseen in the hope of seeing other men masturbate and have sex.

DS: *How long did they shoot?*

WEJ: They shot over three weeks during July and August, 1962.

DS: *In Tearoom it's also possible to see the old idea about cruising as form of connection and communication and how sex happens between different classes, ages and races, which I thought is amazing. In 1962, The March on Washington was just in preparation and it was only eight years after desegregation. It was far from common to see a black man fucking a white man. The porn movie Boys in the Sand (1971) by Wakefield Poole, which features one sex scene between a black and a white man, started a huge discussion around that topic ten years later...*

Michel Foucault was writing in his book about friendship that it's not the sex between men which is confusing or dangerous for the society, it's the things which might come out of it: networks, friendships, groups for action... Can you relate Tearoom in any way to these thoughts?

WEJ: From the tone of the articles I get the sense that what really disturbed people was the mixing of different social classes and races, the notion that men could form bonds outside the models of marriage and conventional home life, the ideological state apparatus, if you will. It's important not to assume too much about the footage, though, because most of the men we see in the film would probably not consider themselves gay. Many of them were married, some of them had children.

DS: *That seems to be an unimportant part of it. It doesn't matter if they are gay or not...*

WEJ: I know, but people bring assumptions to the footage. One of the reasons the footage is presented in its entirety and silent is that people can in some small way empty their minds of their assumptions. You know, the footage had previously been presented in public: in court and in a movie that was used to instruct police forces. In these contexts the audience was told at every moment what to think of the footage. A prosecutor or a narrator told them who these people were and what acts they engaged in. I thought it would be really interesting to see how the footage worked without any commentary. In screenings I provide minimal context and then answer questions afterwards. I do not impose a reading upon the material in advance. That in itself is potentially liberating. Conceptually or philosophically this is an interesting position. How little can I do to the material to make it into something that provokes people, gives occasion for thought or gives pleasure? (William E. Jones interviewed by Dietmar Schwärzler: "More Than One Way to Watch a Movie!" Published in *Smell It!* Vienna: Kunsthalle Exnergasse, 2009. Excerpted from www.willamejones.com/collections/about/11)