# There's always more: the art of David McDiarmid

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# *There's Always More: The Art of David McDiarmid*

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*Abstract*

This thesis argues that the work of the artist David McDiarmid is to be read as an enactment of late twentieth century gay male and queer politics. It will analyse how both the idea and the cultural specificity of 'America' impacted on the work of this Australian artist resident in New York from 1979 to 1987. The thesis examines how African American music, The Beats, notions of 'hip' and 'cool', street art and graffiti, the underground dance club Paradise Garage, street cruising and gay male urban culture influenced the sensibility and the materiality of the artist's work. McDiarmid's cultural practice of dress and adornment, it is proposed, forms an essential part of his creative oeuvre and of the 'queer world-making' which is the driver of his creative achievements. The thesis proposes that McDiarmid was a Proto-queer artist before the politics of queer emerged in the 1980s and that his work, including his own life-as-art practices of dress and adornment, enact a mobile rather than fixed gay male identity.

## *Acknowledgments*

This thesis would not have been conceived and written had I not met Dr Peter McNeil in 2001. It was Roger Leong, now Curator of Fashion and Textiles at the National Gallery of Victoria who introduced us and began the series of conversations, initially on the visual culture of dance clubbing, which ultimately led to my decision to undertake this thesis. Peter's imagination, intuition and knowledge in his role of thesis supervisor and his unwavering confidence in my project have been inspirational for me. Dr Anna Munster, Dr Tony Ross and Dr Sue Best of the University of NSW College of Fine Arts, are jointly responsible for making suggestions which led me to decide to write in depth on David McDiarmid's art. My former Masters supervisor, Dr Bob Petersen, and academic staff at the College of Fine Arts encouraged and supported my application for the University of NSW College of Fine Arts Research Scholarship which allowed me to write full-time for two years.

Dr Ted Gott, Senior Curator of International Art at the National Gallery of Victoria, has been an intellectual fellow traveller in the process of uncovering and recording the depth of David McDiarmid's oeuvre, jointly with me, since David's death in 1995. Ted has been a companion at a distance throughout the writing of this thesis and I have often been grateful for his work on the chronology of David's life. Others who have assisted in the research and writing of this thesis directly or indirectly include: George Alexander, Stephen Alkins, Dr Liz Bradshaw, Rebecca Cox, Paul Craft, Billy Crawford, Brian Doherty, Bernard Fitzgerald, Pamela Gray, Ruben Gray, Dr Ian Henderson, Linda Jackson, Ivana Jirisek, John Kirkman, Robert Lake, Roger Leong, Bill Morley, Laura Murray Cree, Anna Rauls, Jane Richens, Brian Sayer, Penny Shore, Jason Smith, Ron Smith, Astrid Spielman, Madeline Spielman, Talulah Stephenson, Jeffrey Stewart, Annie Talve, Sarah Tucker, John Witte and Ellen Young.

Institutions which have assisted me include: The University of NSW, College of Fine Arts which in granting me the COFA Research Scholarship and a research travel grant enabled me to have the freedom to think and write and the opportunity to speak on McDiarmid's work to an international audience. The Museum of Modern Art at Heide, The National Gallery of Victoria, The National Gallery of Australia, The Australia Council for the Arts,

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The thesis is dedicated to the memory of David McDiarmid.

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# The Art of David McDiarmid

*History is made an inexhaustible enterprise only because of the ongoing movement of time, the pressure of futurity, the multiplicity of positions from which rewriting can and will occur. History is not the recovery of the truth of bodies or lives in the past; it is the engendering of new kinds of bodies and new kinds of lives. History is in part an index of our present pre-occupations, but perhaps more interestingly, the past is as rich as our futures allow.*

Elizabeth Grosz *This Nick of time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely* 2004, p255.

1. "There's Always More" is a repeated line from the song "Sly", from Massive Attack's *Protection* album, Circa Records, 1994

# Introduction

All art is political in one way or another and this thesis recognises the "always already *political* character of the very representational process and of the contest that it presupposes."[2] The thesis also proposes the political character of the *reception* of art and visual culture. That is, that where one stands, what world views one holds, what experience one has had, impacts on what one sees - indeed what one *can* see - and how one responds to what one sees. The thesis title derives from the idea that the self-consciously political is implicitly and or explicitly the refusal to accept 'what is'. It is in part an insistent reaching for the *more* that exceeds 'what is'. Or a reaching for the potentiality for *more* which exists in the productive liminal spaces between orthodox categories of 'what is'. The *more* referred to here is not the more of late capitalist consumption fetishism but the *more* made available by reaching across the space between the "already-there and the yet-to-come."[3]

Implicit in David McDiarmid's art oeuvre as a whole is a postmodern unsettling of the secure hierarchical cultural binaries of Western thought: high /low, masculine/ feminine, East/West, reason/intuition, good taste/bad taste. His work embraces an

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[2] Fabio Cleto. (1999). *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ann Arbor Michigan, University of Michigan Press, p35.
[3] Judith Butler. (1997). *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford, Stanford University Press p18.

open investigative approach to epistemic and aesthetic questions. McDiarmid adopted a practice characterised by "curiosity rather than faith" in the political art he produced from the 1970s to the 1990s.[4] A non-metaphysical drive towards the "unknown" is a characteristic of McDiarmid's creative practice as it reaches across locations, cultures and political imaginings creating hybridities and excesses and engaging in a nomadic play with multivalent subjectivity and performative masculinity. The artist engaged in an appropriative nomadic "conductivity" which refuses to acknowledge established bounds."[5]

The writer of this thesis is also implicated in an uncertain and curious practice of *reaching across* categories. This thesis works in the interstitial spaces of feminist thought and gay and lesbian history, across art historical and post structural discourses. I appropriate from urban theory, fashion theory, art theory and cultural studies in a restless search for the *more* which is required to make sense for me of recent cultural history. Epistemic meaning is sought in the liminal spaces between.

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[4] Thomas McEvilley. (1995). *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millennium.* New York, Documentext McPherson and Company. P172- 173.
[5] Nigel Thrift. (1996). *Spatial Formations*. London, Thousand Oaks, California, and New Delhi, Sage p 288.

## Beginnings

It was a question asked by art historian Robert Farris Thompson in his essay "Haring and the Dance" which provoked the initial investigative spark which ultimately led to the research and writing undertaken for this thesis. Robert Farris Thompson wrote in his catalogue essay for the 1997 Whitney Museum of American Art's Keith Haring retrospective: "The question emerges: What kind of dancer was Haring himself?" The subsequent discussion by Farris Thompson of Keith Haring's dancing at the Paradise Garage dance club encompassed interfaces between African American, Hispanic-American and Hip Hop music and related dance kinetics, urban subcultural lineages, the performativity of the street and the dance floor, street and subway graffiti and the dynamics of particular urban visual sensibilities.[6] It was the direct question about Keith Haring's actual dance style and the kinetics of his art work which opened up my own enquiry into the art work of David McDiarmid. This question of Farris Thompson's also raised questions for me about the cultural specificities of the Paradise Garage and led me to undertake a study of the work McDiarmid himself made in response to his own experience at this underground dance club.[7]

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[6] Robert Farris Thompson. (1996). "Haring and the Dance". *Keith Haring*. E. Sussman. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art.

[7] My enquiry was animated by my own experience of the Paradise Garage and my perception that it was a cultural site of some importance. I had first (repeatedly) danced there during a six month period in New York beginning in the summer of 1979 and on subsequent visits in the early to mid 1980s. I had long been curious about the origins of the power of its musical, aural and visual culture.

Ultimately my study expanded to become an investigation into the way in which McDiarmid's work as a whole was animated by an eclectic range of cultural influences including, among others, music and dance.

## The artist

David McDiarmid was born in Hobart in 1952 and died of AIDS related conditions in Sydney in 1995. He worked as an artist in both Sydney and New York from the early 1970s to the mid 1990s. McDiarmid's work was animated by a diverse range of cultural influences including the gay liberation movement and the counter cultural politics of the 1970s; the emergent politics of queer of the late 1980s and 1990s; gay male urban life in Manhattan; street art and graffiti; dance music and underground dance clubbing; elements of African American expressive culture including notions of 'hip' and 'cool'; feminist politics; traditional women's domestic craft practices; 'outsider art' and all aspects of the decorative.[8] His unusually eclectic embrace of a range of cultural influences reflected his open-ended relationship to his own subjectivity and his nomadic approach to cultural experience. His

[8] McDiarmid was attracted to the work of untrained or 'unworldly' (outsider) creators. Subway/street graffiti, street memorials and 'feminine' craft traditions were major influences. He visited and photographed the Watts Towers in Los Angeles in 1977 (by manual worker Simon Rodea), and took a sustained interest in rural, peasant and amateur art. See, Robert Malbert, et al, Ed. (1987). *In Another World: Outsider Art from Europe and America*. London, The Hayward Gallery and South Bank Centre.

work would find expression in a great range of creative modalities and material forms.

## The artist and the author

This writer was a friend and colleague of the artist for twenty-one years from 1974 until the artist's death. She is executor of the artist's estate, which has necessitated a formal post-death relationship of a particular character with the artist's legacy. An ongoing relationship with the materiality and cultural significance of the artist's work has been a necessary outcome of a role, which has included arranging private and public bequests of the artist's work.[9] While the writer has what might be called 'insider' knowledge which gives a certain insight into the artist's life and his political and personal concerns, the art work itself is regarded as the principal text of authority for the following work of interpretation.

It is true that David and I danced together and apart at the Paradise Garage; that he made for me his own self-fashioned clothes and art works as gifts; that we closely discussed over the years the creation of his art work in its different stages and locations; that we shared an eclectic political, aesthetic, intellectual

[9] The responsibilities of estate management have including arrangement of bequests from the estate to public art museums, publication permission and reproduction rights for the artist's work.

and social life in Sydney, New York and Melbourne. But in the end that is not the concern of this thesis. What I am interested in is how McDiarmid's work as a whole; its materiality, its conditions of reception, the cultural influences it encompassed and the way in which the time and place location of its making is enacted, can be considered. My own personal, aesthetic and political subjectivity, including my gender and sexuality is of course the formative condition for this work of interpretation.

## Death and friendship

To embrace the task of writing about a person who can no longer 'speak for himself', or argue with me about 'voice' or interpretation, takes a certain amount of ethical resolve. It has not been a simple matter to decide to write a PhD on an artist who was also a friend.[10] Jacques Derrida's work on what he calls the question of the post death "fidelity" which the living owe to dead friends has been of great ethical and epistemic interest in the undertaking of this thesis. Art of course, does not 'speak for itself' either and my work of interpretation is based not only on a close reading of the artist's work itself and the temporal and spatial conditions of its making but also on a certain "faith" on my part

[10] It was not my initial intention to write a PhD on the work of McDiarmid. I began writing about the visual culture of dance clubbing and the work of artists such as Haring and McDiarmid who were influenced by it. It was the very close reading of McDiarmid's work involved in this earlier project, along with strong encouragement by my academic advisers, at COFA UNSW, which convinced me to undertake a study solely on the work of this single artist.

(to continue with Derrida's language) that McDiarmid's own faith in his understanding of the specificities of *my politics* was not misplaced. That is that the presumptions within my interpretive project are predicated on an understanding, the artist himself claimed I possessed, of "the politics of [his] work".[11] Derrida's evocation of both "the danger and the necessity" of speaking, not just of the dead themselves, but also of their "works, their deeds, or their signature" was apposite for me in considering this undertaking. The positing of both "danger" and " necessity" seemed eloquently to express the ambivalence one might have about writing, in this context, of a dead friend. I am thinking of the "danger" of misrepresenting or presuming. Along with the "necessity" of speaking, of giving an account of the artist's work, but also as Judith Butler would say "of oneself."[12] Derrida recognises in his writing about the creative work of his friends (who are now dead) that it is not just the work's "systematicity and coherence" but also "its ability to hold something in reserve or surprise for us" which is of most interest and potential longevity. He pays tribute to a friend's work by "bearing witness

[11] When I asked McDiarmid why he had asked me (four years before his death) and not one of his gay male (or lesbian) friends, to be the executor of his estate and custodian of his visual legacy he answered something to the effect that "I trust your understanding of the *politics of my work* better than I trust anybody else on this." Personal communication with the artist,1991.

[12] Judith Butler. Lecture (this author's notes), City Recital Hall, Angel Place, Sydney June 18, 2005.

not just to what it has taught us but to the questions it has opened up and left us."[13]

I regard this open-ended regard for the work of others as a model for my own work of interpretation of David McDiarmid's work. Appropriately, I believe, this thesis provides a discursive and open-ended account of the artist's work. Not only is the work of McDiarmid itself polysemic, the account within this thesis, while it is comprehensive, thoughtful and dedicated, is also polysemic. It cannot in the nature of things be final. The work of the artist will, as Derrida says, "hold something in reserve or surprise for us."[14]

My approach has been to follow those threads, that I read in McDiarmid's work, which hold most creative, affective and intellectual resonance for me. In other words I am interested in those aspects of McDiarmid's work which resonate most pleasurably for me with my own 'life-as-art' politics. These resonances include my own interest in cultural aspects of the urban; dance; African-American music and clubbing; the racial harmonics which are sometimes possible in certain time-space configurations; a life-long engagement with feminism; the daring involved in a sex-positive life and the intellectually and culturally

[13] Jacques Derrida. (Eds Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas) (2001). *The Work of Mourning*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press p28.

productive interstitial spaces of queer. I always liked David McDiarmid's work, its visual excess and political resolve, and the delight the artist appeared to take in the eclectic 'maverick Orientalism' of appropriation he engaged in.[15] It is *my* delight to retrace and retrieve some of the trajectories and cultural locations he himself travelled and traversed in the creation of his work.

The visual has primacy over the verbal in the interpretation of art, Mieke Bal suggests, and the image itself should be allowed to speak.[16] While, as I have said, I regard McDiarmid's work as the centre and the triggering source of the ideas explored in this thesis, I have also been free in my exploration of the social, political, aesthetic and cultural issues which I believe arise from looking closely at the work. Following Rosalind Krauss I have avoided a simply biographical account which reduces art history to biography.[17] My argument however, is that McDiarmid's own subjectivity is both the content of his work and its principal concern. An investigation of masculine subjectivities, including this artist's play with his own mobile performative subjectivity, therefore forms one of the main investigative concerns of this

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[14] Ibid.
[15] Ross Andrew. "Uses of Camp" pp 308-328 in Cleto, Fabio (1999). *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ann Arbor Michigan, University of Michigan Press p320.
[16] Mieke Bal. (1998). "Seeing Signs: The Use of Semiotics for the Understanding of Visual Art". *The Subjects of Art History*. M. Cheetham. Cambridge, UK and New York, Cambridge University Press.
[17] Quoted in Jonathan Harris. (2001). *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction*. London and New York, Routledge, p 51.

thesis. T. J. Clark has noted that "background" may sometimes become "foreground" in the analysis of the history and context of the creation of works of art. I agree with Clark that in proposing the contemporary relevance of the art of a previous period (in the case of McDiarmid, 1975-1995) one must look with curiosity at the work's "specificity of historical conjunctures."[18]

This project of interpretation of the work of David McDiarmid intends, as I have said, not to imply a singular authoritative view but to create possible new discursive access to important aspects of the work of a remarkable artist. Dead friends remain in some way "forever unknown and infinitely secret" and their works undecided and open to unknowable possible futures, Derrida writes.[19] It is the artist's work itself – its form, materials, techniques and concerns, its location in time and place - which is the starting point for the direction of the research, the central interpretive concern and the organising principle of the thesis.

## McDiarmid within Australian contemporary art

This thesis is the first sustained investigation of David McDiarmid's extensive oeuvre and the first to comprehensively propose some of the potential readings, important influences and

[18] Harris. (2001). Op. cit., p 70.
[19] Derrida. (2001). Op. cit., p28

themes within the artist's whole career.[20] While the artist's work is represented in several major Australian art museum collections, and in private collections in Australia, the United States and Japan, discussion of his work is under-represented in accounts of late twentieth century Australian art and post modern culture.

Contemporary interest in re-interrogating the cultural importance of the 1970s makes a full appraisal of McDiarmid's work of interest, even if only for its historical significance as the work of a 'gay artist' engaging in the identity politics of the gay liberation period of the 1970s.[21] McDiarmid would be remembered, if for nothing else, as a gay cultural activist. He was one of the so-called "'78-ers" who demonstrated in defence of gay rights in Sydney in 1978 and, as an artist, he subsequently became noted as one of the co-creators of the aesthetic sensibility of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parades and parties which were a direct result of the 1978 events.

But the artist's importance extends beyond the work of the 1970s. In terms of historical interest the artist will also be remembered for

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[20] While both the author of this thesis and Dr Ted Gott, have published articles on aspects of the artist's work, (listed in the bibliography) no extensive exploration of the artist's whole career has been undertaken.
[21] Shelton Waldrep. Ed. (2000). *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*. New York and London, Routledge.

his internationally recognised Safe Sex campaign posters of the 1990s commissioned in 1992 by the AIDS Council of NSW. These posters are widely seen as a daring example of the cultural politics involved in the unusually successful (in world terms) public health campaign approach of Australian state and national governments to the AIDS crisis in the 1980s and 1990s. McDiarmid will, at the very least, be remembered as an avant-garde political artist whose work was concerned with challenging and defying cultural and sexual norms within the context of that politically vibrant period of the 1970s and in the sexual politics of AIDS in the 1990s.

I claim, using a distinction made by Craig Owens, that the artist's work is of interest not just for its *historical* importance but importantly for its contemporary *critical* interest.[22] His work engages, as I will explain, contemporary critical concerns regarding interrogation of fixed ideas of identity; mobile 'becoming' subjectivities; the performative enactment of gender; investigation of the idea of 'masculine masquerade'; an interest in the radical potential of a re-configured idea of 'excess' and revitalised interest in what constitutes the 'political' in art.

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[22] Craig Owens. (1992). *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power and Culture*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, University of California Press, p52.

## Materialising a mobile postmodern subjectivity

While this thesis investigates historically significant aspects of the artist's creative work, my contention is that the artist is of ongoing contemporary, as much as historical, cultural interest. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes, Robert Martin refers to the "fluidity" of an identity which "suggests a self yet to be made", or one which is constantly becoming. Listing books he might one day write, Barthes suggested he might write "The Discourse of Homosexuality" or "The discourses of homosexuality" or again, "The discourse of homosexualities."[23]

McDiarmid's work is an evocation of such a notion. That is a notion of multiple, polysemic discourses of sexuality and multiple possible homosexualities. In the course of his career, and in the performative practice of being gay artist, McDiarmid chose to place himself in a number of liminal cultural zones relating to geography, sexuality, gender, race, culture, history and aesthetics which give his work a multivalent complexity and makes a viewing of his work as simply a matter of a politics of fixed (gay) identity unnecessarily limited.

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[23] Roland Barthes. "*Projets de livres* - Projected Books" in Susan Sontag, Ed. (2000). *A Roland Barthes Reader*. London, Vintage, p420

From the beginning of his career the artist worked with the themes and concerns of postmodernity in a practice which, from the early 1970s, appropriated shamelessly from pre-existing and pre-published sources. His work participated in postmodern and post-Pop disruption of notions of high and low culture and the unsettling of the privileged speaking position of traditional power elites. He set out to unseat the modernist meta-narratives of mastery, which were, among other things, patriarchal and hetero-normative[24]

The point of art in a postmodern context, as Thomas McEvilley remarks, is not formal originality but one of response to the ambient world moment in which the artist finds her/himself. The loss of a sense of history from the 1980s onwards, he suggests throws emphasis back on the present as the only living moment to which an artist can respond. The art of the fragment and quotation throws all of history up into the air in a spatial rather than temporal idea of historical time.[25] McDiarmid's response to time and place, especially from the date of his first visit to United States in 1977, has the kind of focused present-moment intensity of this spatial rather than temporal historicity. The work's 'only now' affective intensity is also inflected by the artist's response to AIDS from the mid 1980s.

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[24] John Storey. (1998). "Post Modernism and Popular Culture". *Critical Dictionary of Post Modern thought*. S. Sim. Cambridge, UK, Icon Books: 147-157, p147.

## Eclecticism and fragment

McDiarmid's practice is the antithesis of the Greenbergian notion of the artist deriving inspiration from the medium they work in. "I've got about five different styles I've played with [in my art]," the artist said in an interview in 1992, "I explore and stop and go on to something else and I always have for twenty years."[26] His diverse techniques, materials and modalities place his practice in a tangential relationship to mainstream modernist ideas of what constitutes the artist and art. He operates from the 1970s onwards in a great range of creative methodologies, which were developed in self-contained and visually coherent suites of work often substantially unlike what he had, till then, previously produced.

Methods employed by this artist for the creation of works of art for exhibition include the following range of medium and method: painting in gouache and acrylic on paper, canvas and cloth; drawing in watercolour, graphite pencil and coloured pencil; paper based collage; 'combine paintings' made from materials which included found linoleum flooring, cut and tiled holographic Mylar 'mosaic' and cut and stitched plastics; 3D installations of found objects; off-set printed multiples and several series of

[25] McEvilley. (1995). Op. cit., p165.
[26] David McDiarmid, interview with Carmela Baranowska, 1992. Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

computer generated and laser printed works. His art work often included text, either appropriated or self-invented, and he also produced writing for publication and performance. In addition to his art practice, McDiarmid created his own range of hand-crafted fashion garments; finely executed fabric painting for use in a high fashion context; graphic design for political and cultural contexts such as posters for the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras and Safe Sex posters as part of AIDS public health campaigns. He designed and supervised the production of large 3D sculptures for the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parades, for which he was for a time paid art director, and made domestic interior murals and painted floors for friends. He was an aficionado of Black Atlantic music and a dance party DJ both in a paid capacity and as an art practice.[27]

McDiarmid's ironic distance from the idea of a singular subjectivity and his appropriative impulses led him to employ a wide range of visual sources for his art. Unfixing the authority of the 'original' and the 'authentic' he appropriated visual material from advertising; comic strips; popular American film; fan magazines; the erotic sentimentality of popular music; quilting

[27] David McDiarmid was a DJ for Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parties, private parties and gay clubs in Sydney in the late 1980s and 1990s. His compilation tape entitled *Funeral Hits of the '90s* is in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia. The term Black Atlantic is borrowed from Paul Gilroy and refers here to the popular musical traditions arising from the post-slavery African American diaspora.
See Paul Gilroy. (1993). *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

and embroidery; Situationist-influenced punk fanzines; commercial graphics; gay male pornography; street art and graffiti; newspaper headlines; architectural mosaics and the radiant aesthetics of urban night life and the underground dance club. His choice of sources underlines the nomadic nature of his sexual and identity politics.

The artist's work implicitly and explicitly critiques the hegemonic power of existing cultural norms, the binaries of 'good' and 'bad taste, 'high' and 'low' art, and the ideological power of bourgeois gender and sexual categories. In the case of the early work, all of this takes place within the highly conservative, provincial world of 1970s Australia, a "closet of protestant mediocrity".[28] The complex, and sometimes oblique, ways McDiarmid presents and explores his subjectivity establishes a complex dynamic between the artist's performance of 'becoming' in his life and his art. His practice "celebrates … a sexuality that eludes capture and that constantly reasserts itself" through his art.[29]

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[28] Sam Schoenbaum, Australian artist, friend and contemporary of McDiarmid, who lived in New York at the same time as McDiarmid writes that "The Melbourne I grew up in was itself a closet of protestant mediocrity". Typescript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW

[29] Robert Martin, "Roland Barthes: Towards an "Ecriture Gaie" "pp 282-298 in David Bergman. Ed. (1993). *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. Amherst, Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Press p284.

## Theory and difference

From the late twentieth century, concepts of difference - the gendered, sexual and racial 'other' - have been energetically explored in feminist theory, film, literary and art theory, and in post-colonial studies, gay and lesbian studies, cultural studies and queer theory.[30] A work of interpretation, such as this thesis - of McDiarmid's work as a gay activist artist and of his role as a cultural activist - necessitates an engagement with theoretical insights into difference.

This thesis will draw upon recent theories of performative gender and sexuality; urban theory; post modern theories of dress and adornment; feminism and queer theory, among other theoretical insights, to interpret and propose potential meanings and contemporary relevance of McDiarmid's work. Theory is not understood here as providing fixed first principles from which an interpretive scheme would follow. Theory is not a "pre-determined interpretive frame" but instead it is part of a creative development of thinking and ideas as they encounter different objects and cultural phenomena.[31]

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[30] Naomi Schor and Elizabeth Weed. Eds. (1994). *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Studies*. Providence RI, Brown University.
[31] Gill Perry. Ed. (2004). *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practice*. Malden, Mass. Oxford UK. Carlton, Australia, Blackwell, p14.

I have freely taken insights and understandings from feminist, queer and post-structural thinkers when they seemed fruitful in the context of my interpretive project. Similarly, as stated above, my intention is not to suggest a single point of perception for looking at McDiarmid's intentionality, the potential meanings of his work, or its historical contexts. I have taken the openings which I see arising from within the artist's work itself to explore those theoretical and epistemic pathways which seemed to me to be most generative of the kind of understanding I was seeking of the multiple meanings available to a reading of this artist's work.

It is not new to remark on the importance of issues of gender and sexuality in postmodern thought, especially in discussion of representation. Questions of voice, speaking position, visibility and invisibility are themes that are no longer hidden or marginal in discussions of culture. They impact equally powerfully on processes of reception as well as on those of representation. Pamela Robertson's work on feminist camp has, for example, been of interest in the writing of this thesis in its re-positioning of the hitherto one-sided discussion of potential interfaces between female subjectivity and gay male sensibility and the ways in which women (both lesbian and straight) may read gay male culture.[32]

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[32] Pamela Robertson. (1996). *Guilty Pleasures: Feminist Camp from Mae West to Madonna*. Durham and London, Duke University Press, p9.

Robertson, strongly disputes the proposition put forward by Moe Meyer that queer and camp sensibility and or performativity – both in cultural representation and in cultural reception - are ultimately confined in an essentialist manner to homosexual men.[33] She and Fabio Cleto agree that Meyer's position on this matter is an unhelpfully essentialist one.[34] Robertson astutely notes that relationships between women and gay men are highly problematic and that it is almost impossible to speak of the complexities contained within them. She remarks that "we have as yet, almost no way to talk about … the many close ties and friendships shared by women and gay men. This is in spite of what she calls their very routineness, their "of-courseness."[35]

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's 1993 essay *White Glasses* is an entertaining encapsulation of the complex relations of identification (both identification *with* and identification *as*) between a straight woman, in this case Sedgwick herself, and a gay man she admires, Michael Lynch (who died of AIDS-related conditions in 1991). She uses Lynch's white "patio furniture" glasses as an almost ineffable cultural trope with which to approach the unutterable complexity of the relation she is

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[33] Moe Meyer. Ed. (1994). *The Politics and Poetics of Camp*. London and New York, Routledge, p5.
[34] Fabio Cleto. (1999). *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ann Arbor Michigan, University of Michigan Press, pp17-19.
[35] Robertson. Op. cit., p8.

describing. This essay eloquently approaches the question of 'speaking position' for a writer writing about one whose subjectivity is so different from her own.

## Not 'speaking for others'

My own interpretive endeavour here is of course inflected by my own (mobile) political subjectivity, my own theoretical preferences - most notably various feminisms and the new readings made available by queer theory - and my own aesthetic and affective predispositions. Aware since the 1970s of the dictum against 'speaking for others', I am nonetheless refusing to elide the trajectories of political intersection between gay male sensibility (whatever that may mean) and feminism (with its multiple inflections).[36] Studies of subcultures have tended to talk about one subculture at a time; "one gender, one race, ethnicity, class, one category, one difference at a time."[37]

However contemporary theory including the new conceptions of 'queer', pioneered by Judith Butler and others, have dissolved the certainties around essentialist ideas of identity. This thesis will investigate sexual, gender and racial intersections which are predicated on a notion of a mobile "performative" subject, in Butler's terms, rather than a 'natural', essential identity which can

[36] Simon Watney, "Introduction", in Owens, (1992). Op.cit., px.

be discovered or uncovered and from which all else follows. Neither my own predisposition nor McDiarmid's creative practice conforms to this model. McDiarmid's practice was eclectic if it was anything, as this thesis will show. Our long-term (itself multi-faceted) friendship was in part predicated on our shared refusal to accept 'what is' including orthodox receptions about 'who is who' and who can comprehend and speak about what.

## Reception of McDiarmid's work

An eclectic creative practice - which included not just a great range of artistic modalities but also a fashion and decorative arts and 'community arts' practice - has made McDiarmid's work difficult to encapsulate in conventional accounts of the art of his period. The artist's broad interdisciplinarity has made a reappraisal of his work a fruitful undertaking in light of current interest in the mobile and productive 'spaces between', the liminal space, between cultural categories. He located himself in an unstable relationship to the conventional masculinities of the world of 'high' art in his adoption of a diaristic, self-disclosing, and autobiographical mode - a cultural mode conceived as 'feminine'. His adoption of embroidery, stitchery, quilting and other craft forms, along with many aspects of the decorative in

[37] Robertson, Pamela (1996). Op cit., p7.

his work was a studied connection with debased feminine, domestic traditions.

McDiarmid is an artist whose work has polarised opinions. He attracted gay male partisan supporters – both collectors and curators - for his political engagement as a gay artist and also had broad admirers for his work's funky surface glamour and its daring. His work, like that of some other gay men and women, has sometimes been effectively reduced to the sexuality of its author.[38] It has been seen as possibly too gay or political to be taken seriously as art. And also perhaps paradoxically as too *kitsch*, slight, vulgar or decorative to be seriously considered as the work of a male artist. Previously influential theoretical analysis of Australian leftist and feminist political art of his period has been unable to find a way to embrace McDiarmid's queer creative practice, including perhaps surprisingly, his 'community arts' practice, with its more recognisable social democratic and agitprop context.[39] Moreover his gay liberation and queer political creative oeuvre, produced for an exhibiting gallery context, was also substantially elided from broad discussion of Australian

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[38] eg Joanna Mendelsohn. "Gay Art Comes Out Of Its Bondage" *The Australian Weekend Review,* Feb 5-6, 1994, Christopher Allen. "Art at the Margin" *The Sydney Morning Herald,* Feb 20, 1991.

[39] McDiarmid engaged, throughout his career, in what is usually classified in Australia as a 'community arts' practice, that is one in which marginal or excluded groups are 'given voice' through art. He created posters, badges and magazine design for Gay Liberation in the early 1970s and made creative community interventions such as his 1992 ACON-commissioned Safe Sex posters, until his death in 1995.

political and leftist art.[40] And on the other hand retrieval of the political in art has been derided by critics who regard it as the ultimate in naivete and bad judgement.[41]

Similarly, Australian critical engagement with postmodernity and curatorial initiatives such as the self-styled *Popism* of the 1980s, largely missed McDiarmid's work, possibly because he was by then resident in New York.[42] The influential critic Paul Taylor was developing the curatorial and critical writing projects in question in Melbourne in the 1980s and McDiarmid had left Australia in 1979. However late in the artist's career several feminist, or otherwise radical, curators and critics have engaged with the formal and political concerns of McDiarmid's work.[43]

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[40] Ian Burn. (1984). "The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath". *Anything Goes*. P. Taylor. Melbourne, Art and Text.
[41] Colless, Edward (1992). " 'The Total Look' Decor and Ambience." *Art and Text* (41): 47-49.
[42] Despite fairly obvious intellectual and visual resonances with the show's intent, McDiarmid was not included in the seminal *Popism* exhibition curated by Paul Taylor at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne in 1982. See: Paul Taylor. (1982). *POPISM Exhibition catalogue essay*. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria. See also: Allan Schwartzman. (no date). "Introduction". *After Andy: New York in the Eighties*. P. Taylor. Melbourne, Schwartz City and the Australia Council**:** 9-10. Allan Schwartzman notes that Paul Taylor, even after his move to New York in 1984, appeared to be uninterested in homosexuality as an art issue. Schwartzman notes that it was only after Taylor's own diagnosis with HIV that he became interested in gay male art and "celebrated radicals" .
[43] For example: Liz Bradshaw. "Myth, Fantasy and Reality for Leather Pride" *Capital Q* April 30 1993; Helen Grace. "Beyond Coming Out", *Sydney Star Observer* , Feb 8 1991; Curator, Ted Gott included McDiarmid's work in his major show at the National Gallery of Australia, *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art In The Age of AIDS*, in 1994 and has subsequently written several journal articles on the artist, noted in the bibliography; Judy Annear included a major piece by McDiarmid in the 1995 *Australian Perspecta;* Judith O'Callaghan included McDiarmid's agitprop work in the Powerhouse Museum's *Absolutely Mardi Gras* exhibition in 1998.

## *The inventive nexus of the in-between*

McDiarmid's work is of significant contemporary interest for the way in which it presciently engages with several major theoretical concerns in recent art history and theory. His work sits on the "inventive nexus of the in between", to use Marsha Meskimmon's term.[44] It engages the creative space between many of the dualisms within Western art and culture such as those of theory and practice; politics and art; the serious and the frivolous discussed in the chapters which follow. The artist's practice is "both mobile and located"; it is inflected by its time and space locations and the politics and cultural concerns of his time and at the same time implicitly proposes concerns beyond these. It lies in between, and *in excess of,* the issues, norms and dominant art practices of his period.[45] From the beginning of his art career McDiarmid refused to conform to a singular idea of what an artist of his time was, or should be, and what kind of creative output was appropriate for a male artist of his generation: "I understood that I was in a strange position of marrying politics and art and sex which even in Sydney in the mid 70s was pretty unusual."[46]

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[44] Marsha Meskimmon. (2004). "Corporeal Theory with/in Practice: Christine Borland's Winter Garden". *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art: the Visibility of Women's Practice*. G. Perry. Op cit., p125.
[45] ibid., p126.
[46] David McDiarmid interviewed by Paul Canning, March 1993. Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers State Library of NSW.

McDiarmid's art practice is replete with the complexities, fragilities and provisionalities of the emerging and mobile gendered subjectivity of interest to contemporary theory.[47] It presages contemporary interest in performative masculinities in its investigation, from the 1970s onwards, of tropologies of masculinity.[48] The work is generated out of an aesthetic at play within radically different styles and modalities, unsettling Greenbergian and post-Greenbergian notions of a consistent body of work which characterises an artist's oeuvre and denotes a reliable creative subjectivity.

A rampant appropriative impulse in the artist's work from the early 1970s to the 1990s exemplifies postmodernist interest in appropriation and the associated de-centring of the authentic and the original as well as the idea of the singular creative subject. Similarly an interest in the debased, the popular, the sentimental and the domestic, unseats the authority which decides what is art and what is *kitsch*.[49] The artist's performative play, both within his work and in his life, with the idea of 'artist' and 'identity' both shadows the practice of artists such as Andy Warhol and Gilbert

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[47] Judith Butler. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London, Routledge.
[48] Andrew Perchuk, and Helaine Posner, Eds. (1995). *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*. Cambridge Massachusetts and London, The MIT Press.
[49] Clement Greenberg, " Avant Garde and Kitsch", in Clement Greenberg, (1965). *Art and Culture, Critical Essays*. Boston, Beacon Press.

and George and presages that of more recent artists such as Tracey Emin.[50]

McDiarmid's work "enfolds theory with/in practice" in a contemporary way well in advance of the proscriptive binaries which were at play in the 1970s when he first creatively linked politics and art.[51] In this way the early work exceeds the limitations of the then current neo-Marxist privileging of content over style in discussion and practice of art and politics. It engages in a camp aesthetic politics which unsettles notions of what is serious and what is not. The artist's work, consistently over time, entertains the viewer with its camp play with style, irony, excess, and culturally dissonant notions of the decorative and the pretty. It simultaneously and [para]doxically sets out to "materialise concepts, make ideas and multiply meaning."[52]

## Proto queer

McDiarmid's practice both expressed and prefigured developments in gay male politics, culture and theory. While the early work is fruitfully seen as part of the 1970s gay liberation

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[50] Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend, Eds. (2002). *The Art of Tracey Emin*. London, The Art of Tracey Emin.

[51] While art and politics was a theme at this time it was of a particular character and did not in general include examination of masculinities or male sexual subjectivity. Political art was generally thought of in terms of content and took particular forms such as 'conceptual art'. Burn, Ian (1984). "The 1960s: Crisis and Aftermath". *Anything Goes*. P. Taylor. Melbourne, Art and Text.

[52] Meskimmon. (2004). Op. cit., p124.

project, it can also be seen as presciently 'proto-queer' in its sophisticated destabilising play with ideas of 'identity'.[53] It is an implicit and explicit suggestion in much of what follows below that McDiarmid's artistic practice can be read as presciently 'proto-queer' before the advent of queer theory. This proto-queerness is usefully explored in the transitive sense of the meaning of 'queer' expounded by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. She argues for queer as a way of disrupting available thinking about sexuality rather than a search for category definitions.

Not linked to fixed sexual identities or practices or an innate sexual nature, queer, for Kosofsky Sedgwick, is a "continuing moment, movement, motive – recurrent, eddying, *troublant*." Tracing an etymology of queer, she writes: "The word "queer" itself means *across* – it comes from the Indo-European root -*twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*."[54] From the beginning of his practice as an artist, as I show in Chapter One, McDiarmid manifested in his work a mobile subjectivity in the process of 'becoming' gay man.

While it is undeniable that his project was a confident assertion of non-hetero-normative sexuality and 'gay rights' within the

[53] David M. Halperin. (2002). *How To Do The History Of Homosexuality*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press.

frameworks of 1970s identity politics, it was also a project of more open-ended questioning and the mobile 'becoming' of a self yet to be made, or one which is constantly remakeable and ultimately polysemic. It is such a mobility in the construction of a sexual and gendered subjectivity which I believe is one of the most interesting aspects of the project of evolving political subjectivity which is brought to material form in McDiarmid's oeuvre.

1970s identity politics on the other hand was based on relatively essentialist notions of identity. You *were* gay or straight. You *were* male or female. The ideas of complex 'in between' spaces and the 'becoming' spaces of queer theory were yet to become current. Although McDiarmid's work was manifestly concerned with gay male identity, Gay Liberation and gay rights, his embracing of an understanding that identity was not a simple matter informed his take on his own gendered, sexual and political subjectivity as expressed in his work.

Looking at his practice, his performative play with the role of 'artist', and his extant art work, McDiarmid appears to have found useful the idea that the individual as a discrete, consistent subject was neither factual, possible, nor interesting. The concept of the modernist subject as "coherent, or centred, in the sense of being

[54] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. (1993). *Tendencies*. Durham, Duke University Press. p xii.

relatively consistent over time and in different situations," was one around which McDiarmid seemed to be performing an unsettling play which would have the effect of destabilising its coherence. The model of a true, authentic subject implies within the Western cultural tradition "a unified, autonomous human being and accommodates a relatively simple concept of identity."[55] McDiarmid's work engages in a creative politics of *excess* which involves the *exceeding* of fixed categories of identity and an engagement with a mobile proto-queer subjectivity.

Queer theory, as Mark Turner says, may lead us to "think outside the grand narratives that continue to see terms such as 'men' and 'women' in more or less uncomplicated ways." As he puts it, this has the potentiality to "get us beyond binary thinking ('gay' and 'straight'), of the sort that has defined so much of the way urban modernity is understood."[56] It is not remarkable of course to characterise McDiarmid's later work of the 1980s and 1990s as queer. Queer cultural politics and 'queer theory' arose in the 1980s and 1990s as a response to the AIDS epidemic in the West. It was a way of responding to the re-mergence of virulent homophobia and a way of conceiving of a "Queer Nation" of resistance.

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[55] Sue Rowley in Noris Ioannou. Ed. (1992). *Craft in Society: An Anthology of Perspectives*. Fremantle, Western Australia, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, p 182.
[56] Mark. W Turner. (2003). *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London*. London, Reaktion Books, p45.

The cultural politics which emerged around this moment was familiar to McDiarmid and his work of this period can be seen as part of a global (Western) cultural political movement including the work of groups such as ACT-UP and Gran Fury.[57] It is within the context of the earlier Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s before the advent of queer theory in the 1980s, as I explore in Chapter One, that McDiarmid's art and the discursive creative practices of his life can be read as 'proto-queer'.

## Hybridity, 'hip', and 'cool'

McDiarmid demonstrated, in the influences he allowed to impact on his work, a postmodern lack of respect for Euro-centric hierarchies of cultures and cultural categories. An essentialist perception of cultural fixities which was a legacy of colonialism was unsettled in McDiarmid's art practice by what Andrew Ross has called a "maverick Orientalism," of appropriation.[58] I discuss in Chapter Two how McDiarmid's work enacts something of the geographic and cultural nomadism, which has been associated with Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. In their work on nomadic thought Deleuze and Guattari speak of the "deterritorialising"

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[57] McDiarmid noted in 1992 that his favourite writers up to that time included Douglas Crimp, Cindy Patton and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, all of whom had by that time written on AIDS politics and /or queer theory. Interview with Carmela Baranowska, 1992 (no date). Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers State Library of NSW.

[58] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri. (2004). *A Thousand Plateaus*. London and New York, Continuum, p321.

involved in the process of "becoming."[59] In Chapter Two writing on the impact of 'America', both idea and place, on McDiarmid's work I refer to the work of urban theorist Nigel Thrift, who draws on Deleuze and Guatarri's ideas of a 'becoming', 'nomadic' subject. As Thrift says, a nomadic subject does not "immure itself in the edifice of an ordered interiority; it moves freely in an element of exteriority. It does not impose an identity; it notes difference."[60]

It is as if McDiarmid's art work is an attempt to "yield a vision which is neither pure synthesis, conflating all culture into one, nor pure diaeresis, separating cultures out by insistence on an absolute integrity of ethnic identity."[61] On the one hand an essentialist view of culture makes significant cultural mixing impossible. And on the other, cultural mixings and appropriations by Euro-cultural subjects are liable to be caught in the kinds of unconscious neo-colonial enactments, which have been eloquently elaborated by Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak. However, there are openings of possibility in a more discursive and less hierarchical view of culture. As Paul Ricoeur remarks: "Suddenly

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[59] ibid.
[60] Nigel Thrift. (1996). *Spatial Formations*. London, Thousand Oaks, Calif, and New Delhi, Sage, p288.
[61] McEvilley. (1995). Op. cit., p175.

it becomes possible that there are just *others*, that we ourselves are an "other" among others."[62]

McDiarmid was participating in, through his eclectic netting of fragments, codes and cultures, a "meltdown from manifestly different matrices." He employs "multi-coded conflations" from elements of different contemporary cultures without making an attempt at ontological integrity.[63] As African American scholar, Cornel West says in speaking about Michel Foucault's adherence to his own cultural formation, there is no particular virtue in staying within the limits of our own cultural inheritance.[64] The liminal as an interstitial space of possible movement between fixed categories, including cultural ones, allows the possibility of cultural hybridity in which difference does not imply hierarchy and cultural change may occur. This could enable transcultural space in which personal and communal subjectivity may be newly articulated.[65]

McDiarmid's creative practice was receptive to the non-Western and pre-modern in world culture and was particularly inflected by notions of 'hip' and 'cool', appropriated from African American culture. Kobema Mercer notes that one of the

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[62] Quoted in Owens. (1992). Op. cit., p166.
[63] McEvilley. (1995). Op. cit., p176.
[64] Cornel West. (1992). "The Postmodern Crisis of the Black Intellectuals". *Cultural Studies*. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. Treichler. New York and London, Routledge: 689-705.

engagements of post modernism was the, in part unacknowledged, response to the emerging voices of African, Caribbean and Asian people hitherto excluded from the tropes of modernity. McDiarmid's involvement with African American "expressive culture," including House music and dance, opened his work up to an aesthetic range it could possibly not otherwise have achieved.[66] The nearly untranslatable notion of 'cool' in art and performative cultural subjectivity involves, according to Robert Farris Thompson, an attitude of "deeply and complexly motivated, consciously artistic, interweaving of elements serious and pleasurable, of responsibility and of play."[67] 'Cool' in its translation within McDiarmid's work includes a materialising of tensions between 'serious' and 'play' and the idea of "grace under pressure" as a performative relationship to cultures of the street and later the politics of AIDS.[68]

Creative intersections between African American and gay male urban cultures of the United States involved a "shared tension between status quo and change", between an "outsider's status" and the desire for the overcoming of oppression.[69] Identification is

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[65] Homi Bhabha 1994 *The Location of Culture,* p4.
[66] Gilroy. (1993). Op. Cit. p101.
[67] Robert Farris Thompson. (1998). "An Aesthetic of Cool". *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics"*. B. Beckley. New York, Allworth Press and School of Visual Arts**:** 371-394, p372.
[68] Robert Farris Thompson. (1983). *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York, Random House, p16.
[69] Kai Fikentscher. ( 2000). *You Better Work! Underground Dance Music in New York City*. Hanover and London, University Press of New England, p95.

a complex business, as Diana Fuss eloquently elaborates, taking the concept of identification from its Freudian origins into a broader discussion of alterity. Identifications are, she says, the "origins of some of our most powerful, enduring and deeply felt pleasures. They are also the source of considerable emotional turmoil, capable of unsettling or unmooring the precarious groundings of our everyday identities." Identification is always a matter of *relation* of self to other and of inside to outside.[70] In Chapters Three and Four I explore how McDiarmid's work was inflected by the racial and ethnic specificities of the urban streets and dance floors of New York in a fragmenting and sampling, 'synthetic' practice of appropriation.

Notions of 'hip', which McDiarmid first encountered in Melbourne in the early 1970s through the writing of the American Beats, also came to be a major inflecting trope in his work. Like 'cool', the notion of 'hip' came to North America from West Africa as a cultural legacy of slavery. Hip involves the process of opening one's eyes and being aware, of having insider knowledge beyond the ordinary.[71] This is also one of the tropes of gay male urban culture with its coded subcultural signs and mappings which in themselves are also themes within the artist's work. 'Hipness' became one of the tropes of postmodernity as a 'hip' younger

[70] Diana Fuss. (1995). *Identification Papers*. New York and London, Routledge, pp2-3.
[71] John Leland. (2004). *Hip, The History*. New York, Ecco and Harper Collins, pp14-15.

generation refused the cultural certainties of modernism. McDiarmid's engagement of popular music and other aspects of popular culture within art was one of the marks of 'hip' as John Storey remarks. [72]

## A 'vocation of the self' and performative masculinities

In all of his varied creative modalities, McDiarmid enlisted an energetic resistance to hegemonic sexual, social and cultural norms, performing his life and work as a project of "self as vocation" as Roland Barthes puts it.[73] Such a vocation, for McDiarmid, was one in which a fearless exploration of the self, its possibilities and contradictions became at once an exercise in consciousness, a drive towards freedom and a search for ways to embody desire in a life and in a life's work. Not content with a simplistic idea of 'gay' or any other 'identity' as encompassed in 1970s identity politics, McDiarmid was a courageous explorer of the psychological, sexual and emotional in his work.

Early engagement in the 1970s with the feminist-derived 'personal is political' practices of consciousness-raising gave McDiarmid's work a diaristic, autobiographical and self-disclosing content in excess of then current norms for male artists, and his work

[72] Storey, John (1998). Op. cit., p148.

resembles in this way what was then being done by feminist artists. His encompassing of himself into his work from the 1970s until the 1990s, using his own gendered and sexual subjectivity as the source from which the work took its starting point, stands out now as an unusually radical masculine creative practice.

McDiarmid's 1993 autobiographical essay *A Short History of Facial Hair* is a tracing, in a camp ironic voice, of the history of gay male appearance typologies from the 1970s to the 1990s, "from camp, to gay, to queer," as he himself puts it. This written and performed work explores the artist's performance of a mobile invested masculinity over a twenty-year period.[74] The essay provides an occasion and a framework, within this thesis, for a discussion of McDiarmid's personal performative culture of dress and adornment as part of the practice of a 'vocation of the self' in Barthes' terms. Employing recent insights from within the discourses of fashion theory and recent cultural studies of masculinity I argue that this performative 'life-as-art' practice is an integral part of the artist's artistic oeuvre as a whole. In Chapter Four I explore how the performative typologies of masculinity, being enacted in the major cities of the West by gay men in the

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[73] Susan Sontag, (2000), "Writing Itself: On Roland Barthes", ppvii-xxxviii, in S. Sontag. (Ed) Op. cit., p xxxiii.

[74] This work was first presented as a visual, spoken performance with 35mm photographic portrait slides of the artist, over the 20 year period in question, at the forum *HIV Towards a Paradigm* convened by the National Centre for HIV Research at the University of Queensland in April 1993. It was later published as, David McDiarmid,

1970s and 1980s, were both an originating concern within the artist's work and a conceptual theme within his own performance of multiple tropologies of masculinity.

## Excess and a politics of pleasure

"Are you interested in gay politics or does this girl just want to have fun?" Phillipe Cahill, an interviewer for the Sydney queer newspaper, *Capital Q*, asked this question of the artist in February 1993. "Both of Course," McDiarmid replied.[75] McDiarmid's work is of interest within postmodernist discussion of consumption and excess. Traditional Marxist accounts of culture conflated consumption and excess, seeing a kind of didactic content as having precedence over form and style and adopting a generally puritanical stance towards the playful or superfluous in culture. More recently pleasure has been recuperated as a potentially revolutionary force.[76] Recent theoretical work has been at pains to understand how the libidinous, desirous and the excessive may have the potentiality for unseating the fixed arrangements of culture.[77]

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(1993). "A Short History of Facial Hair". *Sex in Public: Australian Sexual Cultures*. Jill J. Matthews. (Ed) St Leonards NSW, Allen and Unwin: 91-96.

[75] David McDiarmid, interview with Phillipe Cahill, Feb 1993. Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers State Library of NSW.

[76] Robert Martin, (1993). "Roland Barthes: Towards an "Ecriture Gaie"". *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. F. Cleto. Amherst, Mass., University of Massachusetts Press: 282-298, p290.

[77] Rosemary Betterton. (2002). "Why My Art is Not as Good as Me? Femininity, Feminism and 'Life-Drawing' in Tracey Emin's Art", in M. Merck. Op. cit. 22-39.

Speaking of the nature and importance of the idea of 'funk' in an African American cultural context, Cornel West notes that it creates meaning in excess of the ordinary within American culture. A "fragmented subject pulling from past and present" produces an innovative and "heterogeneous product,"
he writes.[78] These cultural modes, growing up in the interstices between (diasporic) Atlantic black culture, and white culture, become a uniquely American phenomenon which McDiarmid is keen to adopt. John Leland remarks on the way hip operates as a strategy for *multiplying* meaning through constant invention and a perverse blurring of normative ideas of 'right and wrong'.[79]

McDiarmid appropriates, from African American culture, the attitudes and sensibilities of 'funk' 'hip' and 'cool' into his work in a move towards *exceeding* the limits of his own cultural formation. He works in the space between the "two fictions" which make up the myths of essential black and white identities.[80] Since the 1980s there has been a significant interest within art history and cultural studies in the recuperation of the radical potential within popular culture. This has been linked with a renewal of interest in Mikhail Bakhtin's study of the carnivalesque with its investigations of popular libidinal cultures of release and resistance. Work investigating these notions is interested in the political potential in

[78] Storey. (1998). Op. cit., p152.
[79] Leland. (2004). Op. cit.p162-3.

excess and prodigality.[81] The 'trickster' figure is one who appears both in the Western carnivalesque and in African American derived ideas of hip. McDiarmid's later language based work, as we shall see in Chapters Five and Six, brings to a peak his creative role of trickster, that is one who acts as a cultural outlaw. The trickster is one who, cleverly and humorously, undermines and exceeds the hegemonic culture's own rules.[82]

Fabio Cleto notes that a feature of excess is that it is "the engine of critical reflection."[83] Developing a metaphor of a camp "diamond" which produces an excess of reflections as it necessarily reflects changing light sources shining upon it, he suggests that the 'diamond' is open to different readings according to different positions of reception and the multiplicity of cultural roles it can fulfil. He proposes we can use the "stylishly cut" planes as a "window pane" to break into a culture. The gem's "facets are critically enlightening not so much in their single, specific reflection, but as refracting the outer cultural light through their systemic inter-relational complexity." By its nature, Cleto suggests, the diamond and its changing reflections can never be a "stable object of discourse" but it will always have its meanings

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[80] Leland. (2004). Op. cit., p165.
[81] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. (1993). *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.* Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press.
[82] Leland. (2004). Op. cit., p161.
[83] Cleto. Op. cit. pp5-7.

inflected by the light which shines upon it and the vantage point from which it shines.[84]

Excess, thus conceived as an engine of changing critical reflection, is not just a quantitative or cumulative concept – a simple matter of multiplying or adding - but involves a sense of "disproportion" between appropriated elements.[85] McDiarmid employs a range of disproportionate and excessive strategies in his work including the adoption of an aesthetics of the decorative and the 'pretty'.[86] His choice of shiny, reflective commercial materials for his 1979-1981 'Disco Quilt' series in response to New York night life or in his 1991 *Kiss of Light* works in response to the death and sex intersections of AIDS, creates both an aesthetics and an affect of excess.

Both suites of work use cut and adhered holographic Mylar sheeting in a showy opulence at odds with cultural constraints of 'taste' and moderation. His apparently indiscriminate, yet highly conscious, appropriations from pre-modern, rural and non-Western visual cultures, as well as from craft and decorative traditions, engage McDiarmid in what Andrew Ross has called a

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[84] Cleto. Op. cit., pp7-8.
[85] Edward Colless. (1996). "An End to The Eighties". *What is Appropriation?* R. Butler. Brisbane, Queensland and Sydney, Institute of Modern Art and Power Publications: 293-208, p296.
[86] McDiarmid's term to describe his work. David McDiarmid in New York, letter to his mother, Vivien Weetman in Melbourne, November 4 1981. Courtesy Vivien Weetman.

"complete disaffiliation from the semiotic codes of contemporary cultural power."[87] The use of a range of non-Western or pre-modern references, confronts, according to Ross, the "guardians of commodity culture with the symbols of a spent historical mode of production or else one that [can be thought of as] 'Asiatic' or 'underdeveloped'."[88] McDiarmid's unrestrained use of high key colour, including rainbow spectrums and hot pink, especially in the *Rainbow Aphorisms* of the early 1990s, brings to mind Elsa Schiaparelli's observation that shocking pink is "not a colour of the West."[89]

The politico-sexual content and the homoerotic explicitness of McDiarmid's work offers a provocation which exceeds bourgeois categories of what is tasteful and what is legitimately the province of high art. The artist's "strategies of sexual provocation and irreverence," are a mark of both the work's difference and its conscious relish of the perverse.[90]

## Art as play

Robert Martin's work on Roland Barthes is of interest to an examination of McDiarmid's oeuvre for its elaboration of Barthes'

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[87] Ross. (1999). Op. cit., p320.
[88] ibid.
[89] Evans, Caroline, and Thornton, Minna. (1989). *Women and Fashion: A New Look*. London and New York, Quartet Books, p137.
[90] Perry. Op. cit., p10.

conception of the 'playfulness' of a text becoming a strategy for freeing it from the normative construction of the visual and the verbal. Normative culture compells a text to conform to, what Barthes calls, the "phallocentric economy of narrative and erotics." Barthes develops the idea of a cultural subjectivity – an *ecriture gai* – beyond and *in excess of* normative sexuality with its traditional emphasis on a two-by-two, linear narrative. He proposes the plurality of the meanings of cultural texts – *de quel pluriel il est fait*. The number of possible systems of meaning is infinite, it is suggested, and there can be no "narrative structure of final meaning." This play upon a multivalent sexuality, Robert Martin suggests, opens a potentiality in which all limits are exceeded. Barthes' intention is not merely to question our epistemology, argues Robert Martin, but to assert a triumphant polymorphous perversity.[91] McDiarmid's work, it appears to me, is related to Barthes' *ecriture gai*. It contests cultural categories within Western hierarchical binaries, as outlined at the beginning of this introduction and proceeds to *exceed* them, pluralising and destabilising them. His work perversely places itself outside of, in excess of, the two-by-two narratives of normative sexuality.

The thesis is structured around the seminal themes, materials and preoccupations, outlined in this introduction. Chapter One, *I Can't*

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[91] Martin. Op. cit., p286

*Think Straight,* traces McDiarmid's early creative engagement with the politics of Gay Liberation and 1970s counter-cultural politics; Chapter Two, *Down on the Street*, explores how the cultural tropes of 'America' and 'American' and Manhattan street life and cruising impacted on the artist's work after taking up residence in Manhattan in 1979; Chapter Three, *Art and the Dance Club*, investigates how African American musical culture and the night-time world of the dance club, Paradise Garage, animated a utopian and ecstatic dimension in the artist's work. Chapter Four, *I'm Here Girlfriend, What's New*, proposes that the artist's embodied practice of dress and adornment is both an enactment of a mobile performative masculinity and an integral part of McDiarmid's art practice as the performance of a lived life-as-art. The fifth and sixth chapters, *Toxic Queen* and *The Full Spectrum,* trace the artist's multi-faceted creative response to AIDS from 1983 until his death in 1995.

# *1.*
# *I Just Can't Think Straight:* [1]
# The Politics and Poetics of McDiarmid's early work 1976-1979

*I understood that I was in a strange position of marrying politics and art and sex which even in Sydney in the mid 70s was pretty unusual.*

David McDiarmid, interviewed by Paul Canning, March 1993.

*The 70s has now become a key part of the equation of our millennial anxiety - the place to look for the answer to the question: Who have we become at the century's end? Whether in "high" art or in mass culture, the seventies were a time when the use of technology and self referential popular culture began to evidence the full post modern effect of late capitalism. The clue to our present seems mysteriously locked somewhere in that slippery decade.*

Shelton Waldrep *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter In Popular Culture*, 2000, p2

1. As well as being a gay aphorism which appeared on T-shirts and similar products, from the 1970s, "I Just Can't Think Straight" was used by David McDiarmid as an aphorism in his artist's book project, *Toxic Queen*, in 1993.

In this chapter I explore David McDiarmid's early work produced between 1975 and 1979 and the political and social conditions which animated it and gave it context. McDiarmid's early work is a radical cultural politics in the context of struggles for legal rights and visibility for gay male sexuality in the environment of the post-Stonewall political developments which became the Gay Liberation movement.

In 1969 - the year of the history-making June events in lower Manhattan in and around the Stonewall Inn which collectively became known as 'Stonewall' - David McDiarmid turned seventeen. Brought up in leafy middle class Mont Albert in Melbourne's eastern suburbs he was then in his Matriculation year at Canterbury High School.[2] The following year he would enrol in film design at Swinburne Institute of Technology in Melbourne but would soon leave his studies to pursue more urgently the dedicated creation of a gay male life. McDiarmid was, by his own account, clear about his sexual orientation by this stage of his life and enthusiastically pursuing it.[3]

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[2] McDiarmid was, according to his former English teacher, a talented student who "always showed originality and was never content to pursue things in a stultified way but sought new solutions. … His creative honesty and refusal to accept outworn concepts impress me." Reference from Donald Murdoch (then Head of Senior School, St Albans High School Melbourne) October 28 1974, McDiarmid estate papers State Library of NSW.

[3] In a 1972 essay McDiarmid said he had his first homosexual sex at 14 in Fitzroy Gardens Melbourne and from then became an active cruiser for sex. McDiarmid, David (1972). "Memoirs of an Oppressed Teenager." *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* **1**(4), Sydney, (no page numbers).

Working part- time at a city bookshop, The Paperback, in Bourke Street, Melbourne, McDiarmid was part of an intense social and political ferment that did not necessarily have much time for careers. From this time his sexuality, his politics and his art became intertwined.

The year McDiarmid started his design studies at Swinburne in 1970, the Victorian Humanist Society in Melbourne set up a campaign committee to fight for homosexual law reform in contemporary circumstances where conviction for 'attempting to solicit a male for immoral purposes' could be punishable for up to 14 years imprisonment. The Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP INC) became one of several organisations in this period to fight for homosexual legal rights, recognition and equality. McDiarmid's art would be formed by, and itself be part of, these struggles, particularly those of the more culturally radical Gay Liberation movement of the 1970s with its youthful, hedonistic and (counter) culturally engaged style.

## 1970s 'counter-cultural' politics and Gay Liberation

An early activist in the Gay Liberation movement, McDiarmid moved between Sydney and Melbourne in the early 1970s and became a founding member of Sydney Gay Liberation (SGL). He

designed and wrote for the SGL newsletter and participated in consciousness raising groups and political demonstrations and interventions. He participated in a range of initiatives to bring the question of homosexual law reform, workplace discrimination and police harassment to public attention. He was arrested at the 1972 demonstration outside Broadcast House in Sydney against a decision by the Australian Broadcasting Commission to refuse to put to air a television program on homosexuality produced by the 'This Day Tonight' current affairs program.[4] He identified with the cultural vanguard of gay politics not limiting himself to the sometimes polite social democratic initiatives, the sometimes puritanical new left or the apolitical 'bar queens'.[5] McDiarmid also admired second-wave feminist politics and embraced the broad cultural politics of the time as an active influence on his work. He was aware of the Civil Rights movement in the United States and knew of its impact on the women's and gay movements. He was of course well aware of the impact of the events of Stonewall in 1969 and the earlier movements for civil rights by groups of lesbians and homosexual men in the developed world. He was an avid reader of *The Village Voice*, the North American gay press, and anything he could get hold of

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[4] A photograph by John Storey of this arrest is in the McDiarmid estate papers State Library of NSW.

[5] See: Gavin Harris and others (1998). *It was A Riot: Sydney's First Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*. Sydney, Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, (no page numbers), for discussion of these groupings.

about gay life in the major cities of the United States. He mentions in an eloquent essay "Memoirs of An Oppressed Teenager" in the October 1972 *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* that it was the United States gay liberationist publications *Gay Sunshine* and *Come Out* which had changed his stance on his own sexuality from what he characterised as internalised oppression to a political consciousness which insisted on visibility and equal rights.[6] He was aware of the global (at least as far as the English speaking Western world was concerned) nature of much of the contemporary radicalism of his time. According to the account of his contemporaries he was a keen reader and trend spotter of the more radical political and cultural nuances of his time.[7]

This was a time of cultural and social radicalisation in which the idea of 'politics' was extended beyond the traditional parameters of both the liberal and Marxist-based left to include personal and private life, sexuality, gender and race. Andrew Ross describes this new kind of politics, largely of the Western middle class, as generating, "a vocabulary of dissent and anti-authoritarianism," wielded against an establishment which was "struggling to

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[6] David McDiarmid. (1972). "Memoirs of an Oppressed Teenager." *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* **1**(4), Sydney. (no page numbers).
[7] Bill Morley, recounted how McDiarmid was always "in the know", "ahead of everybody else". Bill Morley, interview with Sally Gray, February 6, 2001.

resolve, through consumerism, its long crisis of over production."[8]

In this struggle:

> The discourses of hedonism began to outstrip the limits of the controlled structures of consumer society, and soon a wholesale ideology of disaffiliation from the institutions of establishment culture was in place, complete with its own structures (in the areas of the family, education, labour, media, taste, lifestyle, and morality), founded on utopian premises.[9]

McDiarmid's personal and creative practice – the kind of art he made and the kind of sociality he engaged in – fell firmly on the hedonism side of the hedonism/consumption tension mentioned by Ross. He failed to identify with the market driven mainstream art world and did not seek to advance his status in terms of bourgeois ideas of consumption or career. His oeuvre as a whole, while remaining intensely political, engages a hedonistic politics of pleasure and excess extending to the utopian and the ecstatic.

## The personal is political

"I was a hippy when I left high school, lived in a communal household with boys and girls I went to school with" McDiarmid told Paul Canning in an interview in March 1993.[10] Living in countercultural communal households in Melbourne and Sydney in the early 1970s the artist embraced the concept that 'the

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[8] Andrew Ross. "Uses of Camp" pp308-329 in Cleto, Fabio (1999). *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. Ann Arbor Michigan, University of Michigan Press, p 314.
[9] ibid.
[10] David McDiarmid, interviewed by Paul Canning, 1993. Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

personal is political'[11] Originating from North American second wave feminism, this concept involved examining and challenging the existing power relations affecting personal, private and public life. The sharing among peers of personal, sexual and emotional perspectives was part of the contemporary concept that personal awareness was necessary for effective political action and change. McDiarmid participated in gay male consciousness-raising groups when he came from Melbourne to live in Sydney for the first time in 1972.[12] He enthusiastically embraced the idea of the sexual revolution and the liberated sexuality of 'polymorphous perversity' as expounded in Dennis Altman's first book *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* published in 1971[13] and the then widely current ideas of the 'sexual radicals', such as Wilhelm Reich.[14]

Historian Garry Wotherspoon refers to this time in Sydney as one characterised by "hedonistic living, alternative lifestyles, greater access to recreational drugs, rock'n'roll music and of course sexual experimentation."[15] While the so-called 'sexual revolution' was most publicly about heterosexuality, the counter-culture eroded

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[11] This concept, one of the most important of the Women's Liberation Movement, from the 1960s, was first mentioned in print as the title of an article by Carol Hanisch in "Notes From the Second Year" (1970), see Lisa Tuttle. (1987). *Encyclopedia of Feminism*. London, Arrow Books, pp245-246.

[12] Jeffrey Stewart, interviewed by Sally Gray, February 27,2001, noted that McDiarmid was an unusually forthright participant in Gay Liberation consciousness raising groups, disclosing what others were unwilling or unable, for one reason or another, to disclose.

[13] Dennis Altman. (1971), *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* , New York: Outerbridge and Deinstfrey with Dutton.

[14] Paul. A. Robinson. (1972). *The Sexual Radicals - Reich, Roheim, Marcuse*. London, Paladin.

the boundaries of gender roles breaking down monogamy and bourgeois notions of sexual propriety. Gay men were often in the vanguard of the radical displacement of bourgeois sexual norms.[16]

## Activist art

David McDiarmid saw himself, in the context of his earliest exhibited work, as an 'out' gay artist and his work of the 1970s can be read as part of the Gay Liberation project in which the artist was an active early participant. The work is appropriately read as agitprop art, consistent with his political engagements at the time. He help found Sydney Gay Liberation and later returned to Melbourne to help start Gay Lib there. He designed flyers, badges, newsletters and magazine covers for the movement and "decorated the Gay Liberation Front meeting rooms in Glebe Point Rd [in Sydney]."[17]

McDiarmid participated in the history-making 'mardi gras' demonstration for gay rights on Saturday 24 June 1978 in Darlinghurst, Sydney. The events of this night were noted for mass arrests and extreme police violence and became the

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[15] Garry Wotherspoon. (1991). *City of the Plain: History of A Gay Subculture*. Sydney, Hale and Iremonger, p140.

[16] McDiarmid noted in his 1972 essay that from the time of his first homosexual sex he was more interested in sexual diversity and cruising than forming a romantic couple. David McDiarmid, (1972). "Memoirs of an Oppressed Teenager." *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* **1**(4), Sydney. (no page numbers).

[17] Jeffrey Stewart (1995). Ted Gott interview. Op. cit. The 'Gay Lib Centre' was at 67 Glebe Point Rd. Glebe and, according to SGL newsletters, was open from 7 to 10pm five days a week.

foundational events of the now famous Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.[18]

McDiarmid designed, printed and hand-coloured the poster for the first openly lesbian and gay group art exhibition to be held in Sydney at Watters Gallery in July 1978 (as well as exhibiting in that show). This exhibition was associated with the Fourth National Homosexual Conference at Paddington Town Hall (Sydney) later in August of that year.[19] McDiarmid also exhibited work in the art exhibition held in the Town Hall to coincide with the conference.[20] He was again arrested at a demonstration arising out of this conference when conference participants streamed down Oxford Street (then becoming the 'gay mile') from Paddington Town Hall to Hyde Park to protest an anti-abortion rally. They were intercepted by police at Taylor Square and it was here that McDiarmid was arrested.[21]

Wotherspoon notes that in the 1970s the streets of Australia's major cities, were the site of "recurring confrontations between

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[18] The 'mardi gras' was organised by the Sydney Gay Solidarity Group formed in response to a letter from the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Committee (to Annie Talve and Ken Davis) asking for international solidarity against the new right backlash against homosexual rights.

[19] The first had been held in Melbourne in 1975, the second in Sydney in 1976, the third in Adelaide in 1977.

[20] McDiarmid's work exhibited at Paddington Town Hall (a stitched and collaged black and transparent vinyl hanging with an S/M aesthetic) was famously slashed at the exhibition, allegedly by a lesbian disturbed by the work's embodiment of male power.

[21] The charge of "take part in an unauthorised demonstration" was later dropped. Letter from NSW Police Department to David McDiarmid 17 January 1979, in McDiarmid estate papers, State library of NSW.

police and protesters"[22] around issues to do to with the Vietnam War; the environment; sexual and cultural repression and conformity; gender inequality and racism. Young people moved to the, "cheap rundown inner areas of the major cities," and new gay and other alternative venues were established to cater for a revolution in cultural mores and behaviours.[23] He characterises young people of this period in Australia, as "a youth culture with a political purpose."[24] Sydney's gay zone along Oxford Street in Darlinghurst became a magnet for men from all over Australia, and the Asia-Pacific region, who were looking for a freer sexual and cultural environment. McDiarmid moved briefly to Sydney from Melbourne in 1972, helped organise Gay Liberation there, and subsequently began an extended period of residence in Sydney when he returned from travelling in South East Asia, with his friend and fellow artist Peter Tully, in 1974.[25]

## 'Coming Out'

'Coming out' was both the background to the production of the artist's early work and its principal subject matter. In coming out, says Carole Anne Tyler, "one affirms an identity, declaring and displaying it as a positive difference from a presumptive norm

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[22] Wotherspoon. Op.cit., p140.
[23] ibid.
[24] ibid.
[25] Jeffrey Stewart (1995). Ted Gott interview. Op. cit.

which has also served as the measure of superiority."[26] McDiarmid's early work was explicitly associated with 'coming out'; the title of his first exhibition in 1976 was *Secret Love*, based on the 1950s hit song by Doris Day, "[Once I had a…] Secret Love", making a declaration that this secret love "was no secret any more".[27] McDiarmid was concerned to interrogate, and unseat if possible, those discourses which established heterosexuality as 'superior', to paraphrase Tyler. He wanted to bring to the surface the assumptions which underlay the oppression of lesbians and gay men, that is, to use Monique Wittig's words, "those [discourses] which take for granted that what founds society, any society, is heterosexuality."[28] McDiarmid had a sophisticated understanding not just of the direct oppression suffered by those who chose to engage in same-sex sex acts but also the 'repressive tolerance' of apparently enlightened straights.

In the 1972 essay "Memoirs of an Oppressed Teenager", referred to above, McDiarmid analysed his own internal processes of self oppression and the freedom that potentially comes from adopting a liberationist mindset as opposed to a secretive one:

> I couldn't have done it (coming out) in the old terms, because this meant admitting I was sick. I articulated the negative feelings about myself and

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[26] Carole Anne Tyler. "Passing: Narcissism, Identity and Difference" pp 227-265 in Weed and Schor. Op. cit., p228.
[27] Written by Sammy Fain (music) and Paul Francis Webster (lyrics) the song was a major popular hit and won an Academy Award for best song for its performance by Doris Day in the film *Calamity Jane* (1953).
[28] Monique Wittig. (1992). *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Boston, Beacon Press, p24.

> saw them originating from the rigid anti-homosexual morality that surrounds us. And I was putting shit on myself all the time because I was brought up with those values. I [had] accepted the status quo at face value.[29]

He is particularly eloquent on the question of homosexuality's "second-best" status in hetero-normative culture, noting the response of his straight friends when he came out to them:

> They told me that it must have taken a lot of courage but their basic assumption was that homosexuality was second-best and inferior to male/ female fucking. This was a big comedown – oppressive tolerance. After a few days they said I was going on about it too much – that I was taking it too seriously![30]

In his study of twentieth century gay (and mostly male) art Emmanuel Cooper notes that while the gay male lifestyles of post-Stonewall urban America quickly "provided a model" for other Western cities, the effect on artists of the new gay male consciousness was slow to take effect.[31] For McDiarmid, on the contrary, it was a matter of the sexual and the cultural being inseparable. There was no time lag between his embrace of an active homosexual life, a radical sexual and cultural politics and the production of art work which engaged all of these. His work for his first exhibition in 1976 was sexually explicit in both a corporeal and a cultural sense. He fore-grounded the homo-erotic male body and the tensions between what may be made visible and what hetero-normative culture insists must remain invisible.

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[29] David McDiarmid. (1972). "Memoirs of an Oppressed Teenager." *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* **1**(4), Sydney. (no page numbers).
[30] ibid
[31] Emmanuel Cooper. (1994). *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 years*. London and New York, Routledge, p 267.

His first exhibition directly addressed "what has been made to disappear from – the history of twentieth century art."[32] The axes of visibility and invisibility McDiarmid plays with in this early work include not just the embodied sexual practices which were still outlawed but also elements of traditional and contemporary male homo-sociality, the nuances of 'gay male sensibility' and camp.

## The *Secret Love* exhibition 1976

The artist's first one-person exhibition in 1976 was conceived by the artist as a liberationist project. With precocious sophistication, the 24-year-old McDiarmid both asserts a 'gay' identity, and explores what that might be - or become - in the work he created for the exhibition he titled *Secret Love* held at Hogarth Galleries in Sydney. *Secret Love* is, among other things, an archival enquiry into what the artist saw as his homosexual lineage. A lineage which he conceived as a matrix within which his own self-created life and work would be formed. Emmanuel Cooper notes that artists who wanted to use their art to find a "more open acceptance of their homosexuality" could choose to "look creatively at past traditions and archetypes and reform them for themselves, or reject them in favour of relating to contemporary

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[32] Richard Meyer. (2002). Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth century American Art. Boston, Beacon Press p23.

life and attitudes."[33] McDiarmid did both. He made his work emphatically contemporary in its methods, its tone and its attitude but he also claimed a gay male history and lineage in which he traces his sexual and cultural forebears to include Marcel Duchamp (in a work entitled *Portrait of RRose Selavy*); Sal Mineo (*Plato's End* with collaged film stills from *Rebel Without a Cause*);[34] Jean Genet (*Genet Splash*); Gore Vidal (*Myra Lives*); Tennessee Williams (*A Straight Stud Named Desire*). Anticipating Vito Russo's *Celluloid Closet,* first published in 1981, the artist interrogates the 'secret' place of gay men in cinema and popular culture. [35]Pin- up photographs, appropriated from movie fan magazines, of closeted Hollywood film stars Rock Hudson, Tab Hunter, Anthony Perkins and others were juxtaposed with gay male soft- porn imagery in a work which was itself entitled *Secret Love*. [Fig 1.] This work, a wall hung installation in pink vinyl is carefully stitched, in the craft traditions the artist would appropriate throughout his career, in coloured plastic hobby thread. The same thread is used to carefully spell out in stitched text, like a homily on an embroidered sampler, the refrain of the song *Secret Love* whose title is the title of the exhibition and the work under discussion:

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[33] Cooper. (1994). Op cit., p 266.
[34] See H. Paul Jeffers. (2000). *Sal Mineo, His Life, Murder and Mystery*. New York, Carroll and Graf for a populist account of Sal Mineo's role of Plato, in Nicholas Ray's 1955 film *Rebel Without a Cause*, the "first homosexual teenager in a movie in Hollywood history", pxi.
[35] Vito Russo. (1981). *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies*. New York, Harper and Row and Colophon Books.

> *Once I had a secret love that lived inside the heart of me.*
> *All too soon my secret love became impatient to be free.*
> *Now I shout it from the highest hill, even told the golden daffodil,*
> *That now my heart's an open door and my secret love's no secret any more.*

This work activates tensions of invisibility/visibility in a number of ways; most obviously the exposure of the homo-erotic male body and the faces of the closeted stars; less obviously the gentle embrace of the camp 'torch song' sentimentality and tropes of the decorative and craft-like work to destabilise normative masculinity not just of the sexual but also of the artistic.

## Gay urban sociality and art

In other works for this exhibition, the artist maps the social and cruising locations of an increasingly public gay male world in Sydney. Collage on paper works entitled *Green Park Flush*; *Fountain of Love Juice* (El Alamein Fountain, Kings Cross); *KKK* (Ken's Karate Klub, a gay sauna and bathhouse) and *My Sydney* identify key landmarks, venues and locations for long term and emergent gay male urban life. McDiarmid campily quotes selected artefacts, attitudes and conventions of gay male sexuality in works such as *KY Country*; *10" of Heaven*; *Ah-Men*; *Tube of Joy* (KY); *Trick No. 7*; *Glory Hole*; *Active Service* and others. The collaged works in the *Secret Love* exhibition used appropriated pre-published materials; postcards, commercial logos, newspaper clippings and

pornography juxtaposed with text and sometimes drawing in graphite and coloured pencil or gold paint. All of the collage works were gold framed, appropriating a bourgeois high art convention to 'trashy' ends.

The hippy counterculture impacting on youth culture in Australian cities at that time involved re-thinking what was culturally important. There was a rejection of materialism and a re-evaluation of the values of consumption-based 'progress'. Practices of recycling of clothing and household goods, and the re-valorising of rural, pre-modern and tribal arts combined with the idea of 'consciousness' as a political concept. This was all influential on the artist's creative world view. He was aware of contemporary critiques of commodity consumption and the art market as part of the system of capitalist consumption. There was, in the 1970s in McDiarmid's circles, a commitment to the idea of a collective future that might involve sexual and gender liberation, a dedicated commitment to pleasure and more communalist ways of being.[36]

McDiarmid's earliest *Secret Love* works have a humble materiality, made as they are from inexpensive, non-art, found materials –

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[36] Artist and contemporary, Sam Schoenbaum notes that :"David's entry into gay life in the early seventies was as much a political decision about the present as it was utopian. He lived in gay households and believed in gay brotherhood. " Typescript note dated March 1993. Typescript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

clippings from film magazines and pornography, postcards, school-book graph paper and children's rubber stamps. They are nonetheless given an air of polished resolve and ironic opulence with the use of gold acrylic paint and gold frames. This tone of confidence and excess juxtaposed with funky materials and subject matter was a continuing trope in the artist's work.

In retrieving lost or hidden histories, the work in this first exhibition asserted a gay rights message celebrating the fact that the "secret love" need not '"be secret any more" and insisting on cultural visibility for a world of gay signs. It also posited the possibility of a new gay identity in the making and thus engaged early, from the mid 1970s, in what I have called above 'queer world-making', the enterprise of McDiarmid's work as a whole from the 1970s to his death in the 1990s.

## *Self Portrait* 1976

Masculinity itself, a subject which is "rarely critically examined by artists" was one of the discursive engagements of McDiarmid's art practice.[37] In a work from the *Secret Love* exhibition, entitled *Self Portrait* [Fig 2.] the artist confidently presents a 'self', as both 'gay man' and 'artist', in an ironic deployment of his own lower body clad in underwear which carries an artist's palette fabric design. In

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[37] Cooper. (1994). Op. cit., p 284.

this finely executed work in graphite and coloured pencil on graph paper, McDiarmid places himself in a gay male artistic lineage which includes the mid-century homoerotic work of Paul Cadmus, David Hockney's Los Angeles drawings of boys from the 1960s, and Andy Warhol's early homoerotic drawings from the 1950s and 1960s.

The work enacts a playful irony around sexuality and identity through its employment of the tropes of 'art', 'artist' and 'gay man'. It calls up resonances from gay male pornography in the way the work truncates the body into groin only but destabilises this by the pliant vulnerability in the stance and the soft graphite pencil modelling and articulation of body hair. The decorative prettiness of the coloured pencil squiggles and skilful rendering of 1950s popular product design in the palette motif on the jockeys further multiplies the available readings for this work. The artist positions his sexual body, and by extension his sexual subjectivity, along with his subjectivity as ‘artist’ at the centre of his work in a move which will characterise his whole career output - an engagement with tropes of ‘masculinity’, ‘gay man’ and ‘artist’ being a concern

of his work throughout. The work is 'authenticated' by the self-invented identifying markers in the upper right hand corner; an upper case 'D' for David; ‘kookaburra’ graphic for Australian, ‘crown’ for Queen and ‘KY’ logo for sexually active gay man who

thus asserts his sexuality as being at the centre of his ‘authorised’ identity. All except the last are children's rubber stamp impressions appropriated for the carriage of new meanings discussed below.

While Emmanuel Cooper is right to claim that photography was largely responsible for a “new [male] homosexual eroticism” from the 1970s, McDiarmid’s play with an erotics of identity, achieved in collage, drawing and text, is also part of the ‘new homosexual eroticism’ which Cooper claims is “virtually a new art.” This work carries a range of resonances and contradictions which characterises the artist's attempt to play with a shifting personal subjectivity explored through a variety of artistic and conceptual methods. In *Self Portrait*, the delicate facility in drawing is in tension with the 'trivial' and 'ironic' context and content. The work employs 'childish' materials; school-book graph paper pages and rubber stamps; it locates itself outside of standards of serious art and bourgeois good taste by the use of the 'artist's palette' graphic device as if the artist doesn't mind being seen as the subject of a debased iconographic cliché. The framing of the artist's genital area as the subject of the *Self Portrait* problematises the weighty art historical tradition of artist's self-portraiture within which this work places itself, while simultaneously announcing a resistant and mobile sexual and creative subjectivity.

## *The Law and Us* 1976

In other works in the *Secret Love* exhibition McDiarmid wittily de-coded and re-encoded signs, symbols and secrets of the closet while inventing his own signage of a confident self-made gay male identity. The works clearly evoke, among other things, liberationist and rights-based politics. *The Law and Us*, [Fig 3.] a work in collage on graph paper appropriates and re-positions the text which makes up part of Australian state legal statutes regarding prohibition of (what the statutes designate as) "acts of gross indecency" and "buggery." This is superimposed over a photographic image, appropriated from gay male pornography, of the legally prohibited male to male anal sex. The work makes an unambiguous assertion of the relationship between male to male sex acts and the political and legal oppression brought to bear on those who are presumed to practice or solicit them. This piece of direct political agitation for homosexual law reform and equality before the law nonetheless formally destabilises itself as a political tract by employing a decorative schema of sky blue wash, gold calligraphic text, gold frame and the same Asian artist's 'chop' or seal by which 'trade-mark' he authenticated this suite of work. [38] This authenticating set of

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[38] Oxford English Dictionary: chop 5, n. (India, China) seal, licence, passport, permit; (China) trade-mark, a brand of goods. McDiarmid also used 'authenticating' signage of gay male masculinity in his self-presentation for the opening of the *Secret Love* exhibition. He wore a brooch designed and made by his friend, ex-lover, and fellow artist Peter Tully; a pink Day-Glo perspex map of Australia with the KY brand symbol superimposed. The creative and personal relationship between these two artists is a thesis in itself and my purpose here is not to explore Peter Tully's work but to note that

marks, made up of the elementary school rubber-stamp impressions, described above, is arranged vertically like the seal on a Chinese or Japanese scroll. The artist is thus proposing an authoritative camp version of an 'official', gay, authenticating mark. This both destabilises and pluralises the political implications of the work. In addition to a literal political message regarding legal rights, we get an interrogation of the idea of both 'authentic' art and 'authentic' identity itself. This work of the 1970s prefigures the decentring of fixed notions of identity and embraces an unstable performatively inflected one in a way which will later be associated with queer theory and queer politics. The assertion of a queerly inflected set of identity markers rather than a simple plea for acceptance and equality positions the work in this exhibition as both part of a 1970s liberationist identity politics of 'coming out' and also as 'proto-queer'. It also, in its appropriative methods, its cutting and pasting of pre-existing materials to create new meanings, its fragmentary 'trashy' aesthetics, engages in a postmodern unseating of notions of original and authentic cultural production and unified cultural artefact.

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the KY insignia had also been used by him and acknowledge that their friendship was a form of creative and political partnership.

## Confessional politics and masculine identity

The work in the *Secret Love* exhibition is not simply about claiming a singular 'gay' identity and then claiming rights and equality about that identity - as in the more simplistic identity politics of the time. Significantly, McDiarmid also problematises that emergent identity, even as it is being formed. The artist proposes, in his work and life, a 'becoming' identity, which is mobile, emergent, unstable, so that his work itself becomes part of a political and personal project of both "self-making as vocation", to use Roland Barthes' concept, and a project of emergent queer world-making.[39] Like later artists who use their personal experiences and subjectivity as the material of their work such as David Wojnarowicz and Tracy Emin, McDiarmid in his work from the mid 1970s uses images, signs, objects, symbols, references - "material vestiges" - from his own life, to develop a mobile and emergent narrative around his life and subjectivity.[40]

McDiarmid both practised and espoused, through his art, a multi-faceted personal politics. While the work in *Secret Love* can be seen as 'protest art' it also has a more complex politics - that of a shifting multivalent subjectivity as gay man and gay artist.

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[39] Robert Martin. (1993). "Roland Barthes: Towards an "Ecriture Gaie"". *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. F. Cleto. Amherst, Mass., University of Massachusetts Press: 282-298, p283.

[40] Rosemary Betterton. "Why My Art is Not as Good as Me? Femininity, Feminism and 'Life-Drawing' in Tracey Emin's Art" pp22 - 39 in Merck, Mandy. and Townsend, Chris., Ed. (2002). *The Art of Tracey Emin*. London, The Art of Tracey Emin, p26-27.

Involving as it does, apparently contradictory or incompatible modalities and methodologies, McDiarmid's work invites speculation about his exploration of multiple subject positions. The artist's work as a whole reflects transitive subjectivities - according to the continuously changing perspectives, positions and juxtapositions he chose to place himself within. The work raises questions about "the relationship between representation, lived experience and the construction of self in art"[41] As did also the work of David Wojnarowicz, an artist McDiarmid admired, who used a diaristic technique in his art work from the late 1970s and created a substantial diary which he had kept from 1978.

The employment of 'material vestiges' of his own life and an engagement of his own subjectivity as the content of McDiarmid's work is in contrast with the reluctance of many artists at the time [the 1970s] to use "their own lives as subject matter," as noted by Emmanuel Cooper.[42] While Cooper also claims that some gay men's art of the post Stonewall period had a "confessional aspect" to it the "the direct use of personal [homosexual] experience" was, as I have said above, seen by Cooper as such a radical departure from normative masculine art practice as to constitute an artistic innovation in itself.[43]

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[41] Betterton. (2002) Op. cit., p23.
[42] Cooper. (1994). Op. cit., p 266.

Self disclosure and diaristic or confessional politics was a common thread between the ideals and consciousness raising groups of 1970s Women's Liberation and those adopted by Gay Liberation groups following the feminist model. This self-enquiry within gay male consciousness raising groups went against the grain of received notions of masculinity.[44] While McDiarmid like other gay (and straight) men of his generation would engage and enact tropes of hyper-masculinity his emotional and political facility with self disclosure would, among other factors, also make his work resonant with political and artistic concerns associated with feminism.[45] As previously mentioned, in the October 1972 *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* which was also designed and layed out by McDiarmid, the artist wrote an articulate personal account of the emergence of his own sexual and gender identity from the age of fourteen to the present – he was then twenty. Forthright and intellectually and emotionally acute, the essay engages in a level of personal disclosure and articulation of social awareness remarkable for its time, the age of the writer and his circumstances as an 'other' of western culture. The essay was an act of political courage and creative verve which prefigured his performed essay of 1993 *A*

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[43] Cooper. (1994). Op. cit., p 303.

[44] Jeffrey Stewart a long-term friend of McDiarmid's, remembered how the artist had an ease of disclosure of intimate personal details of his sexuality in consciousness-raising groups. This Stewart found unusual and admirable. Jeffrey Stewart, in conversation with Sally Gray, February 27, 2001.

[45] Michael Warner notes that early gay liberation was a movement for general human liberation and against the oppressive binaries male/ female, gay/straight. See: Michael Warner. Ed. (1993). *Fear of a Queer Planet*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, pp111-112,

*Short History of Facial Hair* which will be discussed in Chapter Four.[46]

## *Identity Crisis*

In the work McDiarmid titled *Identity Crisis*, [Fig 4.] exhibited in the 1976 Hogarth Galleries exhibition, a scrambled mass of hand-scribbled text wryly asks:

> *Can People Tell? Will people like me if I am more feminine? Am I masculine if I like being fucked? Am I too masculine? Am I too feminine? Do People like me when I act camp? Do they see it as another role? I know I'm not sick but why do I act masculine and hide my feelings? Was my mother too dominant, why do I ask? Is there a Mr Right? Is my cock big enough?*

This text is scrawled on a substrate of graph paper which holds collaged images of early twentieth century male physical culture/ pornographic imagery which is itself employed in this work as a trope of performative masculinity.[47] At this early stage in his career McDiarmid is already reading his own sexuality and creative practice 'against the grain' in such a way that it has multiple viewing and reading positions. The work begins a public exploration of his own sexual and political subjectivity which will be further explored in the work produced in the

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[46] David McDiarmid. (1972). "Memoirs of an Oppressed Teenager." *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* **1**(4), Sydney. (no page numbers).

[47] McDiarmid's archival research into gay male cultural lineage had led him to early twentieth century physical culture imagery which was then used as a closeted form of homoerotic visual material. He was interested in male homoerotic imagery as found in contemporary pornography and in the work of older artists like George Platt Lynes.

following years. 'Identity' is not a simple matter of adopting the 'gay' naming and subcultural behaviours and sociality of the new 'gay community' but is a mobile project which will never be stable personally or creatively.

## Labelling the self as queer: The *Trade Enquiries* exhibition, 1978

In December 1978, the year he had participated in the Sydney protests against police oppression which were the founding events for what later became the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, David McDiarmid had another one-person show at Hogarth Galleries in Sydney. Entitled *New Work: David McDiarmid* the exhibition consisted of a suite of work executed in collage on mulberry paper. A related suite of multiples was off-set printed in an edition of 200 and entitled *Trade Enquiries*. Created a year after his return from his first visit to the United States, both suites of work are influenced by and redolent of the performative sexuality and personal dress and image typologies being explored by gay men in large North American cities. Particularly in San Francisco and New York, these appearance typologies had become an integral part of the post-Stonewall, urban gay male, sexual revolution of the 1970s.[48]

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David McDiarmid. (1992). Interviewed by Carmela Baranowska 1992 (no date).Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers State Library of NSW.

In the *Trade Enquiries* works [Fig. 5.], McDiarmid again used found and appropriated items to construct works which evoke the notion of sex as 'trade'.[49] The appropriated fragments, which were cut and pasted to make the works, include sexually coded ads from the 'personal' columns of gay newspapers; sheet music with sentimental and romantic popular song titles; pre-published pornography and fetish imagery; portions of colour-coded bandannas denoting specific sexual practices; images of well-groomed moustached 'clones', 'juicy fruits' who look identical but have been given, by the artist, inter-changeable names: *Ralph, Joe, Frank, Jack, Tom, Steve, Rick, Charlie.* [Fig 6.]

## *Pervert, Faggot …*

Developing the trope of 'label' connected to that of 'trade', in a work in this series titled *Pervert, Faggot …* [Fig 7.] McDiarmid interrogates the 'labelling' of homoeroticism as deviant. The work engages in a play around whether these labels should be denied and rejected as homophobic insults or embraced in an act of effrontery towards the hetero-normative discourse which has enacted them. The work places itself in that resonant space of Jean Genet's injunction that it is a radical act to "take pleasure and

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[48] Shaun Cole. (1997). "Macho Man: Clones and the Development of a Masculine Stereotype." *Fashion Theory*(3): pp. 125-40.

[49] George Chauncey. (1994). *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940.* London, Flamingo Harper Collins. Chauncey gives uses and meanings of the terms 'trade', 'rough trade', in homosexual male history in New York. McDiarmid was interested in the idea of sex as trade and worked as a hustler in New York in 1979. 'Punk' designers, like Vivienne Westwood, were declaring in the mid 1970s that "We are

revel in" homophobic insults and welcome labels such as "queen", "cocksucker" and "freak".[50] The artist employs, in this suite of work, both Dymo lettering and adhesive commercial labels, to create 'labels' which carry meaning of both homophobic insult and self-inscribed, re-positioned identity.

The adhesive commercial labels are used to make up a work which simply repeats the 'labels' applied to homosexual men by hetero-normative culture: *Pervert, Faggot, Kamp, Pansy, Sick, Fairy, Queer, Homo, Deviant, Gay, Sodomite, Poofter, Queen, Invert* and in the centre of the work, *ME*.[51] In this work the artist is simultaneously performing an act of courageous public political self-identification ('outing' himself as the despised other) and assuming for himself the power of re-appropriation by using the labels as self-inscription in a move which also proposes the instability of all such labels. He engages in the politics of "reverse discourse" as Michel Foucault called it in which the artist restages the terms on which "perversity" is conceived. The labelling and regulation of homosexuality by bourgeois culture thus provokes, Foucault suggests, "unanticipated responses and counter-

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all prostitutes" and Warhol's utterances on the 'trade' aspects of sex were well publicised.

[50] Quoted in Cooper. (1994). Op. cit., p 280.

[51] Fabio Cleto refers to the odd linguistic phenomenon of the spelling of 'camp' in Australia and New Zealand with a "K" (p10) or KAMP as part of a probably apocryphal acronym: standing in for "known-as-male-prostitute" supposedly used by Los Angeles Police Department. See: Cleto. (1999). Op. cit., p 29.

representations, unforeseen pictures of difference and self-conscious stagings of deviance."[52]

This is an early proto-queer cultural move. Instead of simply rejecting the 'negative' labels as unjust or oppressive as much of 'gay is good' rhetoric set out to do, McDiarmid reappropriated and 'owned' them as a self-labelling. This is a radically different politics from contemporaneous attempts to gain acceptance from straight society, through what Edmund White has called "an apology to straight people," including acceptance and mimicry of hetero-normative conventions of coupling and domestic arrangements.[53] This is an embracing of the notion of queer exemplified in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's sense of a 'twisting' and 'crossing' against the grain – a perverse refusal of retreat and denial in the face of virulent historic naming.

## *Friendship …*

In another of the *Trade Enquiries* series of collaged and off-set printed multiples; *Friendship …* [Fig 8.], McDiarmid uses autobiographical fragments, placed with affectionate but ironic address, to trace a narrative movement from childhood towards his current urban, sexual and cultural intersections. These

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[52] Quoted in Meyer. (2002) Op. cit., p10.
[53] Edmund White and others. (1997). "On the Beginnings of Gay Male Literature in the United States: A Symposium". *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures*. M. Duberman. New York and London, New York University Press: 262-269 p362.

fragments include childhood photographs; a photograph of the scene of his arrest at the 1978 gay rights demonstration, in Sydney, mentioned above; a childhood letter from his Grandfather referring to a boys' "party" which David and his "chums" will be having, but at which they will not be kissing, because "men don't kiss each other do they?" Included also is a published fragment from one of his Grandfather's sermons (he was a Presbyterian Minister) in which he refers to his Grandson, David's, stated intention, on starting at a new school, to "Find a guy that I know and stick to him." These autobiographical fragments come together in a work which uncovers the, always-present, queerness which is elided by hetero-normativity but which is here retrieved through the artist's re-interrogation of his childhood past against his political and creative present. This diaristic and autobiographical self disclosure can be seen as a political cultural practice in the context of the consciousness raising politics referred to above.

Gayness and queerness warrant interrogation this artist proposes. They are mobile, unfolding notions, in this suite of work, not a given stable, authentic or natural identity one simply uncovers. The multivalent *Trade Enquiries* work was part of a call to visibility and action as an element of a rights-based politics; a public retrieval of lost or invisible queer histories; a performance of a new kind of personal public politics in the context of 'the personal

is political' cultural politics of the 1970s and an exploration of the multiple subjectivities which McDiarmid proposes as part of the emergent political and sexual potentiality of gay liberation and the sexual revolution.

## Fragment and quotation

In both the *Secret Love* and *Trade Enquiries* work McDiarmid engages in an appropriative and citational practice which can be characterised as part of the "citational, ironic and theatrical character of camp".[54] "Camp sees everything in quotation marks" says Susan Sontag in a famous phrase.[55] The seriality and appropriation which both suites of work discussed above employ, destabilise the authentic/inauthentic and original/copy binaries that "bourgeois epistemology posits within sexuality", and within all subjectivity, and that camp potentially *queers* and *crosses*."[56] The *Secret Love* and *Trade Enquiries* works, with their fragmentary, 'trashy', appropriated and quoted materials, exceed the limits of originality, authenticity, and uniqueness. They break with the bourgeois "taboos against strategies that rely on parody and reappropriation of already existing representations."[57]

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[54] Cleto. (1999). Op. cit., p25.
[55] Susan Sontag. "Notes on "Camp"(1964), pp273-292 in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*. S. Sontag (1966). New York, Delta and Farrar Straus and Giroux, p280.
[56] Cleto. (1999). Op. cit., p20.
[57] Cleto. (1999). Op. cit., p19.

## The feminine and the decorative in McDiarmid's aesthetic

McDiarmid's practice was affect-based and relational. The modality of the work is constantly changing according to where the artist placed his relationships, political perspective and his idea of his community at the time of the creation of a given body of work. He saw his work as 'communal' in the sense that it contributed to the shaping of his intimate relational circle and his wider gay community. In the 1970s in progressive circles in Australian cities there was a well-developed relationship between second wave feminism and cultural politics.[58] McDiarmid was aware of contemporary feminist cultural politics, and radical political connections to art practice through poster collectives and agitprop around women's liberation and gay and lesbian events, some of which (posters, buttons, journal covers) he designed and made.[59]

He was aware of feminist projects of reclamation of devalued female craft traditions and ideas of using female domestic crafts in an 'art' context. From the mid 1970s there was a growing number of publications on feminist art and the notion of the 'subversive

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[58] Barbara Hall. "The Women's Liberation Movement and the Visual Arts: A Selected Chronology, 1969-90", pp276-284 in Catriona Moore, Ed. (1994). Op. cit..

[59] McDiarmid viewed Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party* project when it was first exhibited in San Francisco in 1979 and as a broadly radical artist was well aware of Australian developments in relation to feminist art practice such as the establishment of women's art projects, publications, exhibitions and collectives.(Personal communication with this author,1979)

stitch' was familiar to McDiarmid.[60] Initiatives in Sydney at this time such as the women's art projects *Mothers' Memories, Others' Memories* and *The D'oyley Show* made connections between women's domestic crafts and the political agendas of the Women's Liberation Movement; these new paradigms were known to McDiarmid through his connections to their organisers.[61] It was in the context of a broad feminist investigation of women's private and domestic lives that feminist artists renegotiated the relationship between art and craft. McDiarmid could see the connections between this and his own enterprise of reclaiming forms of gay male subjectivity in his own work.

The term decorative and a decorative aesthetic itself was, by the mid twentieth century, regarded as anathema to sophisticated western urban visual taste.[62] It was associated with the pre-modern, non-European and rural, and of course women's domestic arts and crafts. The New York and Southern California based 'Pattern and Decoration' movement of the 1970s was relevant to McDiarmid who mentioned it as an influence in his work.[63] If, as Brandon Taylor suggests, the feminine in art "tends to be additive rather than subtractive," McDiarmid's work is

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[60] Rozsika Parker. (1986) *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. London: The Women's Press.
[61] Vivienne Binns. *Mothers' Memories Others' Memories* pp71-79 and *The D'oyley Show: an exhibition of women's domestic fancywork* pp57 -70 in Moore. (1994). Op. Cit.
[62] Robert Atkins. (1990). *ArtSpeak: A Guide to Contemporary Ideas, Movements, and Buzzwords*. New York, Abbeville Press, p120.
[63] David McDiarmid. (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.

emphatically feminine - it adds techniques and modalities over time, it throws materials, elements and busy content onto the viewer's attention in dissonant layers and juxtapositions. And, within Taylor's logic, it defies the "reductive good taste of straight "male" art and celebrates arbitrariness and decorativeness as values which, so to speak, have no stable value in the male aesthetic pantheon."[64]

Asked by Paul Canning in an interview if he, as an artist, "ever felt labelled, boxed in, or defined in ways that you feel are wrong?" McDiarmid answered :

> Yeah. [I] Felt very hemmed in by conservative art scene queens who didn't feel that politics was part of art and didn't feel that you can include any kind of confrontational aspect into your work and I never saw art as being a safe thing. I know that exists but that's not something that involves me. My references were always edgy feminist stuff or whatever and that was always seen as being marginal [but] I never thought of it in that way. I thought they [feminists] were actually right on the edge concerning my life, my sexual identity, the whole notion of how people are labelled, why we're marginalised.[65]

McDiarmid did not aspire in any clear-cut way to being an art world figure. He had a lively scepticism about the reception of his work by established art world circles and did not seek fixed gallery representation or an accepted pathway towards a linear art world career. A work such as *Secret Love*, the pink plastic hand stitched installation using cheap materials in a craft modality discussed above, was hard to place in a critical and art dealing

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[64] Brandon Taylor. (1995). *Avant-Garde and After: Rethinking Art Now*. New York, Harry Abrams and Times Mirror, p68.

context in the 1970s, when camp was equated with *kitsch*, and craft was associated with the feminine and the debased.

The sexual explicitness of his work also exceeded boundaries of accepted taste and respectability and thus placed it outside of mainstream art collecting in which the female body was a legitimate subject but the male body, not to mention the homo-erotic male body, was generally not. Robert Mapplethorpe (who unlike McDiarmid was not involved in the politics of gay liberation) found it impossible to find a gallery for his 1970s collages which are uncannily similar to those McDiarmid created for the *Secret Love* exhibition.[66] McDiarmid, perhaps paradoxically in provincial Sydney, did have a supporter in the Hogarth Galleries but sales were not numerous and the work was sold to a small number of mostly gay men, who were in general the artist's friends.

In terms of his personal networks, and potential professional ones, in the 1970s McDiarmid's associations and connections were sexual, political and broadly creative. His early Melbourne (and later Sydney) friends and associates were not, in general, drawn from the art world but were engaged with sex, window dressing, fashion, film, feminism and radical sexual politics, music and dressing up. His circle in the 1970s could be characterised by its

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[65] David McDiarmid. (1993). Paul Canning interview. Op. cit.
[66] Meyer. (2002). Op. cit., p181.

restlessness, cultural curiosity and creative mobility rather than its ambition.

It is possible that McDiarmid's lack of formal art training as such made him less interested in a conventional artist's career trajectory and made him more open to non-art-world visual culture. His only brief post-secondary education was the study of film design at Swinburne Institute of Technology in Melbourne (he left after two years, before graduating). His eclectic visual interests included advertising, comic-books, pornography, film, fashion, craft and 'feminine', domestic, decorative, non-western and 'outsider' art traditions. He did not have the experience of studying art with a cohort of male peers who were art world- and career-focused. For McDiarmid the compelling thing was the eclectic world of visual culture available to him to do with as he pleased, in whatever balance and configuration seemed appropriate at any given time. As outlined above, his diverse practice throughout his creative career embraced fashion, craft, interior design, graphic design, painting, agitprop poster art and book creation. He worked with non-art materials such as cloth, suede, bedsheets, clothing, fabric paint, commercial display materials and the found pre-published materials referred to above. He employed decorative design conventions and techniques of quilting, embroidery, needlepoint and mosaic. Such

practices held no value in the contemporary mainstream art world.

## Craft and the decorative as 'lowbrow'

McDiarmid's own recorded statements make it clear that he was interested in upsetting received modernist paradigms of what good art was, and unsettling the authority of the exclusion of craft from those models. He was perversely delighted to place himself and his practice outside such paradigms. He employed an abundance of disparate modalities in his work and did not censor the 'low', the 'feminine', the 'craft-like' and the non-western from his techniques, materials and content.

An emphasis on the separation of art from craft is underpinned by a modernist discourse which places art above craft.[67] Art is "highbrow, which is to say elitist; and craft is populist or lowbrow - which is to say commonplace."[68] Michael Tawa describes how modernist thought about art "makes artificial distinctions, amounting to no more than snobbery, between what it chooses to include and exclude". Art is generally thought to be unrelated to the "intimate pattern of home and community life and ritual; and

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[67] Sue Rowley. "Warping the Loom: Theoretical Frameworks for Craft Writing", pp169-186, in Noris Ioannou. Ed. (1992). *Craft in Society: An Anthology of Perspectives*. Fremantle, Western Australia, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, p169.
[68] Michael Tawa, "Poesis and Praxis: Craft, Modernity and the Techne of Architecture", pp269-280 in Ioannou (1992). Op. cit., p269.

it is therefore annexed from the broader social context," writes Tawa. The crafts, he says, have been associated with the "non-intellectual and anti-intellectual."[69]

I have quoted McDiarmid above referring to his own art practice as employing "different styles", "exploring", "stopping and going" across different practices, including being influenced by "edgy feminist stuff" which he thought was "actually right on the edge concerning my life, my sexual identity, the whole notion of how people are labelled, why we're marginalised"[70] He had developed a sophisticated understanding of the complex relationships between art and craft, and high and popular culture, and playfully appropriated bits and pieces of each. Use of craft techniques, like quilting, stitchery and embroidery patterns in his work make reference both pleasurably and perversely to the comfort and meaning these original artefacts had to their community of making and use. In his case McDiarmid created objects which had community meaning and 'use' as signs of community rituals and connections made through ecstatic cultures of the dancefloor, drugs and sex. These will be further explored in Chapter Three of this thesis.

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[69] ibid.
[70] David McDiarmid (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.

## *Man Quilt* 1979

A complex set of intersections between traditional feminine and domestic crafts; new forms of male homosexual sociality in Western metropolitan life; counter-hegemonic ideas of community, privacy and secrecy and the process of making of a new 'queer' world all meet in the work, executed in 1979, entitled *Man Quilt* [Figs. 9. and 10.]. Using traditional quilting patterns and fabrication techniques associated with private, domestic, familial, (and nostalgic) comfort, McDiarmid creates a work which proposes a public/private homosocial world created by gay men. The work which measures 145.8 x 120cm is meticulously hand-stitched, in the 'abutted and over-stitched' 'English' method of patchwork quilting, using the same coloured plastic hobby craft thread he had previously used in the wall hanging, *Secret Love,* described above.[71] The careful appropriation of traditional quilting blocks in the 'Star-Block' and 'Four-Patch' patterns, were used to position fragments of the 'Pink Personals' columns from the San Francisco gay news-paper, *The Advocate*; fragments of different coloured (red and black) bandannas used for coded sexual-practice communication; and fragments of the gay male 'clone' imagery McDiarmid had developed and used in *Trade Enquiries* in 1978.

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[71] Celia Eddy. (2003). *The Quilter's Block Bible*. Sydney, New York and London, Simon and Schuster p31. I am also grateful to Sarah Tucker for information on naming of quilting patterns in McDiarmid's work.

The work has a stitched surround 'framing' it in black leather and a hanging apparatus of chrome chains. So while the work carries a content and materiality which evokes S/M; fist-fucking; sex-for-sale and by arrangement; its means, its meticulous handcrafted techniques and its references to a (here) dissonant tradition of feminine, domestic crafts, unsettles the clear masculinist import of the work.

> I've always been interested in craft … patchwork quilts; and I love macrame and needlework - all that women's art. I was interested in feminist art in the 70s and there was a school of pattern and decoration artists in the 70s in America…. I love the process and the stuff that people call inconsequential or decorative and to me it was more significant than that.[72]

*Man Quilt* disrupts the public /private dichotomies associated with who has the power to create a private world with its own codes and protect it from outside incursions; legal, punitive, disruptive. This 'public-private' dichotomy has been a central issue in the experience of the understanding of modernity, argues sociologist and craft theorist Sue Rowley:

> The relegation of the histories and representational modes of some groups to a 'private' realm is derived from the sense of the private as bound up with *particular* interests. The idea of the private has become encrusted with another set of meanings associated with seclusion and inaccessibility to public scrutiny. We talk of private meanings as those to which a viewing public will not have access, which we might choose to keep 'secret'.[73]

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[72] David McDiarmid (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.
[73] Sue Rowley. "Going Public: Getting Personal" pp213-227 in C. Moore. (1994). Op. cit., p220.

While Rowley is writing in the above passage about women's difficulty in claiming secure and authoritative private space, this insight resonates with McDiarmid's appropriation of feminine, domestic craft traditions in his art to posit a new gay male world in which gay men themselves will define how they are seen, what is important, what kinds of communities they will form and what cultural practices will be developed there.

The work is explicitly autobiographical in its appropriation of personal 'material vestiges' and artefacts and fragments of the artist's homosocial world. *Man Quilt* establishes itself as a public and private gay male urban artefact articulated by creative means which are associated with the rural, feminine and domestic. The work posits a publicly libidinal gay male community which can celebrate, with its own consciously crafted cultural artefacts, its specificity and its resistance. This art work was exhibited in a craft context in *The Australian Experience – Elements of Change* exhibition at the Crafts Council of Australia Gallery in George Street Sydney in February - March 1982. The catalogue contains the following artist's statement from McDiarmid:

> I'm interested in popular culture. My work is in the intersection between folk art, women's art (needlepoint, patchwork quilts) and contemporary materials, I use loud, cheap and vulgar plastics to make "pretty" pictures – pieces of wall decoration. Good taste can be a prison.[74]

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[74] David McDiarmid. artist's statement, *The Australian Experience – Elements of Change* February 22 - March 31 1982, exhibition catalogue, Crafts Council of Australia, 1982.

The last phrase is particularly significant in the culturally conservative Australia of the era. For all its cultural references to the decorative, to community and craft, the *Man Quilt* also has a meticulous minimalist restraint at odds with much of the contemporaneous feminist retrieval of women's domestic art and craft. The work's geometric compositional elegance, and refinement of execution, create the kind of political and aesthetic tension which characterises the complex concerns of McDiarmid's oeuvre.

The celebration of traditional women's work in the 1970s tended to represent a romantic and nostalgic perspective on the historical realities of women's domestic lives. The adoption by McDiarmid of these stitching and handiwork techniques, and feminine domestic aesthetic traditions, nonetheless represented for him a refusal to adhere to male/female; art/craft; public/private binaries and was an act of solidarity with a feminist idea, even though within feminism itself, "the ambivalent valorisation of women's suppressed traditions was [soon] moved off the agenda [by feminist women artists]."[75]

## Interior space and the decorative

The home is of course the location of the women's domestic craft tradition and McDiarmid unfashionably took an interest in that

too. He engaged in decorative projects for his own and his friends' homes at a time when that was possibly counter productive to the project of a successful career based on contemporary norms for art and masculinity. To take an interest in hand-crafted home making and decorating, while it was part of the counter-culture's interest in pre-modern and non-European aesthetic traditions and values, was not something which would add to a male artist's cultural kudos.

McDiarmid's embodying of his and others' stories in his work made it uniquely able to function as a community artefact for a self-selected community with its own patterns of 'trade' and gifting.[76] His decorative murals and floors in domestic settings were an almost archaic decorative practice out of step with then current modernist orthodoxies surrounding contemporary art and interior architecture, associated as they were with 'low' categories of homely, community and amateur arts.[77] McDiarmid admired the work of Australian interior design practitioners Douglas Annand, Marion Hall Best, and Byram Mansell who had employed vibrant colour and unashamedly 'decorative' elements

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[75] Sue Rowley. (1994). Op. cit., p175.

[76] Jeffrey Stewart spoke about the way McDiarmid's work was acquired by a network of gay men and others who understood it, saw their stories reflected in it, and wanted to become part of the world it posited. Jeffrey Stewart (1995). Ted Gott interview. Op. cit.

[77] Sylvia Kleinert writes that the "modern mural tradition has been largely unrecognised because its origins lie in the salon which found itself marginalised by the twin paradigms of modernism and industrial design.",
See Sylvia Kleinert. "Deconstructing 'The Decorative': A Study of Euro-American Artistic Traditions on the Reception of Aboriginal Arts and Crafts" pp115-130 in Ioannou. (1992). Op. cit., p 124.

in mid-century Australian interiors. He also admired the rustic but knowing decorative approach which Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell had employed in the walls, floors, furniture and textiles at Charleston, the country residence of the Bloomsbury circle of artists and intellectuals.[78] McDiarmid's decorative interior work for himself and his friends included painted floors and canvas-based wall 'murals' using decorative elements derived from Australian indigenous flora, geometric forms borrowed from the twentieth century women's house painting patterns of the Ndebele in Southern Africa and other appropriated decorative traditions.

## *The Australian Dream Lounge*

In December 1977, in an exhibition at Hogarth Galleries, Sydney, two months after returning from his first extended visit to the United States, McDiarmid created an installation entitled *The Australian Dream Lounge* [Figs 11. to 13.]. This installation can be read as a camp version of a 'domestic interior' based on devalued materials and aesthetics associated with popular Australian domestic modernity. It can be seen as part of an ongoing trope within McDiarmid's work - expressed in multiple modalities over

[78] Photographs of McDiarmid's home and studio in Sydney, from the early 1990s, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia, show a similar 'all-over' decorative approach to the adornment of space.

time - involving the appropriation of ideas and aesthetics related to so-called 'low' culture, 'bad taste' or *kitsch*.

McDiarmid's purpose here is not to simply establish his cultural knowingness in relation to popular taste - one of the ploys of camp identified by Esther Newton in her groundbreaking late 1960s study of drag performance.[79] *The Australian Dream Lounge* adapted found materials such as an elegant, but then unfashionable, lounge chair designed by Australian modernist furniture designer Grant Featherston, with applied decoration by the artist; brightly coloured vinyls and pink fake fur made into 'carpets' and wall hangings, to produce an environment which re-configured rejected mid-century popular design conventions. Large hand-stitched vinyl wall hangings which referenced over-exposed tourist imagery of Sydney, adorned the walls of the 'dream lounge'. The largest of these, titled *Sydney Curtain* was a meticulously hand-stitched, 6 metre x 2 metre three-panel piece, using hobby craft materials such as coloured plastic sheeting and thread and coloured eyelets. The work appropriated the familiar composition of, Australian artist, Brett Whiteley's famous views of Sydney Harbour from the vantage point of Lavender Bay as well as 'tourist art' conventions such as decorative gumnuts, postcards and fake 'Aboriginal' designs.

*The Australian Dream Lounge* installation, while being a form of anti-high-art, camp aesthetic 'manifesto', also included individual works of art, which were for sale in the conventional way through the Hogarth Galleries. These wall-hung works employed linoleum flooring material, in devalued 1950s geometric print patterns, as collage on board finished with the chromed faux-metal edging associated with lower middle-class 1950s kitchen furniture. The works consisted of band-saw-cut plywood shapes, overlaid with the linoleum and edged with the chromed plastic stripping, of culturally debased Australiana icons such as an outline map of Australia, the 'flying ducks' ceramic suburban wall hangings of the 1950s; and appropriations of 'Aboriginal' tourist art such as a stylised turtle. The popular design tropes, quoted by McDiarmid in this work, had been passionately criticised by proponents of the international style and Australian high modernism, such as architect Robin Boyd in his widely read and publicised book *The Australian Ugliness*, first published in 1960.[80]

The work entitled *My Country* [Fig 14.] from *The Australian Dream Lounge* is a stylised outline map of Australia made from band-saw cut plywood substrate covered with 'lino' whose geometric pattern approximates the 'state-lines' dividing the country. Inset into the

[79] Newton, Esther (1979). *Mother Camp: Female Impersonators in America*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, p129.
[80] Robin Boyd. (1980) *The Australian Ugliness*. Ringwood Victoria, Penguin.

'eastern' coastal zone of the map, approximating the latitude of Sydney is a commercial tourist postcard of a Sydney beach. This postcard and the whole 'map' is outlined in the faux-chromed-metal plastic stripping used, as mentioned, for post-war plastic laminate kitchen tables and benches. This work enacts a statement of provincial identity as 'Australian' a short time after the artist's return from an extended visit to the United States. It resonates with Esther Newton's characterisation of camp as follows: "The kind of incongruities that are campy are very often created by adornment and stylisation of a well-defined thing or symbol" – in this case an elementary school outline of the map of Australia, with a famous beach.[81]

*The Australian Dream Lounge* may have been read as an arch middle-class refusal of popular taste. I suggest that McDiarmid was in fact disrupting and problematising this view. For him, it seems to me, the point was not to establish superiority over unsophisticated consumers of popular product or to propose that "mass culture produced a passive, undifferentiated audience of dupes" as Lawrence Alloway claimed in his discussion of Pop.[82] McDiarmid himself took pleasure in the graphic and textural freshness of the materials and aesthetics he appropriated, for *The Australian Dream Lounge*, from "history's waste", as Andrew Ross

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[81] Esther Newton. (1993). "Role Models". *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. D. Bergman. Amherst, Mass., University of Massachusetts Press: 39-53, P47.

has called it.[83] He was interested in the popular, cultural and economic optimism that their original domestic adoption denoted in 1950s Australia and also in repositioning them in such a way as to create the kinds of incongruities Esther Newton refers to.

Appropriation, in the context of a commercial contemporary art gallery, of devalued suburban domestic design conventions and materials, then thought of as *kitsch* was a ploy that dis-established and exceeded the idea of 'taste' as understood by hegemonic bourgeois culture and its commentators and arbiters. This work engaged the Pop idea that "everyday cultural currency had value, and that everything had more or less equal value", as Andrew Ross says, and that "Culture was to be described and enjoyed, not prescribed like a dose of medicine by those with cultural capital to decide 'what's good for you.'"[84] In this installation, on return from the United States the artist was announcing his status as a 'provincial', 'non-metropolitan' artist and his distance from aspirations within a Euro-American modernist art tradition. In this work McDiarmid resists the idea of the educated 'good taste' which is the mark of an authentic, 'natural' bourgeois cultural

[82] Lawrence Alloway quoted in Ross. (1999). Op. cit., p318.
[83] ibid.
[84] Ross. (1999). Op. cit., p319.

subjectivity.[85] In a country in which 'good taste' was perhaps an even larger source of anxiety than in international metropolitan centres, this was a determinedly tangential cultural act.

## Conclusion

David McDiarmid's first publicly exhibited work was created between 1976 and 1979 when he was actively involved in the politics of Gay Liberation - in its activist organisational activities, its impetus towards sexual freedom and experimentation, its politics of identity and its self-inquiring aspects. McDiarmid was influenced by the liberationist ideology associated with the broader counter-culture, including ideas relating to sexual freedom, civil liberties and broad issues of non-conforming sociality, living arrangements, style and dress. All of these political interests impacted on his aesthetic sensibility and his work from the 1970s.

McDiarmid's artistic output in the 1970s confuses distinctions between fine artist/activist, artist/craftsperson, high/low, Pop/serious, and political/decorative. He consistently employed methods, techniques and themes which have traditionally been marked as feminine – hand-stitching, quilt patterns, hand-written

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[85] Fabio Cleto provides an analysis of camp, queer and a critique of the bourgeois concept of the depth subject. Drawing on Esther Newton, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Cleto explores the idea of a mobile, elusive, complex and multiple

confessional utterances, domestic decorative design and a practice which can be read as a whole as diaristic or autobiographical. The work is a constantly changing exploration of a mobile sexual, social and political subjectivity and a record of his shifting ideas of a gay male 'community'.

All of the work of this period is concerned with identity resonating with counter cultural-political concerns of this time. The work exhibited in the *Secret Love* and *Trade Enquiries* exhibitions (1976 and 1978) records the sexual, social and political identity concerns of interest to the Gay Liberation movement, while at the same time exploring a 'becoming' identity associated with the later concerns of queer theory. The *Man Quilt* of 1979 appropriates domestic feminine craft techniques and found material fragments to propose a new kind of gay male 'community' which perversely builds itself on the camp adoption of the traditions of a more conservative and nostalgic idea of community - again enacting a form of queer world-making. *The Australian Dream Lounge* works of 1977, both individually and as an installation, propose an Australian provincial identity through a camp-inflected Pop aesthetic. The work of this period is paradoxical in that it engages a number of political and aesthetic discourses thought to be antithetical as outlined in the binaries above. McDiarmid saw his practice as being in part connected to a

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subject, as opposed to a stable, bounded and fixed subjectivity enshrined in the

'community arts' discourse, which included a critical perspective on the commercial and institutional parameters of the mainstream art world but at the same time his work exceeds the earnestness and cultural naivete of that discourse.

bourgeois idea of authenticity and depth. Cleto. (1999). Op.cit.

Fig. 1 *Secret Love* 1976

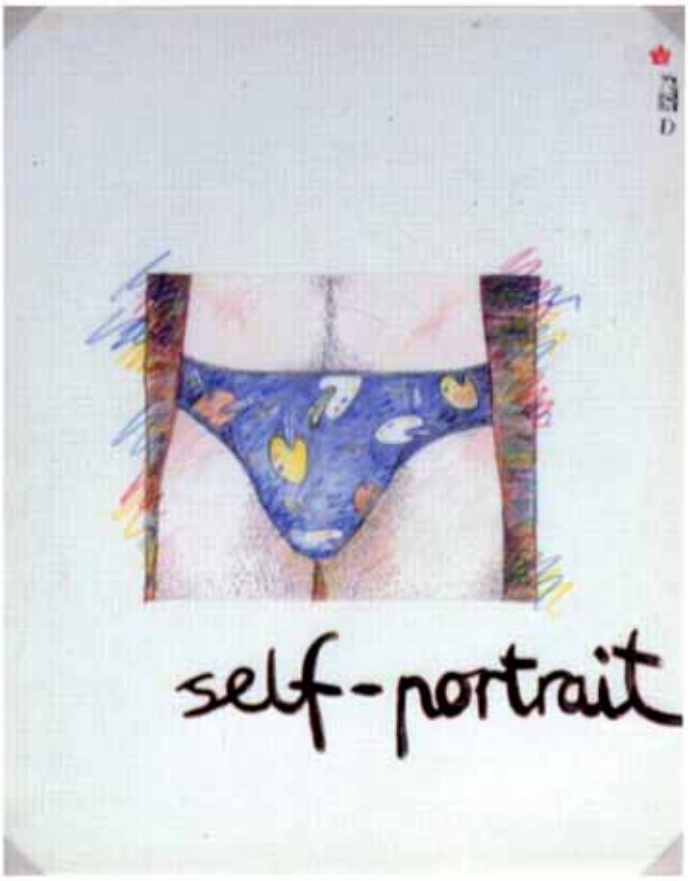
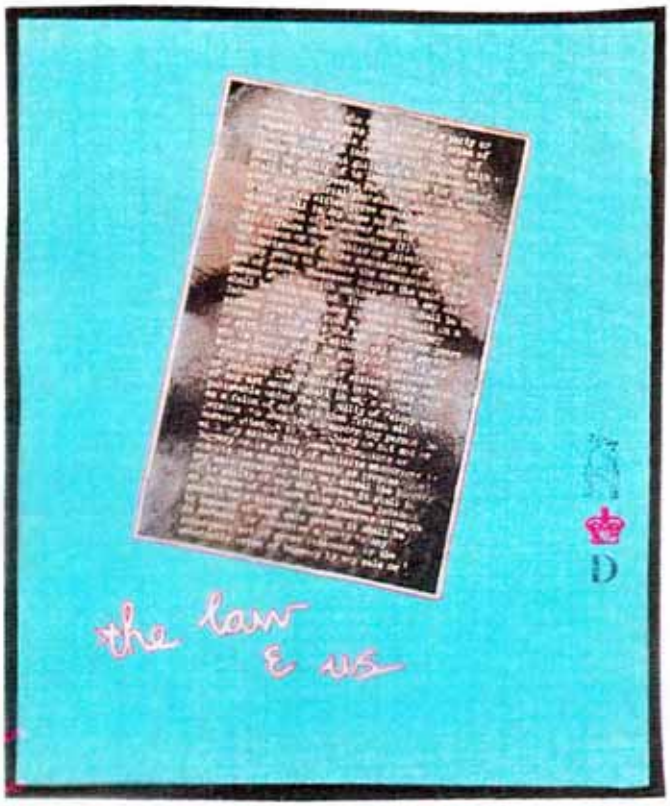
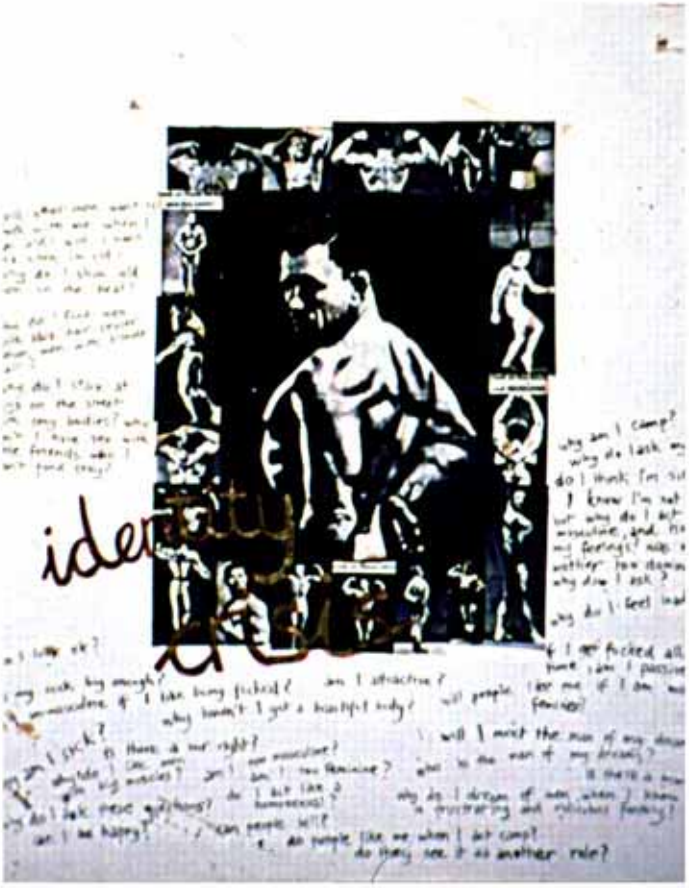


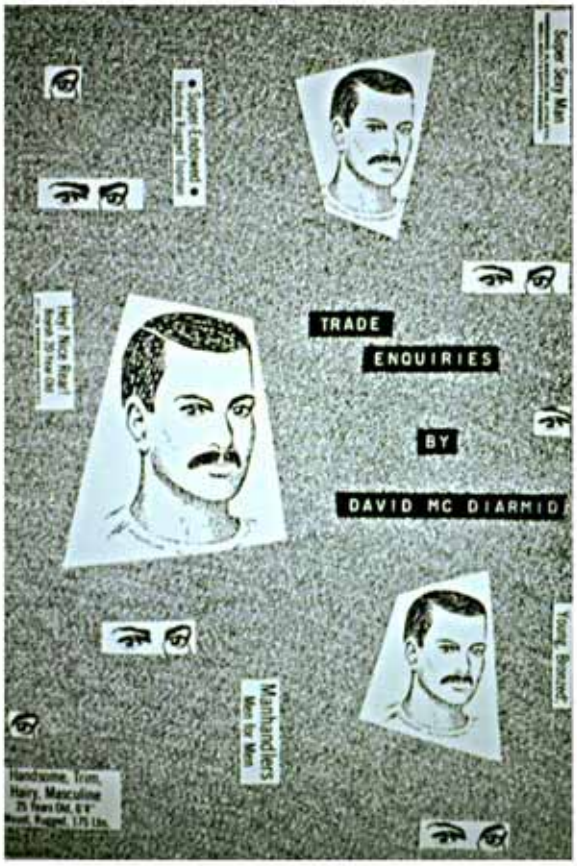

Fig. 2 *Self Portrait* 1976

Fig. 3 *The Law & Us* 1976

Fig. 4 *Identity Crisis* 1976





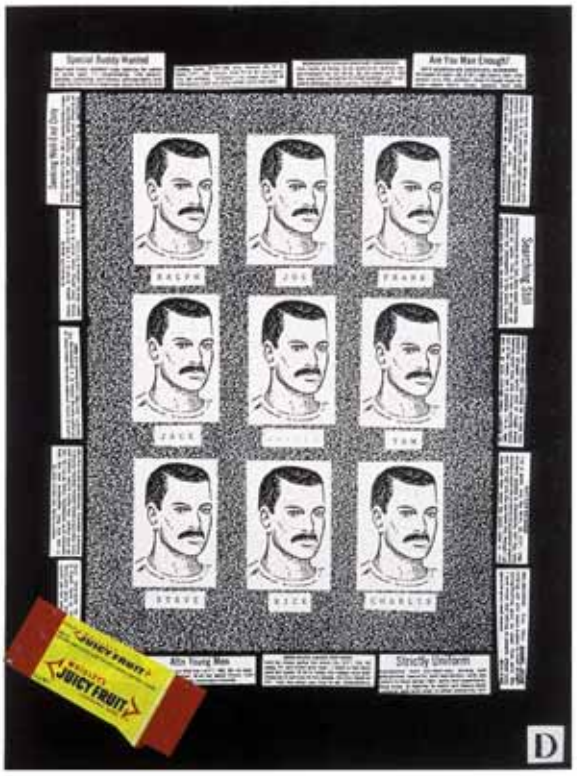
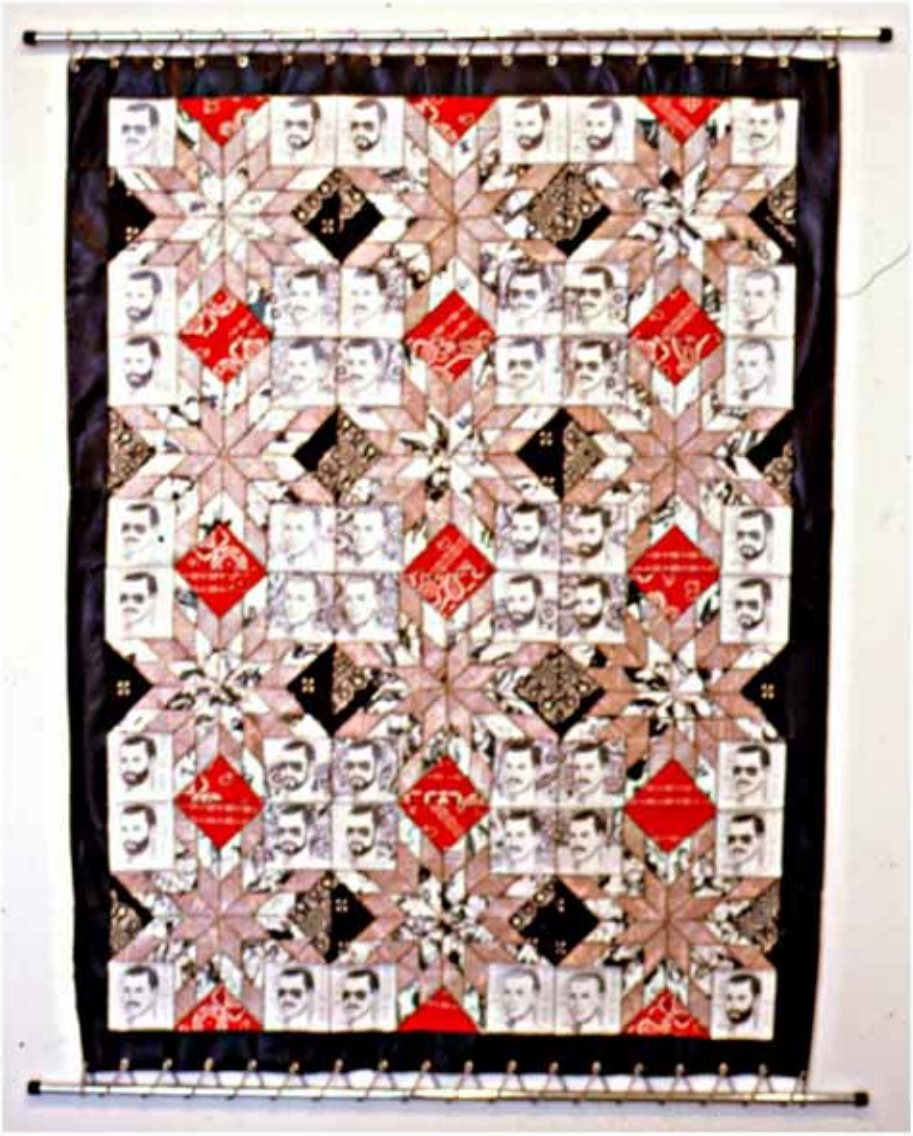






Fig. 5 *Trade Enquiries* 1978 (cover) Fig. 6 *Ralph, Joe, Frank...* 1978

Fig. 7 *Pervert, Faggot...* 1978 Fig. 8 *Friendship...* 1978



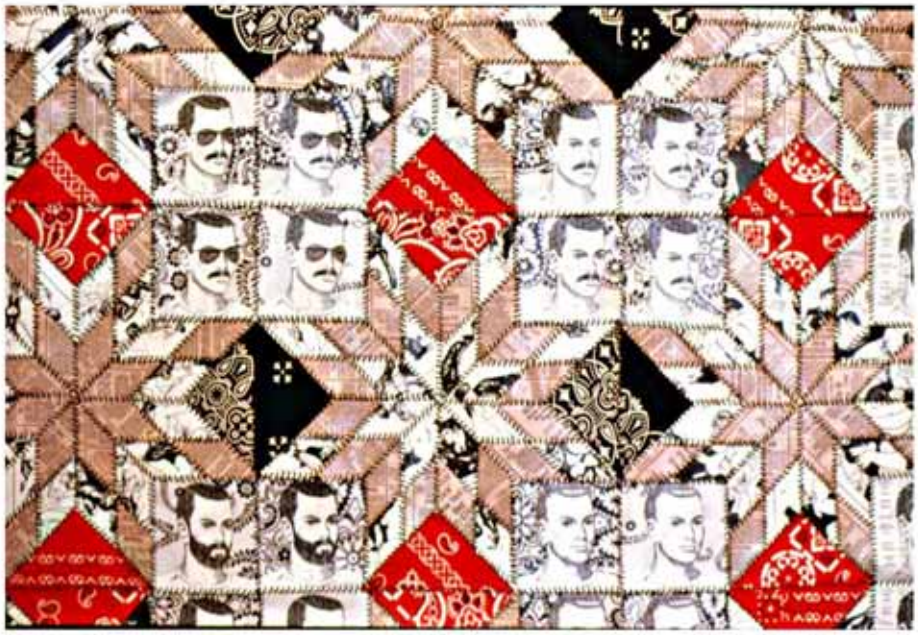


Fig. 9 *Man Quilt* 1979 Fig. 10 *Man Quilt* 1979 (detail)

Fig. 11 *The Australian Dream Lounge* 1977 (installation view)

Fig. 12 *The Australian Dream Lounge* 1977 (installation view)

Fig. 13 *The Australian Dream Lounge* 1977 (installation view)

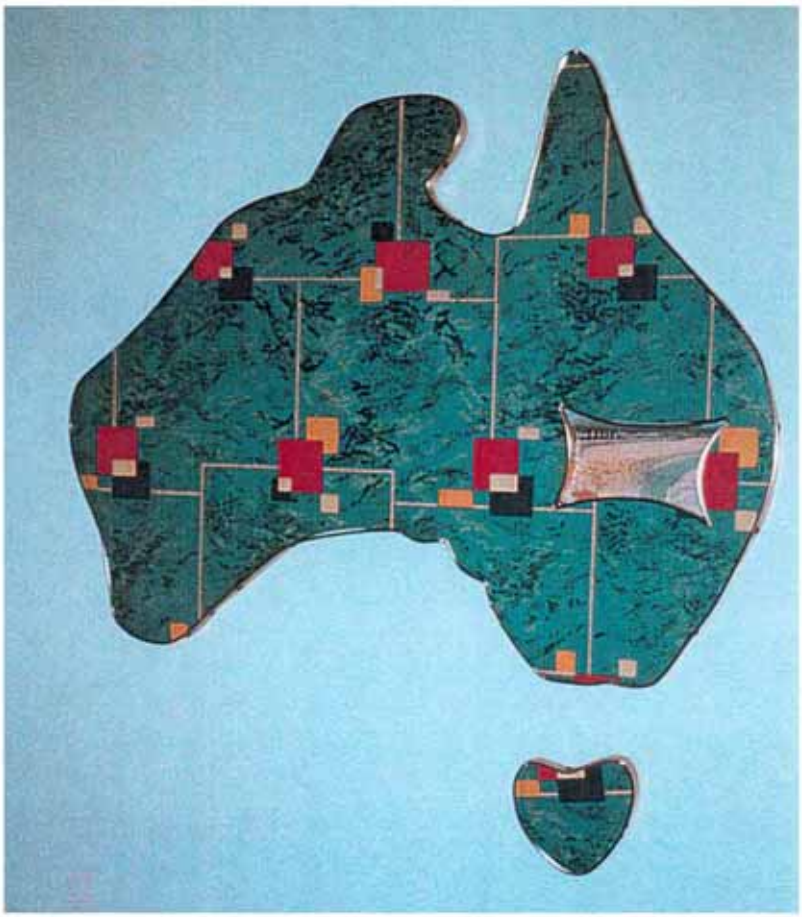


Fig. 14 *My Country* 1977

# *2.*
# *You Make Me Feel Mighty Real:*[1]
# McDiarmid and America

*He began to think that the city is the greatest university of all, the real one, and all his education until now had been a mime.*
Andrew Holleran: *Dancer from the Dance: A Novel* 1979, p9

*... there are many gay stories, but the story that touches my subject is the one about urban migration, the move of the marginalised from the country to the cities and capitals of America and Europe, many of which represented a New Gay Jerusalem ... by the end of the twentieth century. San Francisco. New York. London. These cities had long established and thriving queer cultures and cultures of sexual dissidence, which have become the subject of academic and popular studies seeking to put gay urban history on the map.*

Mark Turner: *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London* 2003, p 44

*There are a number of ties that bind the cruiser and the writer of graffiti - the subcultural claiming of public spaces; the fact that the cruiser and graffitist are often around but often are not detected committing their crimes; their use of anonymity; and the coded use of private languages. Part of the effectiveness of graffiti comes from its being indecipherable, a language from which most of us are excluded.*

Mark Turner: *Backward Glances* 2003, p150-151

1. [You Make Me Feel] "Mighty Real", is the repeated line of a song by Sylvester, from *Disco Heat*, Fantasy Records, 1978.

In the previous chapter I argued that David McDiarmid's art practice was intricately connected with his ideas about personal liberation and political agency. I have shown how his engagement with liberationist movements, identity politics, 1960s and 1970s counter-culture, and emerging articulations of 'queer', made him receptive to certain ways of being and behaving. These all had a powerful impact on the way McDiarmid saw himself as an artist, the kind of art he produced and his relationship to the contemporary art world.

This chapter explores the impact of the city of New York, particularly Manhattan, on McDiarmid's visual and cultural concerns and his creative practice between the late 1970s and the mid 1980s. As Elizabeth Grosz remarks of the importance of city life to sexual life, "The city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality."[2] In this enquiry I examine the specificity of McDiarmid's attraction to the United States, especially New York, and the sexual, cultural, political and creative engagements with that city which became enduring themes in his work.

The 'America' that McDiarmid was attracted to was not the world of official American culture but "the cultures of America's own

[2] Elizabeth Grosz. (1995). *Space Time and Perversion*. London and New York, Routledge, p104.

rebellion", as Janet Wolff puts it.[3] Not the world of Reaganomics and conservative family and religious values and "institutionalised and pervasive racism" but the world of sexual permissiveness, racial mingling and cultural innovation and daring.[4] As a young man from the 'periphery' the bright lights and cultural complexities of the metropolitan 'centre' provided a compelling magnetism which animated the artist's personal and creative life for the remainder of his career.[5]

In March of 1977 David McDiarmid left Sydney for his first visit to the United States, returning by October of that same year. In doing so he was pursuing a trajectory which was implicit in his work from 1976 onwards. This included exploration of the following themes: liberationist gay male sexuality and politics; a poetics of sensuality through drugs, music and sex; dissident traditions in American intellectual life represented in part for McDiarmid by notions of 'hip' and 'cool' as expressed in the work of, among others, the writers and artists known as The Beats; 'African-American expressive culture', especially music and dance; American pioneer women's domestic crafts, especially quilting

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[3] Janet Wolff. (1995). *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism*. New Haven Connecticut and London, Yale University Press, p139.
[4] ibid.
[5] To this artist, who grew up in Melbourne and moved to Sydney in the early 1970s, both of these cities would be characterised as culturally 'peripheral' in the post-colonial studies sense in which it is understood that the periphery lacks access to, and authority on, important cultural sites and issues of the times. See Bill Ashcroft, et al, Ed. (1998.). *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts*. London and New York. Routledge, p 138.

and needlepoint; street art and graffiti; native American craft and arts, especially dress. He was also attentive to the aesthetics and themes of American film, advertising, fashion, product design, gay male pornography and the cult of celebrity. All of these interests impacted on his work by way of subject, method, materials and style and on the way he thought of himself as an artist.

McDiarmid's drive towards American cultures of resistance especially in New York was the driver of his creativity from the late 1970s and determined the subsequent character of his artistic output. In this chapter I explore the specificities of the city which influenced McDiarmid's life and work and use this as a basis for developing an understanding of both the inspiration for and the materiality of the work produced when he was resident in New York in the late 1970s and 1980s.

## An American 'ideolect' in McDiarmid's work

McDiarmid's attraction to New York was first and foremost to the sexual possibilities in a city that had a high population density, broad racial and cultural diversity and was inscribed with a sub-cultural 'map' of gay male places of significance, some of which had been gay meeting places for decades and others of which had

sprung into prominence post-Stonewall.[6] The city of New York, its spaces and its mythologies, generates creative concerns and styles which become a kind of 'idiolect' in McDiarmid's work from the late 1970s onwards.[7] By this I mean that McDiarmid worked within a visual and conceptual language system which was inseparable from his location in New York at a particular time. In this sense, I propose that the time and space intersections of his life and subjectivity are implicit in the way his work evolved from 1977 onwards when he first visited the United States and after he settled in New York in June 1979.

I suggest that in looking at McDiarmid's work from this time, "space is an implicit operator which needs to be teased out."[8] This is not to say that I see space as an absolute category, but rather, following urban theorists Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift, I am interested in *space as process* and *space in process*, that is "space and time combined in a process of becoming."[9] McDiarmid's location of himself in New York at this time is a commitment to, and

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[6] George Chauncey. (1996). "Privacy Can Only be Had In Public: Gay Uses of the Streets". *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*. J. Sanders. New York, Princeton Architectural Press: 224-267, p259.

[7] "Idiolect: the speech habits constituting the language system of an individual" Alan Bullock, Oliver Stallybrass and Stephen Trombley, *The Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought,* p 405.
See also Crang and Thrift for how certain cities become 'ideolects'. In their introduction to, "Thinking Space", their 2000 publication on urban theory, Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift assert that "Space is the everywhere of modern thought", that it is "the flesh that flatters the bones of theory. It is an all purpose nostrum to be applied whenever things look sticky." They go on to suggest that there are some cities which within discourses of space "now stand as idiolects." Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift. Eds. (2000). *Thinking Space*. London and New York, Routledge, p1.

[8] Crang and Thrift. (2000). Op. cit., p2.

[9] Crang and Thrift, (2000). Op. cit., p31.

development of, a particular way of being a gay man, an artist and a cultural subject. The visual languages he developed in the city from the late 1970s were grounded precisely in that place and that time.

In an exploration of McDiarmid's geographical 'transitivity' I draw on the work of Nigel Thrift, and other urban theorists, to show how both the idea and the spatial reality of the metropolis impacted on McDiarmid's subjectivity and his work. In 1993, six years after he returned to live permanently in Sydney from an extended period living in New York (1979-1987), McDiarmid said in an interview:

> I consider myself part of a community that isn't only to be found in Australia... I still like to travel and read novels, books, magazines and movies from other places because I need to get turned on and I'm not always turned on by what's produced here. And I'm hooked on stimulation for better or for worse. [10]

This cultural curiosity and expansive restlessness is of course true of many artists, intellectuals or adventurers who seek time away from their own cultures for stimulation and new ideas. For McDiarmid however, the drive towards America manifested not just as a desire for change and variety but as an opportunity to pursue the 'life without limits' he aspired to. A temporary Australia Council-funded residency (at Greene Street, or P.S.1. studios) – the more usual pathway for Australian artists in New

[10] David McDiarmid, interviewed by Paul Canning, March 1993. Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

York - was never going to offer sufficient spatial or temporal exposure to desired metropolitan edges for him, either as an artist or as a politico-sexual activist and cultural subject.[11] I mentioned in Chapter One McDiarmid's eloquent personal account of the way in which exposure to American gay publications had given him the intellectual and emotional clarity to come out as a gay man.[12] As I also made clear in the previous chapter, McDiarmid's art, his life, his sexuality and his politics were inextricably connected. As far as he was concerned, they all needed to be developed in America.

## Nomadic subjectivity and the city

Nigel Thrift in his book *Spatial Formations* draws on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's work on 'transitivity and nomadism'[13] to understand what the city is to those who choose a particular urban edge for their existence. Thrift is interested in the freedom which may be achieved by living life in a conceptual and physical mobility which involves "only temporarily occupying a space and

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[11] A more common relationship with New York, for Australian artists, was as a temporary occupant of Australia Council funded studios; PS 1 at Long Island City and Greene St in SoHo. I am grateful to Billy Crawford at The Australia Council for the Arts for providing me with a complete list of artists and dates of residencies for Australian artists at these studios between 1979 and 1987. Of course, some of McDiarmid's contemporaries, such as Australian artists Ian Burn and Sam Schoenbaum did locate themselves more permanently in New York.

[12] David McDiarmid. (1972). "Memoirs of an Oppressed Teenager." *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* **1**(4): (no page numbers).

[13] Nigel Thrift. (1996). *Spatial Formations*. London, Thousand Oaks, California and New Delhi, Sage, p288.

imposing no fixed and sedentary boundaries" on that space.[14] This kind of mobility makes space for a cultural freedom of the kind which McDiarmid sought and claimed in his life in the United States.

His intention in becoming resident in New York was to live life close to his own chosen cultural, political and sexual limits, to revel in a freedom and intensity he could not find in smaller, more provincial Australian cities in the 1970s. McDiarmid's letters to friends and family in Australia from his first trip to the United States in 1977 and during his subsequent residence from 1979 to 1987 have an ebullient intensity even when they report poverty or disappointment at lack of recognition or career developments. In a letter to his mother in 1981, for example, while lamenting the "toughness" of the city, he reaffirmed his choice to be on an "edge" in New York, an edge which he believed was good for both his work and his "personal growth".

> I never realised how fortunate we were in Sydney in terms of contacts in being able to organise our careers [referring to himself and his friend and fellow artist Peter Tully]. It is a tough place here. But these initial setbacks are just going to make me try harder. I know I could return to Sydney and resume life as before, but it doesn't give me that edge that working here offers. Not only for art, but for my personal growth. I must admit that I've felt despondent at times. I'm not always that confident David that you saw in Sydney last time. Its humbling to show your work, and for people to say, in effect, So what! You're a hick from Australia. Prove to me why I should be so interested. So you're selling yourself as well as your work. And the odds seem immense. But it's too soon to give in. I'm determined to make a go of it.[15]

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[14] ibid.
[15] David McDiarmid, in New York, to his mother, in Melbourne, 4 November, 1981, courtesy Vivien Weetman.

'Nomadic transitivity', according to Thrift, allows the urban subject to traverse shifting subject positions and contexts.[16] This transitivity of existence is what McDiarmid sought from locating himself in New York and from the fragility and mobility of his chosen 'edgy' existence there. I argued in the previous chapter that McDiarmid's work can be seen as 'queer' in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's terms as acting in a space of mobility crossing between fixed categories of subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattarri's notion of a *geographical* in-between-ness, as explored by Nigel Thrift, is another useful way for understanding McDiarmid's creative subjectivity and the developments in his art practice activated by New York.[17]

On the impact of space and time on the formation of subjectivity, Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin write that:

> … human subjects, which we conveniently describe as a unity of body and purpose, are in fact aggregates of numerous subject positions which are part of numerous networks. At any time, a 'subject' will therefore be the result of switching in and out of particular positions in particular networks, shuffling between particular spaces and times. [18]

For McDiarmid this restless, evolving subjectivity was enabled by the cultural edges, borders and complexities of New York. His engagement with the city was multi-dimensional. He pursued an interest in such disparate cultural locations as the uptown world

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[16] Thrift (1996). Op. cit., p288.
[17] Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guatarri. (2004). *A Thousand Plateaus*. London and New York, Continuum, pp3-28.

of fashion and style; a life of gay male prostitution; African American music; dance clubs and drugs; art, craft, fashion and design museums; bookshops and ideas and Lower East Side and SoHo art galleries. He also had a camp engagement with American ideas of celebrity and an active life of street cruising.

Nigel Thrift proposes (based on the work of Heidegger, Giroux, Tomas, Hebdige and Chambers) that borders are generative, productive.[19] That is they are places where things interact and "unfold", rather than "stop". "Borders therefore become processes, living pedagogies which force us to reconsider, … here and there, margins and centres, convergences and overlaps, exiles and evicts."[20] The active and generative nature of borders means they can provide space for the reception and generation of difference. As Thrift puts it they can create a "speaking and signifying space large enough to accommodate difference."[21]

McDiarmid was compelled, as a self designated "exile" and "evict", (to use Thrift's terms) into the intersections and borders available in the complex spatial and temporal world of New York - a city big enough, dense enough, diverse enough, and complex enough, to both accommodate and generate difference.

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[18] Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift (2002). *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*. Cambridge, Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers, p29
[19] Thrift. (1996). Op. cit., p294.
[20] ibid.
[21] ibid.

The city provided a constant opportunity to release identity from "fixed referents" and therefore to form and reform personal subjectivity in, as Thrift says, a "hybrid and dialogic" context, in which identity is constantly being "copied", "revised", "enunciated" and "performed".[22]

McDiarmid quickly placed himself across the borders and within the networks of difference he found available within the city:

> It felt like home as soon as I went there. It felt comfortable. It felt like a place you could grow. I felt that I'd done everything that I could in Sydney for the moment. [New York] was like going to school on a very high level: on an art level, a sex level - the two most important things. It was like a playground. There was such a lot happening. It was not that frantic, it suited me, the pace. So why not live there? It was a really easy choice.[23]

## New York as 'New York'

No doubt it was the idea and the fantasy of New York that drew McDiarmid like so many other artists and immigrants to the city. "A city named in certain ways also becomes that city through the practices of people in response to the labels. They perform the labels," argue Amin and Thrift.[24] Hal Foster also makes the observation in his catalogue essay for the 1982 exhibition *Brand New York,* at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, that "New York is a projection as well as a place."[25] While that

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[22] Thrift, (1996). Op. cit, p295.
[23] David McDiarmid, interviewed by Carmela Baranowska, 1992 (no date). Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.
[24] Amin and Thrift. (2002). Op. cit., p23.
[25] Hal Foster. (1982). "New York Art: Seven Types of Ambiguity". *Brand New York*. L. Appignanesi. London, Institute of Contemporary Arts: 14-24, p 24.

observation may be true of many cities, New York holds a special place as the ultimate modern city of the twentieth century.

This specificity of New York, as a place, is important in looking at McDiarmid's New York-based and influenced work from the late 1970s onwards. If, as Thrift and Amin say, "People and places script each other," the fantasies of New York which drew McDiarmid to the city were also those he chose to perform in his politico-sexual life and in the directions he took in his work.[26] His re-writing of a self as a mobile and multiple subject, on the streets of New York, is both expressed and explored in the holographic Mylar works produced between 1979 and 1981 (discussed in Chapter Three), the 1983-84 graffiti-inspired acrylic on cotton bedsheet paintings (discussed in this chapter) and the work he produced in response to AIDS in New York from 1983 (discussed in Chapter Five). The city also influenced the vocabulary of McDiarmid's performative dress and adornment practices (discussed in Chapter Four). McDiarmid allows his subjectivity and his art to be impacted on by the city through what Janet Wolff calls a "re-writing the self" which is enabled by the "possibilities of escape and freedom from constraint" the city allows.[27]

[26] Amin and Thrift. (2002). Op. cit., p23.
[27] Wolff. (1995). Op. cit., pp11-12.

Richard Sennet in his essay "Civic Bodies: Multi-Cultural New York", writes that before he came to New York for the first time in the 1970s, he had, "read his way into" Greenwich Village, as did so many others, in the pages of Jane Jacobs' influential book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities.* [28] McDiarmid also 'read his way into' New York but in his case it was through the *Village Voice*, Andy Warhol's *Interview*, gay periodicals such as *Christopher Street*, and gay writing, including the work of the Beat writers Burroughs and Ginsberg and gay male novelists and writers including Samuel Delany, Edmund White and Gore Vidal.

It is not difficult to imagine the pull of American culture and the 'space time' landscape of New York in the late 1970s for an artist such as McDiarmid whose visual and socio-political sense was already attuned to American creative, commercial and popular culture and the gay identity politics which had emerged there. He was interested in the big, bold and outrageous offered by American wealth and cultural promiscuity. Andrew Ross notes the cultural seduction of the idea of the 'America' whose popular culture had been exported throughout the West since the Second World War as the epitome of the glamorous and the modern. He writes that:

[28] Richard Sennett. (1994). *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*. London and Boston, Faber and Faber, p 355.

> For Britons, the importation of American popular culture, even as it was officially despised, contained, and controlled, brought with it guaranteed immunity to those traditional 'European' judgements of elitist taste to which it was structurally oblivious.[29]

Ross believes that the *idea* of America, that is what he calls an *imaginary* relation to American culture, was implicit in the development of British Pop Art.[30] British gay artists David Hockney and Mario Dubsky also both found being in The United States to be stimulating for their art practice and their sexual freedom in the 1960s.[31]

In Australia, America was for some artists by the mid 1960s, also beginning to supplant Europe as the mythic centre of western avant-garde culture. As Australian curator John Stringer, who himself spent some years in the United States, writes:

> Due to colonial legacies and cultural allegiances, most [Australian] artists up until mid [twentieth] century were inclined to seek their artistic nemesis (sic) in Europe - which for most Australians meant London - but with the 1960s this monopoly was broken, and … adventurous souls [drifted] to the renowned centre of New York. [32]

The idea of 'America' represented the new, radical, innovative and avant-garde; the profligate, excessive and rich; the 'hip' and the 'cool'. In a typed note for Lachlan Warner who was to write a

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[29] Andrew Ross. (1999). "Uses of Camp". *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. F. Cleto. Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press: 308-329, p312.
[30] ibid.
[31] Emmanuel Cooper. (1994). *The Sexual Perspective: Homosexuality and Art in the Last 100 years*. London and New York, Routledge, pp270-274.
[32] John Stringer was curator of the ground breaking exhibition of Australian contemporary (minimalist, conceptual and pop) art, *The Field*, which opened the new building of the National Gallery of Victoria on St Kilda Road, Melbourne, in August 1968. He lived in New York for some years and was instrumental, along with others, in introducing Australian art audiences to American minimalism, abstract expressionism and Pop.

profile on him in 1992, McDiarmid notes that his favourite writers at that time included Cindy Patton, James Baldwin, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and that his favourite artist was David Wojnarowicz. Nearly every cultural reference was North American. Exceptions include Gilbert and George, Issey Miyake and Jean Genet.[33] "To middle class aficionados," writes Andrew Ross, "American popular culture was a Cockaigne of the perverse intellect, a fantasy of taste turned upside down with which to avenge themselves against the tweedy sponsors of European tradition."[34] "Tweedy sponsors of European tradition" is not an inappropriate epithet to describe the culture of 1960s and early 1970s Melbourne in which McDiarmid grew up.[35] A distaste for 'uncool' Europe and a drive towards 'hip' America would drive the direction of McDiarmid's work from the late 1970s.

On the preference for American over European ways of being and seeing, Jean Baudrillard puts it thus in a 1998 interview with Jerome Sans: "In the Old World we have entropic imaginations; in New York the opposite. Not a contemplative beauty but an

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John Stringer. (2002). "Cultivating the Field". *Fieldwork: Australian Art 1968-2002*. J. Smith. Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria: 16-25, p16.

[33] David McDiarmid typescript note (undated but internal references suggest 1992) for interview with Lachlan Warner. Typescript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW .

[34] Ross. (1999). Op. cit., p319.

[35] As I noted in the Introduction, Sam Schoenbaum, Australian artist, friend and contemporary of McDiarmid, who lived in New York at the same time as McDiarmid writes that "The Melbourne [they] grew up in was itself a closet of protestant mediocrity". Typescript in David McDiarmid estate papers State Library of NSW.

overloaded circuit - extravagance, excess."[36] For McDiarmid also, America was the exciting, "excessive", "overloaded" option, to use Baudrillard's terms, Europe merely the redundantly authoritative one. In the late middle of the twentieth century, when McDiarmid was coming to political and cultural awareness in Melbourne and Sydney, and when it came to making cultural choices, he chose 'excessive' and 'overloaded' over 'authoritative'. America was to McDiarmid the fountainhead of gay liberation, sexual permissiveness, cool Black Atlantic music and hip street style, Hollywood film and celebrity and Pop art.[37]

## The glamour, fame and celebrity thing

"In today's media dominated world … everyone is a Closet Star" writes art dealer, Henry Geldzahler, in his introduction to a collection of Keith Haring's subway drawings in 1984.[38] As an artist McDiarmid was attracted to the popular, the glamorous and the commercial, as well as the critical and political. America was

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[36] Jean Baudrillard, with Jerome Sans. (1998). "New York Forever", Interview by Jerome Sans with Jean Baudrillard." pp 70 - 76,*Visual Arts and Culture: An International Journal of Contemporary Art* Vol 1 Part 1: p74. NOTE: Whatever one thinks of Baudrillard's pronouncements, about New York, for example his view that there is no racism in New York, (as there is in France), views which were criticised when this piece was first published as *Amerique* in 1986, there can be no doubt that he has spoken for many in noting the seductive power of New York as an urban and cultural phenomenon at least until September 2001 and perhaps still. Baudrillard later says, in the quoted interview; "only an enormous catastrophe could end it, a catastrophe whose scope equalled that of the city."

[37] The exhibition, *Two Decades of American Painting* from MOMA, New York was shown at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1967, introducing Australians to the work of Rauschenberg, Oldenburg, Rosenquist, Lichtenstein, Keinholz, and Warhol. I do not know whether McDiarmid saw this show (he would have been a 15 year old High School student) but it had a profound effect on many who did, including myself - who saw it as a 21 year old High School teacher of English Literature.

[38] Henry Geldzahler. (1984). "Introduction". *Art in Transit: Subway Drawings by Keith Haring*. Kwong C. Tseng. New York, Harmony Books. (no page numbers).

perhaps an inevitable destination for somebody for whom the eroticism in advertising and commercial graphic design was an enduring trope of his own sexuality and his creative imagination.

> I constructed sexual fantasies around advertising which was around when I was a kid. I was 11 years old when I saw a newspaper ad for Jantzen swimwear. It was 1963, and the look was American collegiate and blonde. I can still remember the pattern of chest hair on the model's washboard and the shape of his thighs. The image stayed with me for days and weeks, until its power drove me to spend an afternoon searching through a stack of old newspapers in our garage, looking for that picture.[39]

McDiarmid was culturally attuned to the perverse and ironic interfaces between commercial popular culture and the high art world which had also animated American Pop Art and which had become embedded in the New York contemporary art world. As Andrew Ross notes of the seductive power of American affluence and its visual manifestations:

> The uses made of comic strips, science fiction, 'Detroit' auto styling, Westerns, rock'n'roll and neon advertising by different social groups cannot be read as if they were real responses to real social conditions. On the contrary they represent an *imaginary relation* to these conditions, and one which is reflected through the powerful lens of the so-called Great American Dream - a pathologically seductive infusion of affluence, ordinariness and achieved utopian pleasure. The American as the dream American.[40]

Part of the attraction of New York for McDiarmid was the profligate world of money and fame. As his friend and fellow Australian artist, Sam Schoenbaum, himself resident in New York from 1978, said of that period:

> It's difficult to live in New York and not be affected by the fashion industries, whether it's rag-trade and canvas or ideas and rhetoric. The city is designed for trade, promoting market mentalities, whether

[39] David McDiarmid. (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.
[40] Ross. (1999). Op. cit., p319.

> the currency is cash and stock, or the body and its agendas, the principles of exchange create an ongoing discourse between the declarable and the undeclarable. [41]

McDiarmid had no desire to avoid the shallowness of the world of fame, fashion and the commercial market place. In fact he strenuously immersed himself in its delights and adopted its excesses in his work.[42] On his first visit to New York in 1977 he wrote to his friend and creative collaborator, fashion designer Linda Jackson, about his own, what he calls, "celebrity gawking" at the Gala Premiere of the Martin Scorcese film *New York, New York* at the Lincoln Centre:

> … disappointing film, but darling, the glamour! We wonder where girls wear their chiffon frocks … honey; it's the Lincoln Centre! I counted 15 Halston jerseys, I Z. Rhodes chiffon, 2 McFaddens, 5 YSL taffetas, and countless Daughters of the American Revolution nightmares!! I also saw A.W. in the flesh!!" [43]

McDiarmid had a list of 'heroes' or celebrities he admired for their creativity but also for their style, glamour and fame. And for him there was the - albeit knowing and ironic - illusion that it was possible to be whoever he wanted to be; in American idiom to be 'somebody'. When McDiarmid arrived in New York to live, "Warhol was still alive, and New York was the epicentre of

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[41] Sam Shoenbaum, typescript, March 1993. Typescript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

[42] In Chapter Three, I discuss new synthetic reflective materials McDiarmid discovered in New York which enabled a new kind of visual excess in his work.

[43] David McDiarmid, in New York, to Linda Jackson, in Sydney, 27 June, 1977. Courtesy, Linda Jackson.

modern art."[44] Gossip, fame and glamour held a camp fascination for McDiarmid as he later somewhat archly recalled:

> Yes I did coke with Robert Mapplethorpe … Yeah I used to go to the same club as Keith Haring, and yes, we talked every week and said 'Hi', and yes, I bought drugs for him for weeks on end because his dealer was unavailable.[45]

As Andy Warhol himself said, "It was fun to see the Museum of Modern Art people next to the teeny boppers, next to the amphetamine queers, next to the fashion editors."[46] In a 1992 interview, Paul Canning, referring to fame and celebrity, asks McDiarmid of his former life in New York, "Did you get to meet a lot of, I'm reluctant to use the word, your heroes?" McDiarmid replies with ironic detachment:

> I slept with all the men I wanted to sleep with, except for one, and none of those were heroes. I had heroes who were men I lusted over in bars. They were my heroes and I slept with every one except one. As for what passes as heroes in a cultural sense or a star sense I ended up meeting them all yes but just by accident. I didn't try to.[47]

## Art, abjection and the street

The time when McDiarmid chose to live in New York was a time when, as Marshall Berman says, public life on the street "was growing increasingly abrasive and dangerous."[48] Writing in 1982 Berman remarks that "Among the many images and symbols that New York has contributed to modern culture, one of the most

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[44] Chris Dobney. "Kiss of Light", pp30-33, *Outrage*, May, 1992.
[45] David McDiarmid. (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.

[46] Andy Warhol. (1975). *From A to B and Back Again - The Philosophy of Andy Warhol*. London, Pan, Picador. Quoted in Ross. Op. cit., p312-313.
[47] David McDiarmid. (1992). Paul Canning interview. Op. cit.

striking in recent years has been the image of [urban] ruin and devastation."[49] By the 1960s, major urban development projects like those conceived by Robert Moses had created in the city of New York conditions which later resulted in 'urban blight', impoverishment, urban civil disorder, and 'white flight' to suburbia.[50] This state of affairs left, for a time, the inner parts of the metropolis free to the diverse, the creative and the perverse.[51]

McDiarmid's attraction to New York was not solely a gossipy Fifth Avenue one, or a 'centre-of-the-world' contemporary art one, still less a Warhol-esque hunger-for-celebrity one. It was also the abjections and abasements of New York, the complexity of 'everything' in one place, which compelled his return to live in the city in 1979 after his first visit in 1977. It wasn't simply that poverty forced him into the *demimonde* of New York - he wanted to be there - he wanted to see what was *really* going on and chose to place himself on a spatial and cultural edge in order to do that. In September 1979, within months of arriving to live in New York, he had, in spite of the horror of some of his friends,[52] signed up with a hustling agency 'Chelsea Men' to earn his bread but also, in his own terms, his street credibility and political savvy as an

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[48] Marshall Berman. (1988). All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity. New York, Penguin, p 321.
[49] Berman. (1988). Op. cit., p 290.
[50] Berman. (1988). Op. cit., p 293.
[51] John Hannigan. (1998). *Fantasy City: Pleasure and Profit in the Postmodern Metropolis*. London and New York, Routledge, p43.
[52] The artist recounted later that his friend, and then roommate, artist Peter Tully, was horrified. Personal communication between the artist and this writer, 1980.

inheritor of the lineage of Jean Genet and others who had used prostitution as a way to stay alive and comprehend the realities of power in the world.[53]

McDiarmid deliberately placed himself in the way of a broader understanding of the life of the city than that usually available to an artist working solely on his career. Edmund White notes that hustling was not uncommon at this time for young gay men in New York who "thought it was cool, a source of money and adventure and a key to enter other worlds."[54]

There was always a creative tension between the 'life as art' performativity of McDiarmid's practice and his production of exhibitable art work in a contemporary gallery context. It was as important to McDiarmid that he gravitated to the experiential edge and looked over it to the other side, or to the unknown below the surface, as it was for him to 'make-it' as an artist. It may be argued that in New York he prioritised the former over the latter. It was the idea of New York as the ultimate abject urban place, fraught with danger and excitement, which inspired McDiarmid's work as much as any other aspect of the city. The streets he traversed daily and the complex rhythms and connections found there would be the generator of the major body

[53] Edmund White. (2004). *Genet*. London, Vintage and Random House.
[54] Edmund White. (2005). *My Lives*. London, Bloomsbury, p124.

of work executed some years after his arrival in the city. One writer characterises this urban abjection thus:

> The block below the East Village [in the vicinity of where McDiarmid lived in 'Alphabet City'] where peddlers merchandise millions of dollars' worth of dope a month; the fires in Harlem; the knifings in the Bronx; the garbage in the…; the corruption in the …; the exploitation in the …; And the skyscrapers going into a vertiginous spin … the locks on the private apartment doors, locks so many and so heavy …. The seductive ululation of the sirens of distress racing over the steaming manholes.[55]

The perverse glamour that the urban decay and danger of New York held for savvy outsiders and culturally privileged locals implied a hipness in being able to manage the danger, and even more, in being able to embrace it. George Alexander refers to this attitude when he writes of McDiarmid for an exhibition of the artist's work in 1984:

> New York's too amazing to be left to the Americans. David McDiarmid is someone who thrives in this plural, chancy, mobile environment. And like his work - with its mesmerising intricacy of surface and subsurface - is erudite and streetwise enough to get by.[56]

There was a perverse cultural kudos for McDiarmid in being able to handle the toughness and turn it into grist for his personal politico-sexual and creative process. I referred in the Introduction to the African American notion of hip, of being 'in the know' as an influence on McDiarmid's work. It is a knowing engagement with street level life and rhythm, which is McDiarmid's danger and delight, and the inspiration for his subsequent work. This is not a new interest for artists of course.

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[55] Melvin Bragg. (1982). "The Two New Yorks". *Brand New York*. L. Appignanesi. London, Institute of Contemporary Art: 5-6.

From the 1960s "an enormous amount of contemporary [especially American] art in a great many genres would be both *about* the street and, sometimes, directly *in* the street."[57] Artists like Claes Oldenberg, Jim Dine, Allen Kaprow and George Segal moved away from painting into using non-art materials such as rubbish and found objects retrieved from the street. Oldenberg embraced the "City filth, the evils of advertising, the disease of success, popular culture" and advocated looking for beauty "where it's not supposed to be found."[58] These ground-breaking developments in the arts at mid-century "overlapped with avant garde dance and theatre, Neo dada art, abstract expressionism, American independent film, California assemblage, Fluxus and happenings."[59] The Beats as part of their embracing of extremes of human sensation and experience, also "took themes and materials from the street."[60] This was a lineage that McDiarmid also embraced in his New York based work.

## The Beats, hipsters and cool

There was perverse glamour for McDiarmid in bonding with the city *because* of its abjection. In this he was happy to be following in

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[56] George Alexander. (1984). *David McDiarmid: New Work*. Sydney, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery (exhibition brochure essay, no page numbers).
[57] Berman. (1988). Op.cit., p329.
[58] Berman. (1988). Op.cit., 319.
[59] Lisa Phillips. (1996). "Beat Culture: America Re-envisioned". *Beat Culture and the New America*. L. Phillips. New York and Paris, Whitney Museum of American Art and Flammarion: 23-40, p33.

the footsteps of the Beat poets and writers such as Jack Kerouac and especially the gay footsteps of William Burroughs and Allen Ginsberg, who along with a wider group of artists, film-makers and musicians known collectively as The Beats, changed ways of thinking about contemporary culture. McDiarmid's work from the mid-1970s employed, as we have seen, a 'cut-up' aesthetic which could be partly attributed to an interest in Burroughs. His own career-long interest in "celebrating life at the margins"[61] can be read as a conscious placement of himself in the lineage of The Beats. McDiarmid repeatedly stated in interviews about his life and work that from his early twenties the American Beat writers and artists were his role models when it came to art, sexuality and engagement with street level life.[62] His 1972 essay "Memoirs of an Oppressed Teenager", discussed in Chapter One, mentions Allen Ginsberg and Peter Orlovsky as the only example of a gay 'couple' he then found convincing or interesting.[63] He thought of The Beats as his culture 'heroes' and he was one of a "younger generation of artists [inspired by The Beats'] directness, courage and intensity of vision".[64]

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[60] Phillips. (1996). Op.cit., p38.
[61] Phillips. (1996). Op.cit., p28.
[62] David McDiarmid. (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.; David McDiarmid. (1992). Paul Canning interview. Op. cit.; David McDiarmid.(1990s) note for Lachlan Warner. Op. cit.
[63] David McDiarmid. (1972). "Memoirs of an Oppressed Teenager." *Sydney Gay Liberation Newsletter* **1**(4): (no page numbers).
[64] Phillips. (1996). Op.cit., p23.

It was the combination of the qualities of the raw and the ecstatic identifiable in the vision of the Beats which helped fuel McDiarmid's fantasy of what a creative life and 'America' would be. As far away as Melbourne in the late 1960s and early 1970s McDiarmid was inspired by the Beats as transgressive creatives. They "pursued their desire for risk and total experience through drugs, sex and speed and they continued [a long American tradition of] the pioneer/outlaw - of the individual forging an independent way against the majority."[65] It was this combination of personal, cultural and political radicalism which attracted McDiarmid to the work of The Beats and the 'America' their work embodied and represented for him. They pursued a utopia "based on the intense embrace of experience, often evading logic, bypassing reason and staying in the presence of sensation."[66]

This embracing of utopian intensity and raw edges would determine the kinds of experience McDiarmid opened himself to and the themes he took up in his work. He was, of course, in this hip inflection to his work, also drawing on the notions of 'hip' and 'cool' that the Beats themselves had derived from African American culture. John Leland sees 'hip', derived though it is from the West African Wolof word *hepi,* as essentially an American creation formed out of historical intersections between

[65] Phillips. (1996). Op.cit., p29.
[66] ibid.

black and white. He describes its knowing, coded, underground understandings as being also connected to urban "faggot" culture and camp.[67] Cool, he argues, drawing on the work of African American scholar Robert Farris Thompson, is the protective mask which masks the knowing understanding which is hip.[68]

## The street, *flânerie* and cruising

If as Nigel Thrift writes, the *flâneur* principle is "look but don't touch"[69] McDiarmid's relationship to the streets is much more than that of the *flâneur*. The erotic and subcultural potentiality of cruising for sex was the principal stimulation for his permanent move to New York in 1979 as his own utterances show. Mark Turner, writing about cruising, notes that "the reciprocal, erotically charged gaze" is a specific way of making contact with others and of experiencing the city. The cruiser relies on the "uncertainties that linger in the fleeting experience of the backward glance."[70] It is not just about sex but a way of being on the street, "sex may be the point of cruising for some but cruising and sex have different interactions," as Roland Barthes says,

[67] John Leland. (2004). *Hip, The History*. New York, Ecco and Harper Collins, p14 and p8.
[68] Leland. (2004). Op. cit., p58.
[69] Thrift. (1996). Op.cit., p287.
[70] Turner. (2003). Op.cit., p66.

describing cruising in Paris, in *Incidents.*[71] For him, the "mere eye contact and exchange of words eroticises me."[72]

For Barthes cruising is "a distinct kind of urban practice, an end in itself with its own pleasures."[73] In speaking of being present, to oneself, on the streets of New York, Jean Baudrillard says that, "We can walk for miles in a perpetual tracking shot. We are in it. We cover infinite distances."[74]

Charles Kronengold advances the idea that "walking is the master trope of performative identity".[75] In an essay on the way music and movement are configured in black action films of the seventies, he describes how, in the opening credit sequence from the 1971 (Gordon Parks directed) film *Shaft*, the character of Black detective, John Shaft, (played by Richard Rowntree) is established by the *fact* that he is walking, and the *way* he is walking, through Times Square in Manhattan. The Isaac Hayes soundtrack, the award-winning *Theme from Shaft*, marking the *rhythm* of Shaft's performative persona, helps establish the urbanity, street smarts, and urban resilience of the character.

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[71] Quoted in Turner. (2003). Op.cit., p60.
[72] Turner. (2003). Op.cit., p61.
[73] Turner. (2003). Op.cit., p60.
[74] Baudrillard. Op.cit., p73.
[75] Charles Kronengold, "Identity, Value and the Work of genre: Black Action Films", pp79-124 in Shelton Waldrep. Ed. (2000). *The Seventies The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*. New York and London, Routledge, p82.

Similarly, in the opening sequence of John Badham's, *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) the character of young, Italian-American, Tony Manero, (played by John Travolta) is established through his famous 'strut'.[76] As Anne-Lise Francois argues, Travolta walking to the tune of the Bee Gee's, *Staying' Alive* is "usin' his walk" to put a [slant] on his relationship with the world… his funky street walk - a self-serving echo of black street styles - may be what is most "his" about him"[77] These examples of heterosexual male street performativity employ some of the tropes of performative masculinity present in gay male cruising which will animate McDiarmid's work of the 1980s.

A self-assured and self-conscious performativity characteristic of McDiarmid's engagement with the street takes a certain sophistication and a capacity to read one's surroundings. This resonates with the description Amin and Thrift offer of Walter Benjamin's street wanderings in Naples and elsewhere: "He was not the naïve and impressionable dilettante, he was armed instead with a transcendental speculative philosophy that allowed him to select, order and interpret his sensory experiences of the city."[78]

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[76] See also the last scenes of *Stayin' Alive,* (the 1983 sequel film to *Saturday Night Fever*, directed by Sylvester Stallone), for a reprise of the famous 'strut'.
[77] Anne-Lise Francois. (2000). "These Boots Were Made for Walkin'". *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*. S. Waldrep. New York and London, Routledge: pp155-176, pp171-172.
[78] Amin and Thrift. (2002). Op. cit., p11.

## Sex and the city

The scale, population density and diversity of New York produced a particular kind of street anonymity which McDiarmid relished. Urban density creates a situation in which "people … remain essentially anonymous and … encounter others mostly as strangers" as the nineteenth century philosopher and sociologist Georg Simmel put it.[79] McDiarmid's arrival in New York in the late seventies is a seminal moment of possibility for him. He arrived in a transgressive, permissive and culturally anarchic city which carried sexual, intellectual, musical and artistic histories and practices he regarded as essential for his personal and creative growth. The life of the street would become an integral part of this for him.

McDiarmid recounted some of this to Peter Tully in a letter from New York during his first visit to that city in 1977:

> Firstly, every street is a beat!! If you walk around for an hour or so, just looking in shop windows, soon enough some number will look, and then look again, and then look again, and then say "Hi! How ya doin'? Wanna get it on?" Honey it's unbelievable. I went to Bloomingdale's last week (the ultimate dept store … ultimate, ultimate) and was just wandering around, and sure enough, in 10 mins, there's 2 sets of eyes following!! Found out yesterday it is a notorious beat, but at the time I was stunned. [80]

After a brief stint sub-letting on 6th Avenue at Greenwich Village McDiarmid eventually found a permanent home in a second floor

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[79] George Simmel. (1971). "The Metropolis and Mental Life". *On Individuality and Social Forms*. D. Levine. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press: pp. 324 - 339.
[80] David McDiarmid, in New York, to Peter Tully, in Sydney, 11 and 12 May, 1977. McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

railroad apartment on East 12th Street between First Avenue and Avenue A, on the edge of "Alphabet City" and not far from Tomkins Square and the Projects. In this neighbourhood he was surrounded by the young men who were the children of the Puerto Rican immigrants who had populated the Lower East Side since the 1950s, partly replacing the older Eastern European immigrants and turning it into the Latin 'Loisaida'. In the late 1970s when McDiarmid was first living in New York the utopian moment of the Nuyorican Puerto Rican poets was not yet over and the street culture of the Lower East Side included an explosion of Latin liberationist wall art.[81]

McDiarmid's graffiti-based work of 1983-84 was inflected by both the urban environment of his neighbourhood, the sexual ambience of its streets and inter-racial sex with, among others, Puerto Rican and African American men and boys. Dennis Altman in his *Homosexual Oppression and Liberation* sees links between (American) blacks and male homosexuals in relation to internalisation of oppression. He remarks that "in America especially there has always been a strong cross-racial homosexual attraction less restrained by social barriers than its heterosexual counterpart."[82] Jonathan Dollimore suggests that, "For homosexuals more than most, the search for sexual freedom in the

[81] Janet L. Abu-Lughod. (1994). *From Urban Village to East Village*. Oxford, UK, and Cambridge USA, Blackwell, pp144-145.

realm of the foreign has been inseparable from a repudiation of the western culture responsible for their repression and oppression."[83] Neither Altman nor Dollimore sentimentalise this, noting the racist and homophobic tensions which may exist across the race/sexuality divide despite the connections.

There is a compelling cultural romance for McDiarmid in the intermingling of racial and ethnic diversity and eroticism. There was for many politically progressive gay men a kind of radical appropriateness in racial and sexual mingling as 'equals'. Many gay men were aware of the political intersections between black liberation struggles and gay liberation. Andrew Ross remarks on the way that gay liberation explicitly based itself on the Black Civil Rights movement.[84] Jonathan Dollimore also notes that the gay movement learned from the black political experience and that in the early days of both liberation movements, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was accord rather than mutual distrust. As Dollimore points out, Huey Newton (co-founder of the Black Panthers) in 1970 called for solidarity between the Black Panthers and the women's and gay liberation movements.[85] There was a cultural and political specificity to McDiarmid's time in New York, post-Stonewall and before the AIDS epidemic, which

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[82] Dennis Altman quoted in Jonathan Dollimore. (1996). *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, p333.
[83] Dollimore. (1996). Op.cit., p339.
[84] Ross. (1999). Op. cit., p315.
[85] Dollimore. (1996). Op. cit., p333.

allowed gay interracial sex to be seen as part of the progressive politics of the time – quite apart from its libidinal possibilities.

## The fragile freedoms of the city

In his study of gay male cruising on the streets of New York and London, Mark Turner speculates on the magnetic pull of the metropolis on homosexual men from the regions and provinces of the world and the impact of the metropolis on a gay male sense of possibility. Drawing on Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* project with, what he calls, its "queerly modern understanding of the city" Turner asks:

> What is it about the city that stimulates? Surely that altogether special blend of closeness and distance, crowd and flickering, surface and gaze, freedom and danger. Others are defenceless vis a vis your gaze and you yourself are on display to theirs; you come so close to them that you actually touch them, yet ought not to: a distance that incites you to overstep yet still maintain it; surfaces intercept gazes and turn into signals, and the flickering vibrates; the crowd generates feelings of supply and possibilities; the anonymity and the absence of immediate social control amplifies the feeling, and the risk of nevertheless being monitored and uncovered increases the tension. You sense the omnipresent, diffuse sexualisation of the city and confirm it by designing your surface accordingly and by taking up a position, perhaps also by engaging in cruising and brief encounters.[86]

Writing of urban street interaction, particularly between homosexual men, Turner notes that the anonymity of the "mutual exchange of passing glance" has the result of creating connections between strangers.[87]

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[86] Turner. (2003). Op.cit., pp59-60.
[87] ibid.

The late 1970s and early 1980s may well be the last time that the romance of the modern Western metropolitan centre as a livable fantasy for artists, bohemians and urban adventurers was a practical possibility. This was a time before real estate prices and rents made it largely impossible for artists to live in the centre of major Western cities.[88] In the case of New York, the gentrification of Lower Manhattan began to accelerate in the time McDiarmid was living there and this would have made it impossible for him to live in Manhattan had he arrived a decade later.

McDiarmid's arrival also coincides with the time before Operation Pressure Point, a "gentrification-induced police crackdown on drugs," on the Lower East Side where McDiarmid lived on East 12th Street near Avenue A.[89] It also predates the City of New York's so-called 'zero tolerance' policy, which was part of the 'cleaning up' of the streets of New York associated with the re-gentrification of Manhattan. This policy allowed for more severe prohibition and punishment of drug and sex-related street offences and petty crimes which had hitherto largely been considered in practice as misdemeanours, especially for whites. It predates also new zoning laws which outlawed sex premises in

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[88] The movement of artists to the outer boroughs of New York was already happening while McDiarmid was living in New York . See: Richard Kostelanetz. (2003). *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of an Artists' Colony*. New York and London, Routledge. Also: Abu-Lughod. Op. cit., and Christopher Mele. (2000). *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate and Resistance in New York City*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.

[89] Abu-Lughod. (1994). Op. cit., p163.

certain areas and virtually quarantined the sex-in-public, backroom club and bathhouse world which McDiarmid was able to enjoy.[90] The time McDiarmid was in New York also in part predates AIDS, a subject we will discuss in detail below.

The flourishing post-Stonewall gay male world in New York was a world, indeed the only world, that could sustain McDiarmid's personal and creative project at this time. An urbanity both sophisticated and transgressive gave the essential animation, materials and locale for the further development of his artistic practice.

On arrival in New York for the first time in 1977 McDiarmid wrote to Peter Tully in Sydney saying:

> This city is breath-taking. I thought California was great but this is it! I never want to leave! The air is electric, the sidewalks are magic and the people are crazy crazy crazy…[91]

This street excitement was enhanced by the aural landscape of the city. For McDiarmid who was an informed follower of African American underground musical cultures and the emerging beats that became Hip Hop this was in turn intensified by the headphones and beatboxes of the "ambulent listener."[92] As Iain

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[90] See Michael Warner. (2002). *Publics and Counter Publics*. New York, Zone Books p190 for a detailed discussion of the implications for gay men and for sexual freedom in general of these urban developments.

[91] David McDiarmid, in New York, to Peter Tully, in Sydney, 4 May 1977. McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

[92] Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson. (1999). *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound*. New York and London, Routledge, p131.

Chambers puts it, a "nomadic listening identity is constituted as the subject actively recreates the landscapes which surround him/her" in a kind of "diasporic identity."[93] The street would become the site of cruising, broad interracial sexuality and sociality, visual, aural and cultural stimulation and the source of inspiration for McDiarmid's work at a time when it was also inspiring the work of other artists.[94]

## The 'graffiti bedsheet' paintings of 1983-84

In the graffiti-inspired suite of work produced in 1983-84 for the May 1984 solo exhibition *David McDiarmid: New Work* at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery (Sydney) McDiarmid engaged in a process of 'mapping' the city's specificities based on the vantage point of his own particular urban experience. The artist noted retrospectively in 1992, that in New York his "move to language based work became more pronounced. Figures disappeared from my art altogether, for a while, and it became very graffiti-based".[95] Graffiti both as explicit practice and as visual trope was also part of the work of other artists including, much more famously, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat. McDiarmid knew Haring and his work: "We saw each other a lot, went to the same clubs, had

[93] ibid.
[94] The most obvious resonances between McDiarmid's interest in the street and that of other contemporary artists is with the work of Keith Haring, Jean-Michel Basquiat and David Wojnorowicz.
[95] David McDiarmid, interviewed by Chris Dobney, *Outrage*, May 1992, pp30-33.

similar influences. Yes I suppose you could say his work influenced me pretty strongly."[96]

McDiarmid identified with the power and vitality of street and subway graffiti and appropriated it as a kind of lineage for his work. Like others he saw graffiti as a kind of liberationist practice. Tricia Rose says graffiti and the artists who produce or 'write' it are rightly seen as: "Diagnostic indicators of an invisible environment of attitudes and social processes. Far more than fears, threats and prejudices, they are the prelude and a directive to open behaviour. The walls are more than an attitudinal tabloid; they are a behavioural manifesto."[97]

Post-Stonewall gay men developed their own subcultural maps of the city of New York and re-named its landmarks.[98] This was a city in which gay men perhaps more than anywhere else "could go anywhere day or night."[99] McDiarmid, while recognising the streets as dangerous, took delight in the world of the streets I have described above. For him, it was true that, as Mark Turner writes:

> The streets [were] places of danger: a place of crime, confusion, movement, speed, noise, [with] many fleeting images confront[ing] the walker of the streets. [The streets were] A place where anything can happen", but also there was, ". The freedom of the streets: a place

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[96] ibid.
[97] Tricia Rose. "Black Noise" quoted in Amin and Thrift (2002). Op.cit., p25.
[98] See Chauncey (1994). Op. cit. For a comprehensive account of male homosexual mapping of the city in the 19th century. For Post-Stonewall city mappings, see Sanders, Joel, Ed. (1996). Op.cit., p 259.
[99] Peter Tully recounting how New York was an open city for gay men, in conversation with John McPhee, in John McPhee. (1991). *Peter Tully: Urban Tribalwear and Beyond*. Canberra, Australian National Gallery.

> of democracy, of escape from interiors, the mingling of classes, of high and low, the levelling ground of society. [100]

This was all grist to McDiarmid's creative activity; the street became the source of both the content and the style of his work. He was an astute performer of an urban identity. His hip knowingness allowed him to read the streets for a wide range of codes - sexual, class, racial, ethnic, gender, creative, commercial, visual and aural. His relationship to the street was as observer and engaged actor. He needed to understand and read its signs in order to, in Amin and Thrift's words , as quoted above, 'frame', 'know', 'order' and 'negotiate' the meanings of the streets. McDiarmid's observation of the perverse glamour of urban complexities and his pleasure in being a player in the game of sex-with-strangers is embodied in the works of the graffiti-influenced series prepared for the solo show at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery in Sydney in May-June 1984. This was the first series of exhibited work in which he attempted to convey an encoded set of meanings derived from the specificities of his experience of the New York streets.

The artist devised techniques which would convey both the 'intimate' and 'public' character he wanted to communicate about this street world. He adopted cotton bedsheets as the substrate for this series of work which employed a personal, graffiti-like,

[100] Turner. (2003). Op. cit., pp101-102.

signature line in fabric paint and artist's acrylics. The eloquent but robust facility of the brush-painted line in these works derived from the finely executed fabric painting he had been doing for Sydney fashion designer Linda Jackson for nearly a decade. Instead of the delicate application of paint to silk chiffon, wool crepe and silk taffeta with which he had created his distinctive patterns and forms for Linda Jackson, he evolved this fluid signature line into a more energetic, encoded and overlaid one. This line owed a debt of origin to the aesthetic of street and subway graffiti which itself evoked the temporality and spatiality of New York.

The 'bedsheet graffiti' works of 1983-84 consist almost entirely of hand-rendered calligraphic text and coded graphic symbols. The text intertwines in one of the several contemporary styles of subway graffiti, requiring time and effort to decipher, like graffiti itself: "The messages of graffiti - wiped out, overwritten, added to, extended [are] an affirmation of - the overlapping, non-consecutive, interwoven contact that goes on around us all the time." [101]

While McDiarmid's brushwork lines had originated in his 1970s and 1980s fabric painting, produced in a fashion context, they were articulated for this series of art work into a calligraphy

inflected by the various calligraphic forms then used by graffiti-writers on both the inside and the outside of New York subway trains. McDiarmid's line was resonant with the black (wide felt-pen and spray-can) calligraphy employed by graffiti-writers for the 'tags' in the inside of subway trains. The acrylic line McDiarmid used for his 'bedsheet' paintings was also a carrier of text-based codes which were embedded within and enacted by the line itself in the manner of the contemporary graffiti styles on the exterior of the subway trains in which the design and the meaning were conflated. The backgrounds behind and between McDiarmid's calligraphic lines were 'filled in' with blended colour-shading in the manner of the 'filling in' of the gigantic graffiti letters on the exterior of the New York subway trains which reached their creative peak in the early 1980s.[102]

The substrate of the 'bedsheet' works is provided by "QUEEN'-sized" cotton and acrylic bedsheets, to use McDiarmid's own emphasis, which the artist had first used and then covered with the insistent, assertive, high-keyed, calligraphy.[103]

> The bedsheets were from the reject pile, found at his [Robert Cromwell] lover's closet. Gifts from mother. They slept on them, made a mess on them and then they became texts and art.[104]

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[101] Turner. (2003). Op. cit., pp153.
[102] Martha Cooper and Henry Chalfant (1984). *Subway Art*. London, Thames and Hudson.
[103] David McDiarmid, in New York, to Peter Tully, in Sydney, February 21, 1984. McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.
[104] Sam Schoenbaum. (1993). Typescript. Op. cit.

McDiarmid is placed here within a tradition of 'effluvial references' on bed linen which includes Tracy Emin, Cindy Sherman and Robert Rauschenberg.[105]

## Self portraiture in queer street code

*Mr Man* [Fig 15.] from the May 1984 exhibition, employs graphic symbols adopted from both street and subway graffiti and body marks and tattoos which McDiarmid will employ in his later work on the subject of AIDS (discussed in Chapter Five). These symbols were collected into the artist's visual inventory from streets, subway stations and trains, telephone booths, toilets and the bodies of men he saw or had sex with. They include an outline human handprint; spirals; a 'noughts and crosses' cross-hatched grid; Valentine's Day heart; star, sun and moon; dollar sign; Christian cross and fish; arrows; ship's anchor; a set of scales; male gender sign; the letters MF (Male Female) and a knife.

This work, *Mr Man*, employs the stylised figuration of a 'Man' which will become a familiar trope in the artist's work of the 1990s. The 'Man' figure has a square head derived from the iconic iron mask of nineteenth century Australian outlaw Ned Kelly, famously used by Australian figurative modernist artist Sidney

[105] Mandy Merck. (2002). "Bedtime". *The Art of Tracey Emin*. M. Merck. London, Thames and Hudson: 119-133, p 126.

Nolan in his 1940s works depicting the outlaw.[106] Also in *Mr Man* are encoded words *Love* and *Hate*, used as textual symbols, as if the artist is positing or 'weighing up' a creative balance or tension between the two concepts - love and hate.[107] The letters of the word *Love* are inscribed within the four corners of a Hindu *sauvastika* form making up the 'face' of the head, while the *Hate* text is engraved onto the fists of *Mr Man*.[108] The robust, well built and mobile figure whose 'heart' is in his groin is standing in front of, or over, the name *Jose* with a/his telephone number in the manner of 'name and number' inscriptions for hustlers or tricks in a telephone booth, toilet or on a street wall. The use of Puerto Rican and other Hispanic names in this series becomes an affective device chronicling the interracial sex and sociality I have been discussing in this chapter.

The nuances of 1980s inter-racial cruising are recalled through the naming of the unique individuals who have become part of the artist's world, if only for a moment through chance street or sexual encounter. Through naming, and thus memorialising, *Hector,*

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[106] For example *Burning at Glenrowan* 1946-7 in the collection of The National Gallery of Australia. The work of Nolan, including the mask, was also appropriated by Chilean Australian artist Juan Davila.

[107] The textual trope of 'love and hate' appears frequently throughout McDiarmid's work from this suite of work until his death. It is discussed further below.

[108] Carl G. Liungman. (1991). *Dictionary of Symbols*. New York and London, W. W. Norton and Company, p178-179. Liungman notes the ancient history of the (clockwise) swastika, associated with Buddhism in India, China and Japan and the (anti-clockwise) *sauvastika* associated with Hinduism in India. The latter according to Liungman is associated with misfortune and bad luck, although other sources debate this. (McDiarmid by 1984 is quite sure he is HIV positive, see Chapter Five). The use of the symbol, which could be mistaken for a Nazi swastika, whether reversed or not, is obviously culturally provocative.

*Miguel, Julio*, and their telephone numbers, *Jose 431 7182*, McDiarmid seems to be inscribing these men's unique existence. This inscribing of names can be seen as a mnemonic not just for the subjects of encounters inscribed but also for the tension between on the one hand, the idea that any man can be loved more or less as any other man, and on the other the idea of the erotic charge of the unique individual, "if everyone is interchangeable then everyone is stripped of all erotic charge, which necessarily depends on the *uniqueness* of the individual."[109] This memorialising I suggest captures the erotic charge of the temporal and spatial specificities of McDiarmid's New York. As novelist, Samuel Delaney puts it:

> … very importantly contact is also the intercourse - physical and conversational, - that blooms in and as 'casual sex' in public rest rooms, sex movies, public parks, singles bars and sex clubs, on street corners, with heavy hustling traffic, and in the adjoining motels or the apartments of one or other participant, from which non-sexual friendships and acquaintances lasting for decades or a lifetime may spring. [110]

Samuel Delaney links graffiti and cruising suggesting that through 'reading' graffiti, like cruising, "You learned something about these people (though not necessarily their name, or where they lived, or what their job or income was); and they learned something about you". The relationships were not necessarily

[109] White. (2004). Op. cit., p463.
[110] Turner. (2003). Op. cit., p152.

consecutive. “They braided. They interwove, they were simultaneous."[111] Overlapping and crossing like graffiti itself.

The large, acrylic-on-cotton works of 1983-4 explore the urban inter-weavings Delaney mentions, in particular the inter-weaving of cross-cultural and interracial cruising. They do this through their twisting interwoven graphic form, their coded messages and through naming and implicitly memorialising sexual encounters. As I have said, the memorialising is mainly to Puerto Rican men and boys - *Hector, Miguel, Julio, Luis, Jose, Sal*.

The memorialising of these unique person-hoods and their unique temporal and spatial locations is made more urgent by the fact that by 1983-4, when these works were made, the AIDS epidemic was already impacting on McDiarmid's world.[112] In this suite of work, as well as deriving his aesthetic means and his cultural message from the graffiti referred to, he was also referencing the 'spray can memorials' which were starting to appear on the walls of Lower Manhattan, The Bronx, and elsewhere in New York, to commemorate the victims of AIDS, violence, and drugs.[113] He appropriates some of the iconography of these street works -

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[111] Samuel Delaney quoted in Turner. (2003). Op. cit., p153.

[112] By his own account McDiarmid had lost his first friend to AIDS in 1982 and by the time the works under discussion were made he already thought he was himself HIV positive and would be “dead within two years”, David McDiarmid. (1993). "A Short History of Facial Hair". *Sex in Public: Australian Sexual Cultures*. Jill J. Matthews. St Leonards NSW, Allen and Unwin: 91-96, p93.

knives, hearts, dates and encoded aphorisms into his own work. *Mr Man's* body is 'tattooed' with the graphic *encryptions*, appropriated from walls and streets, which I have mentioned including heart, dollar sign and hand outline which will re-occur in the artist's work into the 1990s.

In the work titled *Alphabet City* [Fig 16.] executed, like *Mr Man*, in vibrantly coloured acrylic on cotton bedsheet, the artist draws a childlike outline of a personalised skyline of Manhattan which includes the World Trade Centre twin towers, the Empire State building and Phillip Johnson's then recently completed AT&T (now Sony) building. This skyline forms the 'horizon' of a work which principally consists of fluid italicised letters of the alphabet exploding like fireworks into the 'sky' above the horizon. These letters refer to the multiplicity of the city that contains 'everything' from A to Z but also to the Lower East Side neighbourhood where the artist lived, near Avenue A, known as 'Alphabet City'. The work is bordered with a Greek key pattern appropriated from the ubiquitous, franchise-coffee-house cardboard take-out coffee containers, a design trope he employed in the work entitled *Coffee To Go* [Fig 17.] which simply co-opts the 'Greek' design of the cardboard cup. The lateral edges of *Alphabet City* are bordered in the flowery folk-embroidery-derived patterns which also form

[113] Martha Cooper and Joseph Sciorra. (1994). *RIP: New York Spray Can Memorials*. London, Thames and Hudson. See Chapter Five for further discussion of this influence on McDiarmid's work.

part of the iconography of the holographic Mylar dance club-inspired work which will be discussed in Chapter Three. *Alphabet City* celebrates the city and maps McDiarmid's own version of its histories - architectural icons, design residues of successive immigrant waves, and the visual excess and intensity of affect which is the artist's own position on it - the conditions of his location of himself within it.

*Self Portrait Number 2* [Fig 18.] from the 1983-84 'bedsheet' series is composed of calligraphic text in purple, green, red and white acrylic. The inter-connected words intersect with graphic symbols of stars, arrows and vortex-like spirals, writhing together in a mobile twisting arrangement. When deciphered, these words turn out to be: *Fear, Insecurity, Uncaring, Selfish, Pride, Jealousy, Hate, Pain;* an uncensored and unmediated report, a 'self-portrait' from the front line of sexual-emotional life in the city. This abject self-disclosing display of affect resonates with the duality of 'love and hate' mentioned in discussion of *Mr Man*. This, here quite explosive, evocation of sexual-emotional subjectivity is a continuing trope in the artist's work from the 1970s to the 1990s. It first appears in the *Secret Love* exhibition of 1976 and is continued in the *Trade Enquiries* series of 1978, both discussed in the previous chapter. This probing exploration of the ragged interfaces between the sexual and emotional, then also engaging feminism, constitutes an unusual cultural move for a male artist.

These themes and the complex interfaces between sexual freedom and emotional and sexual 'health' will be taken up by the Gay Men's Health Crisis and other groups, sometimes simplistically, in the context of the AIDS epidemic. The impact of this on McDiarmid's work is discussed in Chapter Five. McDiarmid was never to condone neo-puritanism in the face of AIDS and his exploration of the subtleties and complexities of sexuality and interiority are appropriately seen as part of the self-disclosing, diaristic 'personal is political' liberationist politics discussed in Chapter One.

In another of the 1984 works titled *Word Up* [Fig 19.] the artist seems to be speculating on tensions within the normative romantic-erotic imagination. Rendered in bold high keyed colour with vibrant splashes of yellow, orange, red and blue filling in the spaces between the huge mobile letters, this work reads: *Romantic: Imagination: Subjectivity: Emotion: Nature Worship: Passion: Interest in Individual Especially the Downtrodden: Remote in Space and Time: Innermost Thoughts and Feelings: Praise of Beauty*, as if reading off a dictionary definition of 'romance'. This is a continuation for McDiarmid of his interest in the sentimental and romantic aspects of eroticism, inflected through Hollywood and popular songs, which had been present in his work since the mid 1970s, and is here re-articulated in the robust affect and aesthetics of street

graffiti. The title *Word Up* evokes the idea of 'wording' somebody 'up', as seductive 'chatting up', or filling them in, providing them with necessary information, or the idea of writing (graffiti) words 'up' on a wall as in the 'the word is up' (and out).

## *What's Going On?*

It was important to McDiarmid to negotiate, and enculturate himself within, these complex urban and affective rhythms. He aimed in his work to 'name', 'order,' frame and 'negotiate' (in Amin and Thrift's terms), the rhythms and connections of the city. The city he was reading was the post-Stonewall gay city with its own signposts, codes, traditions and pathways. Mark Turner says that his:

> … own queer reading of the city is one in which the spaces of modernity are up for grabs and always liable to be contested and appropriated; in which the overlapping passing moments on the streets imply many ways of moving and seeing; in which the city allows for alternative and divergent kinds of experience. Cruising is a practice that exploits the ambivalence of the modern city, and in so doing, 'queers' the totalising narratives of modernity, in particular *flanerie*.[114]

The 1983-4 series of 'graffiti bedsheet' work by McDiarmid emulates the way "Graffiti writers leave messages for others; they delete by writing over previous textual traces; and they exchange information (a phone number, a proposition)."[115] Always immediate, these messages are an encoded system of communication which answers or proposes the question; What's

[114] Turner. (2003). Op. cit., p 46.

going on? Graffiti "Acts as an extended conversation - sometimes between strangers, sometimes not."[116] McDiarmid personalises this public communication, making it his own through his choice of what to appropriate and how to visually encode it. As a white, middle class, foreign artist, he is not in the subject position of the 1970s and 1980s 'writers' of graffiti on New York trains and walls. Nor did he use the streets and subways themselves as locations of his art the way Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and David Wojnorawicz did. In common with them, however, he is using his work as an advertisement for himself - for the specificities of his subjectivity in this time and place.[117] He is 'advertising' his subject position as one who is in the know about 'What's going on', hip, on the scene', aware of the coded nuances of street culture.[118]

A work which is entitled *What's Going On* [Fig 20.] consists entirely of the kinds of graphic symbols mentioned above - fish, star, spiral, dollar sign, zig-zag, heart, disembodied penises, along with running and standing male stick-figures waving their encoded masculinity - a 'hand' which ends in the male arrow symbol. Triangles, squares and circles, employed together like the Japanese symbols for the elements, sit alongside a floating line-

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[115] Turner. (2003). Op. cit., p151.
[116] ibid.
[117] Norman Mailer, who Jeff Chang says was one of the first serious writers on graffiti, made this observation about graffiti writers, that is that their work is an advertisement for themselves. Mailer is quoted in Jeff Chang. (2005). *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*. New York, St Martins Press, p74.

drawn 'Parthenon'[119] and a television set, to complete the index of graphic symbols the artist uses to convey the codes of his visual world. As Mark Turner puts it: "the accumulation of the small stuff - all those little traces brought together, all those exchanges on the street, the random meetings here and there - this is part of the fabric of our lives in the city."[120]

## Art and resistance

Graffiti marks place. It imposes a personal signature onto urban space: subways cars, inside and out; walls; pavements; subway stations; bus shelters; telephone boxes and toilets - wherever there is a blank space to be covered. Where it is removed, prohibited and punished it moves onto somewhere else, marking that space.[121] Hal Foster notes that "Graffiti is a symbolic act of response from people who are not represented in the hegemonic culture, who have no real access to its media. Such graffiti confronts, it does not mediate, it 'bombs'."[122]

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[118] *What's Goin' On* is also the title of a (Tamla Motown, 1971) song by Marvin Gaye which became a House Music classic. See Chapter Three for a discussion of the importance of House Music in the development of McDiarmid's work.
[119] Another visual trope appropriated from the take-out cardboard coffee cups referred to above.
[120] Turner. (2003). Op. cit., p152.
[121] Chang. (2005). Op. cit., p228.
[122] Foster (1982). Op. cit., p19.

McDiarmid's insistence on placing himself on a vulnerable urban edge was much more than a self deluded 'radical chic' vanity.[123] By the time he executed these works he suspected, although he had not yet been tested, that he was HIV positive. He had, in his five years in the city, worked as a hustler and house cleaner and seen a lot of what happens to the disenfranchised. He had placed himself within multi-racial, mainly African-American and Puerto-Rican, subcultures in which it was impossible not to learn what it was like to be personally located outside networks of power and wealth.

In a late 1980 letter to Peter Tully in Sydney he notes that despite the fact that he is completely broke; "We currently owe about $1000 in rent, ConEd and bills and I've got $2. I'm cleaning an apartment once a week [for] $20. That's it," he wouldn't think of moving away from New York.[124] McDiarmid's contemporary in New York, Australian artist Sam Schoenbaum, noted that McDiarmid placed himself, not where the greatest career advantage was for him but on a cultural edge removed from power and influence:

> David's work … remained largely private and found no response among official art victims. But among David's friends, and the Black community he had entered through his lover, the audience was growing … Whilst the work of the New York gay icons became

[123] I have adopted this term from the title of the 1970 novel *Radical Chic* by Tom Wolfe which explores the 'chic' for white artists (in this case, composer Leonard Bernstein) in being associated with African American radical culture.
[124] David McDiarmid, in New York, to Peter Tully, in Sydney, December 1, 1980. McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

> establishment, David kept underground, in spite of the occasional nocturnal encounter with fame in a night-time park.[125]

While the 'bedsheet' works were created for gallery walls, not streets or subways, McDiarmid is nonetheless placing himself within a cultural lineage of resistance. As a visual practice, graffiti sits in a space between being seen as "a barometer of the decline of urban civility", on the one hand, and as a "vernacular art form which manifests the variety of the city and the contested politics of the public realm," on the other.[126] By choosing to use the visual language of the street and the idioms of cruising and sex-with-strangers McDiarmid was positioning this work within the complexities of the time-space urban edge he had chosen as his nomadic political and creative location.

## Conclusion

A reading of the temporal and spatial specificities of subcultural New York which attracted and held McDiarmid from the late 1970s to the late 1980s offers valuable insights for a reading of the artist's work executed during that time. The themes, techniques and materials of the work were developed through his engagement with the queerly inflected cultural specificities of the streets of Manhattan at this very specific time-space location.

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[125] Sam Schoenbaum. (1993). Typescript. Op. cit.
[126] Amin and Thrift (2002). Op. cit., p25.

This engagement involved an awareness of the cultural histories and contemporary cultural practices of the streets into which he inserted himself in a kind of palimpsest. The layered urban cultures which interested McDiarmid included a lineage of gay male sociality, activism and identity; the cultural and sexual possibilities of a population density and diversity hitherto unknown to the artist; the legacy of radical cultural movements such as The Beats; a dynamic and energetic street life with its own specific visuality, sounds and stylistics and the possibilities it offered of inter-racial cruising for sex; the presence of well known gay male artists such as Andy Warhol, David Wojnarowicz, Robert Mapplethorpe and Keith Haring; the cult of glamour and celebrity; the rich traditions of African American expressive culture, with its notions of 'hip' and 'cool'; the development of zones of Lower Manhattan, SoHo and the East Village, as sites of alternative, discursive art practices; the promiscuity of the excess of wealth and productivity represented by the idea of 'America'.

The city was thus a site for a unique personal cultural mapping and for the articulation of a changing, self-enquiring personal subjectivity by the artist. McDiarmid's appropriation of the embedded cultural codes and calligraphic immediacy of graffiti was a way to create a material form to hold the intensity of affect of his experience of the city and contain his interweaving of

interpersonal, erotic and cultural threads and sensibilities. In the acrylic-on-cotton 'graffiti bedsheet' works executed in 1983 and 1984, with their hand-rendered graffiti-like text, the artist created highly coded tracings of his cultural and sexual trajectories and networks within the city.


Fig. 15 *Mr Man* 1983-4

Fig. 16 *Alphabet City* 1983-4

Fig. 17 *Coffee To Go* 1983-4

Fig. 18 *Self Portrait Number 2* 1983-4


Fig. 19 *Word Up* 1983-4

Fig. 20 *What's Going On?* 1983-4

# *3.*
# Art and the dance club: utopia and ecstasy in the work of David McDiarmid 1979-1981

*Paradise Garage, a Manhattan club that closed its doors in September 1987, was, and still is, regarded as having been the most influential underground dance venue in New York City. To this day many members of the underground dance scene consider it to have constituted the epitome of social dancing as a celebration of individuality and community at the same time. Dance records produced after 1987 have invoked the club's name more often than any other venue in New York by either mix or song title.*

Kai Fikentscher: *You Better Work: Underground Dance Music in New York City*, 2000, p 61.

*No diamond sheds its light independently from the culture producing, refining, and forging it, cutting the stone into a prism whose intensity of refraction equals its currency value as a seductive sign of a peculiar kind of power, the power inscribed in the domain of the 'aesthetic', the 'ephemeral', and the 'superfluous'.*

Fabio Cleto: *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*, 1999, p 1.

*[In the dance club] different worlds, different forms of sexuality, different senses of 'home' and different kinds of 'communities' can be brought into being. Club cultures are especially significant places for the working out of new ideas and ways of being.*

Maria Pini: *Club Cultures,* 2001, p191.

In this chapter I discuss a series of new art works McDiarmid made in New York between 1979 and 1981, and the world that inspired them. In their material, method and style these are something of a departure from previous work and their politics is ecstatic and utopian rather than critical, agitational or confrontational. However there is both *continuity* between these works and earlier work and a *disruption* occasioned by the affective intensity of the life the artist had adopted in New York. There is continuity in the concern with queer world-making, as I explore below, and in the deployment of musical themes and a romantic eroticism to fire the work. But in terms of the visual excess both expressed and created in the new work there is a departure which reflects metropolitan night-time light, and the ecstasies of the sex, dance and music scenes the artist had found in New York from the time of his first visit in 1977.

The large luminescent works made by McDiarmid from 1979 were executed in a new material - reflective holographic Mylar sheeting - that the artist had found in commercial display outlets in Canal Street, lower Manhattan after taking up residence in the city in June of that year.[1] I examine here how these works express

[1] 'Mylar' is the trade name of a commercial display product used in window dressing and other display situations and subsequently widely used for greeting cards, wrapping papers and other commercial applications. The material used by McDiarmid consisted of a substrate of adhesive backing material over which a layer of laser generated reflective holographic foil, and a thin layer of glazed vinyl or paper, was applied during manufacture. The artist cut and juxtaposed small segments of the material, forming a reflective mosaic effect in the 'quilt' and 'embroidery' patterns under discussion. When McDiarmid first used the material which he found in display outlets in lower Manhattan, it was expensive to buy and rarely seen, especially in an 'art' context.

utopian and ecstatic impulses associated with a time of great optimism for gay men in the West, especially in the cities of North America, before the radically changed conditions brought about both by the AIDS epidemic and by aspects of urban transformation from the mid 1980s. The work amounts to a series of aesthetic and affective gestures inspired by the impulses of the underground dance club, the cultural and political optimism of the post-Stonewall urban gay world and inter-racial sex and friendship. They embody the utopian and ecstatic expression of early House music and underground dance clubbing, in particular the social practices of the legendary dance club, The Paradise Garage and its ground breaking DJ Larry Levan.[2]

These non-figurative decorative works were made as a kind of 'community artefact' to accompany the world of underground dance clubbing which McDiarmid entered from 1979 onwards.
They were both inspired by, and at the same time became part of, the cultural invention which is dance clubbing. The specificities of

[2] The musical lineage of what is now known as House music, arose out of Disco music and includes certain musical innovations developed within Chicago and New York underground dance clubs. The seminal DJs, it is widely agreed, were Frankie Knuckles in Chicago and Larry Levan in New York. The DJs played (mixed, intersected, overlaid, blended), specially produced 12 inch single dance records on two or more turntables. The techniques, technologies, musicality and virtuosity involved in the early developments of this now legendary dance music tradition are elucidated by several authors: Mel Cheren. (2000). *My Life and the Paradise Garage. Keep on Dancin'*. New York, Twenty Four Hours for Life Inc.pp 145-147; Kai Fikentscher. ( 2000). *You Better Work! Underground Dance Music in New York City*. Hanover and London, University Press of New England, pp 33-38; Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton. (1999). *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey*. London, Headline, p.270-282; Glenn A Berry. (1992). *House Music's Development and the East Coast Underground Scene*. Masters Dissertation in Afro American Studies. Madison, University of Wisconsin; Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson. (1999). *Discographies: Dance Music, Culture and the Politics of Sound*. New York and London, Routledge. The specificities of the Paradise Garage dance club are discussed below.

underground dance music and clubbing in the late 1970s and 1980s provide a necessary background for understanding the impulses and materiality of McDiarmid's work of this period. It will be the task of this chapter to elaborate these specificities.

The works under discussion, sometimes collectively referred to by the artist as 'disco quilts', employed traditional American quilting blocks and provincial European embroidery patterns in vivid colours and patterns fashioned from the reflective Mylar material discussed above. The artist told his mother in a letter in 1981 that the 'embroidery' patterns within the works were based on "Russian and Austrian embroidery borders, enlarged and made like mosaics," using a patchwork or mosaic application technique. He said, at the time, that the works employed "pattern on pattern and are very pretty."[3] With titles such as *Klub Kwilt* [Figs. 21. and 22.], *Miss Thing* [Fig. 28.], *Rapper Dapper Snapper* [Fig. 27], *Disco Kwilt* [Fig. 29], *Wild Thing* [Figs. 25. and 26.] and *Party Time* [Figs. 23 and 24.] the works were clearly meant to both celebrate and invoke the dance club. The visual excess of their light reflection, colour, and shiny surface glamour both evokes and replicates the visuality and affect of the dance floor. McDiarmid made these works as a celebration of his own and his chosen community's

[3] David McDiarmid in New York to his mother, Vivien Weetman, in Melbourne, November 4, 1981. Courtesy Vivien Weetman.

experience in the constantly evolving gay male night life of the city, including the underground clubs which pioneered what has since become known as 'House' music.[4] The works, with their light reflective and illusory surface, both capture the mood of, and emulate, the glamour, sensuality and mystery of a particular experience of 'after dark.'

The quilt and traditional hand embroidery, as I noted in Chapter One, conventionally embody domestic and feminine concerns. They are the "confirmation of daughterly or wifely skills and virtues, a symbol of a long tradition of domestic femininity."[5] McDiarmid's 'quilts' and 'embroideries' which are made from gaudy, shiny, reflective, synthetic commercial materials denote a frankly different and self-invented 'tradition'. The holographic Mylar material itself allows for a proposition that 'surface is depth'. Its showy, synthetic surface reveals, under light, and depending on the position of the beholder, a gorgeous, even infinite, depth of shining glamour. This is achieved because the

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[4] The term 'underground' is used throughout this chapter to mean, as Kai Fikenscher puts it, a cultural "context in which certain activities take place out of a perceived necessity for a protected, possibly secret, arena that facilitates opposition, subversion, or delimitation to a larger dominant, normative, possibly oppressive environment." That is they are social practices which are set apart from, and /or set themselves apart from, the mainstream". In the case of the Paradise Garage, it was 'underground' in the following ways: it played non-commercial , new and innovative music; it was a members only club with restricted access; it created a safe environment for a black, gay and multi- cultural crowd. See, Fikentscher. (2000). Op. cit., p.9.

[5] Rosemary Betterton, "Why My Art is Not as Good as Me? Femininity, Feminism and 'Life-Drawing' in Tracey Emin's Art", pp22- 39 in Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend. Eds. (2002) *The Art of Tracey Emin*. London, p38.

holographic material contains, within its surface, reflective prisms, facets and surfaces which produce, with the right lighting conditions, an illusion of 'limitless' visual spatiality. The art works have, in turn, been made even more 'excessive' by the way the artist has cut and juxtaposed the different colours and holographic patterns into complex quilt or embroidery patterns. The cutting and juxtaposing of fragments multiplies the surfaces available for light reflection and refraction thus increasing the works' visual intensity,

The work offers a camp take on what might be proposed as 'synthetic authenticity'. The shiny surfaces of the frankly synthetic material both disrupt and exceed the effects of the quilting and embroidery patterns of the folk craft traditions. McDiarmid thereby both reveres and craftily removes these traditions from their hetero-normative familial settings. The cut-up, fragmentary and synthetic surfaces capture the synthetic world of dance clubs with their new musical technologies involving the mixing (cutting and juxtaposing) and replaying of pre-recorded music and the employment of cutting edge lighting and sound technologies which produced an aural and visual excess which was in itself quite new.

These works attempt to capture, within their complex reflective geometries, the utopian and ecstatic impulse which drove the

social world they reflect, and for which they provide, a proposed or implied, visual artefact and 'tradition'. The discourses of authenticity surrounding the quilt and embroidery are transposed onto a frankly transitory, momentary sensationalism linked to sexuality, drugs and dance music. These are works created not to be 'handed down' from 'generation-to-generation' but to provide even more visual excess in a world, and for a community, in which a luxuriousness of visual and aural sensation was being fore-grounded. These works frankly attempt to achieve in their excess an "ecstatic perfection in the present"[6] the way the gay and African-American underground dance club scene attempted to achieve this effect on the dance floor.

## The *Klub Kwilt* 1979

In creating *Klub Kwilt* [Figs 21. and 22.] the earliest of the holographic Mylar works the artist chose intense jewel-coloured, geometric-patterned Mylar samples and constructed a 'quilt' using similar traditional North American quilting patterns to those he had employed in the earlier *Man Quilt,* discussed in Chapter One, also made in 1979. Using the 'Jacob's Ladder' (sometimes also called 'Underground Railway'); 'Chevron'; and 'Four Square' quilting patterns, McDiarmid created an intoxicating visual excess

[6] Gilbert and Pearson. (1999), Op. cit., p168.

which simulated the excitement of the 'Klub' to which the title of the work refers - the Paradise Garage.

While the work may be read as existing within the minimalist trajectory in visual art of the 1960s and 1970s, or even conversely within the 'pattern and decoration' movement of the 1970s in New York, it has a cultural specificity linked to the artist's personal and sexual life as well as to larger art movements. McDiarmid was not creating this work for the art world, for a gallery, or the market, but as a cultural artefact to reflect and resonate with the urban night time world whose magnetism he was then enamoured with.[7] McDiarmid never restricted his art interests to the art or gallery world but made art about his life as a gay man in a political project of both affirming a current lived reality and proposing a more liberated future – what I have called queer world-making.

The holographic Mylar 'disco quilt' series of work forms part of this project. The sourcing of folk crafts is consistent with McDiarmid's long term interest in stitchery and feminine craft traditions discussed above. The gentle coloured pencil on graph paper cartoons [Fig 24] the artist produced as the maquettes for some of these Mylar mosaic works have a contemplative feeling to them. Their careful execution is in keeping with the sourcing of

[7] The work was, however, subsequently purchased by the National Gallery of Australia, in 1992, after a long life as the kind of 'community artefact' under discussion.

their patterns within women's domestic craft work.[8] In the creation of delicate pencil-drawn maquettes, the artist was both appropriating the feminine tradition, of marking out patterns on paper before beginning a complex piece in needlepoint or embroidery, and affirming it as part of his own chosen cultural legacy.

McDiarmid's method in cutting, tiling and adhering patterns operates as I have said to multiply the number of planes, facets and surfaces made available to reflect light. The artist thus brings a synthetic set of materials and techniques to bear on the above mentioned feminine traditions in an ironic cultural move. This is a move which engages the sort of "paradox" which Brian Pronger sees as characterising homoeroticism and gay male sensibility. The paradoxical man, he says, is one "who finds himself on a special frontier of interpretation." Such a man understands culture and the "myth of gender" in a special [paradoxical] way. "At a deep psychical level", says Pronger such a paradoxical, "interpretation of oneself in gender is both an acceptance and rejection of one's place in the myth [of gender]."[9]

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[8] McDiarmid's research for these works was based partly on his collection of a number of books on domestic stitchery and textile crafts from a range of traditions. At the time of his death he still had, in his collection, books on needlepoint, cross-stitch, patchwork, embroidered samplers and decorative patterns and borders from a range of traditions.
[9] Brian Pronger. (1990). *The Arena of Masculinity: Sports, Homosexuality and the Meaning of Sex*. London, GMP Publishers, pp72-74.

This work of McDiarmid's sits in the kind of interstitial space that he had made his own, appropriating the 'feminine' to create, in Pronger's terms, a paradoxically 'masculine' artefact. The work is created in a space and at a time when gay men were uniquely able to propose a self-made 'community' with its own sensibilities and paradoxes. That is in the time-space intersections of post-Stonewall, pre-AIDS sexual liberationist New York. "At that time, [1980] just before AIDS challenged all our convictions, the New York gay community was entering its triumphant apogee," writes Edmund White in 2005.[10]

With its Orphic geometry and intense colour *Klub Kwilt* holds a chromatic and optical intensity that has been historically associated with ideas of paradise and religious ecstasy.[11] It recalls religious art traditions such as the jewel-like colours of medieval Christian stained glass windows, the colour reverberations of Islamic tile work and the intense blues, pinks, reds and greens of contemporary popular images of Hindu gods and goddesses. Like intense colour and optical geometries, dancing has been, both traditionally and in contemporary social dance, linked to psychic

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[10] Edmund White (2005). *My Lives*. London, Bloomsbury, p192.

[11] The term *orphisme* was coined by Apollinaire to describe the kind of geometric work of Robert Delauney "which depended upon the primacy of pure colour over form." Apollinaire expounded a law of "simultaneous contrasts which should give pictorial dynamism". Orphism as practiced by both Delaunays, (Robert and Sonia) has been thought by art historians to be "one of the formative elements" in non-representational abstract art. Peter and Linda Murray. (1967). *A Dictionary of Art and Artists*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, p230. In Chapter Four I note that Sonia Delaunay was a significant influence on McDiarmid's aesthetic sensibility.

and somatic release or religious and ecstatic transcendence.[12] Keith Haring refers to this notion of a spiritual, paradise-like dimension when he says:

> The Paradise Garage was one of the biggest influences of my entire life, especially my spiritual level. Dancing there was more than dancing. It was really dancing in a way to reach another state of mind, to transcend being here and getting communally to another place.[13]

## American Enchantment

Part of McDiarmid's enchantment with America, as I have discussed in Chapter Two, was the richness of its popular, especially African American, musical traditions and innovations. The artist had an insider's knowledge of obscure, underground black music, the kind of music which would later become incorporated into House music's classics.[14] The Paradise Garage, the club to which McDiarmid became an early devotee, offered, as well as a musical and sensual experience, a "profoundly visual" one.[15] The club's visuality, aurality and sensuality are intertwined to create an excess which the holographic Mylar art works of this period attempt to reflect. As Brian Currid expresses it: "the

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[12] Janet Wolff, "Dance Criticism, Feminism, Theory and Choreography" pp67-87 in Janet Wolff. (1995). *Resident Alien: Feminist Cultural Criticism*. New Haven Connecticut and London, Yale University Press, p77.
[13] Robert Farris Thompson, "Haring and the Dance", pp214-252 in Elizabeth Sussman. Ed. (1996). *Keith Haring*. New York, Whitney Museum of American Art, p216.
[14] Brewster and Broughton. (1999). Op. cit., pp387-395.
[15] Brian Currid. "We Are Family: House Music and Queer Performativity" pp165- 196, in S. Case, P. Brett, and S. L. Foster. (1995). *Cruising the Performative: Interventions into the Representation of Ethnicity, Nationality and Sexuality*. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, p 178.

darkness, the lights, the throbbing rhythms, and the cinematic fantasy of communal belonging."[16]

The mobile, fragmented and fractured opticality of *Klub Kwilt* evokes the elusive 'backward glance', the momentary 'here and not here', the 'seen and not seen' characteristic of both street cruising, as discussed in Chapter Two, and also the fragmented visuality of the dance floor.[17] In the movement and the changing light and dark of the dance club the subject is glimpsed and glimpses fleetingly the other(s) across the crowd. This inter-subjective visuality changes according to what light, colour, or reflection illuminates the space in the micro moment and the seemingly endless series of micro moments which made up the underground club dance-floor experience. The embedded optical 'secrets' of *Klub Kwilt* are changed, hidden or revealed, according to the time of day, the light falling on the work and the position of the viewer.

Music was a consistent inspiration and informant for McDiarmid's work. He drew on an affect shaped by mass culture, including popular musical culture. His earliest exhibitions, as we have seen, took popular song lines and titles as cultural reference points,

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[16] Currid. (1995). Op. cit., p 179.
[17] Mark. W Turner. (2003). *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer Streets of New York and London*. London, Reaktion Books.I have appropriated Mark Turner's title for his book on cruising here as the term seems to me to also be somewhat descriptive of the inter-personal opticality of the dance floor.

drawing on sentiments expressed in songs like *Secret Love*.[18] The romantic erotic yearning in the early work's employment of musical themes is intensified in this later work under the influence of the specificities of McDiarmid's chosen gay male subculture in New York. A utopian and ecstatic affect, triggered in this case by urban gay male political optimism, hedonism, inter-racial sex, the utopian social harmonics of the dance floor, the intense aurality and visuality of the underground club and the effects of MDA and other drugs is both revealed and expressed in the work.[19]

In this way, the work attempts a materiality in which a romantic yearning for an eroticised transcendence and a utopian idea of 'paradise' is posited. This is a paradise in which drugs, aurality, visuality and sensuality are combined to evoke a utopian dream of social, racial and sexual liberation and equality. This is the principal message of House music and is also what is being attempted in the luminosity of this art work - an approximation and extension of the "energetic and polyrhythmic"[20] world in which sex, music, drugs and intense visuality combine to create an

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[18] See Chapter One.

[19] The drug of choice for McDiarmid, and his circle, for use on the dance floor, as well as marijuana, cocaine, LSD, amyl nitrate and other drugs, was
MDA: (3,4 methylenedioxyamphetamine). A precurser to MDMA (ecstasy), MDA was a still-legal compound first synthesised in 1910 by the Merck researchers who went on to compound MDMA. Its psychotropic effects made it the love drug of the 1960s. Combined with its speedy effects, its 'empathy enhancing effects' and its longer acting metabolite (than MDMA) it was the perfect dance floor drug. http://www.mdma.net/.
See also: Bruce Eisner. (1989). *Ecstasy: The MDMA Story*. Berkeley, Calif, Ronin Publishing, pp xlv-xlviii.

[20] Anthony Thomas "The House the Kids Built: Dance Music's Gay Black Roots" *Outlook: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly 5* (Summer 1989) p 25, quoted in Brian Currid, Op. cit., p 183.

instance of utopian and ecstatic bliss. Richard Dyer thinks that with its physicality and range, Disco (and I add, its later development House music) "never stops being erotic, but it restores eroticism to the whole of the body."[21]

## Night Light in the City

I have discussed in Chapter Two the importance of the idea of 'America' and the metropolitan experience of New York as a vital part of the inspiration for McDiarmid's work. In the holographic Mylar works under discussion it is night-time in the city, as experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s, which is the inspiration. Theorisations of the city again provide a useful reference point for elaborating the time-space context of McDiarmid's holographic Mylar work with their reflection of an urban "optical montage", visual mobility, refraction and reflection.[22] Nigel Thrift, drawing on the work of urban theorists of the modern, has shown how electrification of the modern city effected a "colonisation of time" whereby the illumination of the city at night enabled, "two cities [to] coexist within the same territorial space." That is the "night time city" and the "day time city."[23]

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[21] Richard Dyer quoted in Gilbert and Pearson (1999). Op, cit., p100.
[22] Nigel Thrift. (1996). *Spatial Formations*. London, Thousand Oaks, Calif, and New Delhi, Sage, p278.
[23] Thrift. (1996). Op. cit., p267.

Analysis of artificial light and its effects thus becomes an essential way of understanding the urban experience. "It was the invention of the electric bulb in 1879 which heralded the widespread electrification of light and the decisive break between light and fire," says Thrift.[24] In contrast with other urbanised places, such as Britain, which was not widely electrified until the 1920s, New York already had 17,000 electric street lamps by 1903.[25] Interior and exterior lighting displays in cities became essential for the kinds of facilities and activities we associate with the sophisticated and urbane; theatres, restaurants, hotels and department stores.[26]

Thrift uses the term "electric sublime" for the affect in the work of American artists, such as Edward Hopper and Georgia O 'Keefe, concerned with night-time in the city. As Thrift puts it, "the city at night began to be perceived as just as real, or even more real, as the city in the daytime."[27] Lighting had the effect of rescuing the city "not only from dimness but from banality. Lighting became essential to glamorise the city."[28] Thus, "Electrification made possible a new kind of visual text, one that expressed an argument or view of the world without writing, solely through suppressing

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[24] ibid.
[25] ibid.
[26] Thrift. (1996).Op. cit., p268.
[27] Thrift. (1996). Op. cit., p277.
[28] ibid.

some features of a site and expressing others. The new rhetoric of night space edited the city down to a few idealised essentials."[29]

This illumination enabled the city to be grasped as a "simplified pattern." Urban streets "stood out in white bands of light, the tall buildings shone against the sky, and other important structures such as bridges hung luminously in the air.... The city centre blazed its importance."[30] Urban night-time space under artificial light has different colours, different coloured shadows and creates different visual and bodily sensations from daylight. While the modernist city to which this urban studies work refers was breaking apart from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, the still glamorous but more ambiguous light effects of urban spaces, I suggest, are expressed in this work of McDiarmid's.

In the work *Party Time* [Fig 23.] which hardly needs explanation in terms of what it refers to, the artist uses mauve, pink, blue and lime green Mylar samples which under the light effects produced by external light on the reflective holographic surface, are imbued with the 'electric', and multi-coloured, reflective intensity associated with night-time in the city. Now in a private collection in Sydney, the work resembles a work entitled *Wild Thing* which hung in the artist's walk-up 'railroad' apartment on East 12th Street

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[29] ibid.
[30] ibid.

[Figs. 25. and 26.] as a talismanic object – potentially a daily reminder of the excitement and excess of night-time in the city and the possibilities of a queerly-lived world. [31] Both works use a stylised version of the European embroidery patterns referred to above and mosaic patterns derived from the Neptune Pool at the Hearst Castle at San Simeon, California.[32] In both cases the artist creates a frankly decorative and sensational work which evokes his and his chosen community's visual, social and affective world.

## The cultural mix after dark

Not only is the night-time city a matter of visual effect, there are differences between the socio-demographic structure of the day-time city and the night-time city. “They lived only for the night." writes Andrew Holleran in his novel *Dancer from the Dance* which is set in the same homoerotic time-space location as the art work we are discussing.[33] At night, Holleran writes, "they [the gay men who danced the nights away] were the most romantic creatures in the city," and the music and dancing was able to transcend "days [that] were spent in banks and office buildings.”[34] Thrift notes also

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[31] Janet Plunz and Janet Abu-Lughod "The Tenement as a Built Form" pp63-80 in Janet L. Abu-Lughod. (1994). *From Urban Village to East Village*. Oxford, UK, and Cambridge USA, Blackwell, pp 65-68.
[32] The artist had photographed the mosaic patterns of the Neptune Pool at Hearst Castle in 1977 on his first visit to the United States. These photographs remained in his photograph collection on his death.
[33] Andrew Holleran. (1979). *Dancer From the Dance - A Novel*. London, Jonathon Cape, p43.
[34] ibid.

that "at night there is a decentralisation of authority, a movement down the hierarchy of the equivalent day time authority."[35]

Henri Lefebvre's notion of "leisure spaces" as "counter space" provides us with another useful lens for looking at how McDiarmid's work engages with night-time spaces of intense sensuality and cultural specificity in the recreational life of the city. Lefebvre refers to "leisure spaces" which, "become eroticised, as in city neighbourhoods given over to nightlife."[36] Despite his insistence that leisure is by no means a site of potential revolutionary social change, Lefebvre refers to the quest for "counter space" or "deviant", "diverted" spaces which, "though initially subordinate, show distinct evidence of a true productive capacity."[37] These "counter spaces" appear to have "on first inspection … escaped the control of the established order." It is precisely as "spaces of play" that these spaces constitute a "vast counter space."[38] These "leisure spaces" tend to "surmount divisions: the divisions between social and mental, the division between sensory and intellectual, and also the division between the everyday and the out-of-the-ordinary."[39]

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[35] Thrift. (1996). Op. cit., p277.
[36] Henri Lefebvre. (trans Nicholson-Smith, Donald.) (1993). *The Production of Space*. Oxford, and Cambridge, Mass., Blackwell, p310.
[37] Lefebvre. (1993). Op. cit. p 385.
[38] ibid.
[39] ibid.

I suggest that it is this "counter space" of sensual leisure, to use Lefebvre's term, which is the temporal and spatial site embodied in McDiarmid's holographic Mylar works. Lefebvre believed that: "The true space of pleasure, which would be an appropriated space par excellence, does not yet exist."[40] However, in post-Stonewall gay male New York one might have been forgiven for thinking that "the true space of pleasure" had arrived, or was at least at hand. New and re-invented 'gay space', including the re-invigoration of homosocial practices from the past, was generated from the hope and momentum of gay liberation, as exclusively gay bathhouses, bars, tea dances, discos and dance clubs were opened almost weekly.[41] It is important to remember, as George Chauncey, reminds us, that Stonewall, and subsequent liberationist politics, did not by any means mark the beginning of an overt gay male social world in New York. Instead it signalled a particular kind of confidence and changed set of cultural circumstances. An increasingly visible, gay male, visual and performative culture - of personal appearance; sexual styles and practices; dancing and cruising - providing a rich text for McDiarmid and others to respond to creatively.[42]

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[40] Lefebvre. (1993). Op. cit., p 167.
[41] Aaron Betsky. (1997). *Queer Space: Architecture and Same Sex Desire*. New York, William Morrow and Company.
[42] George Chauncey. (1994). *Gay New York: The Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*. London, Flamingo Harper Collins.

It might be argued that the post-Stonewall re-invention of gay male urban visibility, confidence and pride was animated by its "own conception of the world", to use Lefebvre's term, and was for its participants a "grand creation." "When a gestural space comes into conjunction with a conception of the world possessed of its own symbolic system, a grand creation may result," says Lefebvre.[43] Utopian or not, in his holographic Mylar works of the 1979-1981, McDiarmid attempts to hold such a "conception of the world possessed of its own symbolic system," as Lefebvre puts it. Further the artist appears to propose a possible visual symbolic system, employing a recently developed contemporary commercial material which would encompass, and make material and visible, this conception. He is attempting within the 'shallow depths', as it were, of the shiny holographic material to contain an ecstatic moment of arrested linear time which resonates with the temporal-spatial specificity of the underground dance club in this city at this time.

In the introduction, and in Chapter Two, I mention the cultural intersections which drew McDiarmid to New York, not the least of which was the city's cultural and racial diversity. His graffiti-based work discussed in the last chapter was inflected by his exposure to Puerto Rican and African American aural, visual and sexual cultures. The multiplicity of race, ethnicity, class and

[43] Lefebvre, (1993). Op. cit. p 217.

sexuality encompassed within the New York underground dance club scene of the late 1970s and 1980s would also impact on the material form of the 'disco quilt' works under discussion here. While the earlier Disco musical culture had been subject to a white, homophobic backlash, oral accounts of the underground dance clubs by contemporary participants, referred to below, repeatedly refer to racial harmony, class inclusiveness and sexual diversity.[44] While it is simplistic "to associate the exhilarating sense of freedom which transgression affords with any necessary or automatic political progressiveness," as Jonathan Dollimore writes, there is however, a utopian impulse within House music itself which animates the art work we are discussing.[45] This utopian impulse in the underground House music dance club included, as I shall explain below, the affirmation of racial and sexual freedoms and cultural multiplicities.

## *Do you want to get funky with me* [46]

Since the early 1970s, with the advent of gay pride and the earliest days of Disco, there has been a strong association between dance music culture and gay men. "Indeed one can safely say that dance

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[44] The so-called 'Disco Sucks' movement was a white, male, homophobic, rock and roll music industry managed, set of events which culminated in a public Disco record smashing at Chicago's Comisky Park in July 1979. Disco music and dancing was characterised, by the spokes people of this phenomenon, as "mindless faggot" music. See Alan Jones and Jussi Kantonen. (1999). *Saturday Night Forever: The Story of Disco*. Edinburgh, Mainstream, p100.

[45] Jonathan Dollimore (1985), quoted in Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. (1993). *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, p201.

culture, as we know it, is largely a gay creation", write Gilbert and Pearson.[47] The utopian and ecstatic impulses of the gay and black underground dance club are embedded in the specific gay and African American associations of House music itself and in its origins in Disco music. Gay men were quick to feel the resonances within the soaring passion and optimism of the African American inventions of Disco and House music.[48]

## A utopian moment

The club that became McDiarmid's utopian and ecstatic 'paradise' of eroticism and utopian affect was Paradise Garage. This members-only underground dance club existed (1977-1987) within what seems, with the benefit of hindsight, a utopian historical moment when it appeared that anything was possible in terms of social and sexual liberation and ecstatic musical and sensual experience.[49] This was, as we can now see with the advantage hindsight gives us, a liminal moment between, as Edmund White says above, the apparently retreating sexual oppression of pre-

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[46] *Do You Wannna Get Funky With Me* by Peter Brown (1977, Drive/ TK Records) was in the top 100 play list for Paradise Garage dance club, listed in Brewster and Broughton. (1999). Op. cit., p 389.

[47] Gilbert and Pearson. (1999). Op. cit., p99; Glenn A. Berry, quotes DJ and musician Robert Owens as saying that gays "were more receptive to the new styles of music. You could bring out something new and it would click with the gay clientele instantly and they would follow it, whereas with the straight market they would have to hear it on the radio." See: Berry. (1992). Op. cit., p 82.

[47] For a detailed account of the African-American musical lineages and impulses which found their way into House music, see Berry. (1992) Op cit,.

Stonewall times and the advent of AIDS. This was a time when, as Shelton Waldrep remarks, "sex [itself] had few, if any, consequences of a physical kind."[50] In the late 1970s and early 1980s in New York it seemed to many politically progressive gay men that the gay liberationist atmosphere, and new homosocial cultural practices it engendered, might indeed signal real social change for gay men. The largely successful United States-wide campaign to defeat the influence of the Florida based ideologue of homophobia, Anita Bryant, had made it seem that progressive social change was possible.[51] This was before the ravages and losses of the early years of AIDS starting in 1981 and before the homophobic backlash and 'homosexual panic' which was the American (and wider world) response to the AIDS epidemic.[52]

It was also a brief historical moment before the erosion of some of the more diverse, edgy and transgressive aspects of New York nightlife. This erosion subsequently took place under the re-zoning and gentrification initiatives of successive New York City governments from the 1980s onwards which I noted in the previous chapter. These developments, as I mentioned, were also

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[49] This is not to forget contemporary incidents like the murder of San Francisco City Councillor and gay activist, Harvey Milk, in November 1978 and the light sentence given to his murderer (and of Mayor George Moscone) in May 1979.

[50] Waldrep, Shelton, Ed. (2000). *The Seventies The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*. New York and London, Routledge, p3.

[51] White. (2005). Op. cit., pp192-193.

[52] Douglas Crimp. (2002). *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. Cam, Mass., The MIT Press, p 14.

associated with 'zero tolerance' of street misdemeanours and discouragement of aspects of sexual activity and certain types of nightlife.[53] The Paradise Garage, judging from recent accounts, would not be permitted, under current zoning and other city ordinances, to open in Manhattan today.[54] The specific transgressive cultural practices of that time associated with sex and drugs; sex-on-premises bars and baths and including the sociality of the underground dance club would be swept up by more repressive conceptions of what constitutes the 'public'.[55] It is likely, as some have observed, that the racial mixing of those times would now be impossible, caught up as it would be in more recent cultural divisions.[56]

Survival as an artist, and a financially marginal foreigner without a Green Card, was also relatively achievable in those years - although not an easy or simple matter. The period when McDiarmid first settled in Manhattan predates the intensified real estate development boom, with its building and land price increases, of the mid 1980s onwards. These developments which

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[53] William Sites "Public Action: New York City Policy and the Gentrification of the Lower East Side" pp 189-212, in Abu-Lughod. (1994). Op. cit.
Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant, "Sex In Public", pp187 – 208.
in Michael Warner. (2002). *Publics and Counter Publics*. New York, Zone Books, p 190.
[54] Berry. (1992). Op. cit., pp58-62.
[55] Warner. (2002). Op. cit., p 190.
[56] Berry. (1992). Op, cit. quotes DJ David Depino as stating that by 1988 in New York "… nobody wanted a Black gay crowd.", pp52-53. Berry also records the fact that, unlike the present homophobic lyrics and attitudes within the Hip Hop scene, early Rap songs were played in the Paradise Garage and were seen as part of the party oriented music, which was enjoyed by gay men, at that club. pp3-4.

impacted towards the end of the artist's period of residence in New York raised rents and made accommodation and survival on the island much more difficult for the financially or culturally marginal.[57]

It was still possible in the late 1970s and early 1980s for McDiarmid and others to imagine longevity for a sexually-permissive cultural world where a queer artist and street-wise style queen could exist entranced in the eroticised metropolis; this "shimmering point of transit and exchange."[58] It was a time of what appears now as almost mythic arrested promise. The promise arrested was of a utopian world where progressive evolution of sexual, civil and cultural freedoms was assumed to be inevitable. Recent accounts of New York nightlife make it clear that this world was indeed a fugitive one.[59]

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[57] For detailed accounts of these changes see, Abu-Lughod. (1994). Op. cit.; Christopher Mele. (2000). *Selling the Lower East Side: Culture, Real Estate and Resistance in New York City*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press.
[58] Christopher Breward. (2003). *Fashion*. Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press, p 194.
[59] Tricia Romero. (2004). "Licensed to DJ." *The Village Voice,* **http://www.villagevoice.com/issues/0427**.
David Herchkovits. (1997). "Take Back the Nightlife: New York's Party People vs Guiliani." *Papermag* **http://www.papermag.com.nov97**.
Greg Tate. (2005). "Hip Hop Turns 30: Whatcha celebratin' for?" *The Village Voice* **http:www.villagevoice.com/news/0501**(Jan 4 2005).
Tricia Romero. (2002). ""Boogie Rights: Why Can't You Dance Where You Want?"" *The Village Voice*. **http:www.villagevoice.com/news/ Nov 26 2002**

## *Ain't No Mountain High Enough:* queer and black[60]

African American culture impacted on McDiarmid's life and work in a number of ways. I have already mentioned his informed interest in underground dance music and its antecedents.[61] I have also mentioned the influence of African American notions of hip and cool on McDiarmid's work and on his decision to live in America.

In a 1992 interview with Paul Canning McDiarmid recalled [62]

> My family in New York were a group of friends who grew up in Ohio together. They were Black. They were academics and administrators in colleges. One of these guys [Robert Cromwell] was my boyfriend for 8 years and his roommate Roger Blackmon was the most exciting man I ever met in my life. He was a Vietnam Vet, he was doing a BA part time, he was a deejay. His attitude to life, his sensitivity, made him exciting. And he was not interested in art.[63]

I see a strong affective and aesthetic connection between McDiarmid's work of the period under discussion and his chosen exposure to African American music, style and sociality. Brian Currid draws on the work of Kobema Mercer and Homi Bhabha to articulate some of the complexities in what he refers to as a "triangulation" of performance, spectacle and spectatorship between black and queer male subjectivities in the context of the dance club. Currid asks us to consider the possibility of "the

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[60] *Aint No Mountain High Enough* by Inner Life (Salsoul, 1981) was in the top 100 play list for Paradise Garage dance club, listed in Brewster and Broughton (1999). Op. cit. p 390.

[61] These included Disco, Soul, Blues and Gospel. McDiarmid was also interested in early Hip Hop.

[62] Wolff, (1995). Op. cit., p140.

subjective experience of club going as a plurality of forms of subjection/subjectivitisation, whereby each form implies a different sort of political relation." In this he draws on Homi Bhabha's articulation of the possibility which is made available by looking at "stereotypical discourse" in developing "our understanding of the "processes of subjectivisation."[64]

In the Introduction I mentioned Diana Fuss's writing on the complex workings of identification. She sees identification as "the play of difference and similitude in self-other relations." While identification with (a different and separate other) is unsettling, it is part of the complex way we work unconsciously to form identity. Identification "sets into motion the complicated dynamic of recognition and misrecognition that brings a sense of identity into being."[65] It is the entry of history and culture into the subject who must then "bear the traces of each and every encounter with the external world."[66]

The dance club is a site in which the performance of 'self'; the spectacle of 'other'; and one's reception as a spectacle of

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[63] David McDiarmid, interviewed by Paul Canning, March 1993. Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.
[64] Currid. (1995). Op cit., p 178.
[65] Diana Fuss. (1995). *Identification Papers*. New York and London, Routledge, p2.
[66] ibid.

'otherness', provides a complex site for mobile identity formation and the "fabrication of communal histories."[67]

> These histories are created partly in a string of memories and associations that are grounded within the thoughts and actions of the dancer on the dance floor; as s/he dances, s/he participates in a new narrativisation of that history in response to the musical, visual and aural stimulation that surround [her/him].[68]

The racial harmony that many informants noticed at underground dance clubs, like Paradise Garage, was part of a utopian impulse referred to in numerous accounts of the early [proto]-House dance club. These accounts refer to the feeling of safety, harmony and beauty in the racial, ethnic and sexual diversity of the dance floor. David Depino, for example, who was assistant to DJ Larry Levan at the Paradise Garage and was around the New York underground dance scene from the 1970s, recounted to Glenn A. Berry the importance of the presence of blacks, whites, gays, straights all together on the dance floor.

Recent feminist and post colonial theorists have unsettled "fixed epistemological frameworks of subjectivity and identity formation" and pursued an interest in "inter-subjectivity and open-endedness" around the issues raised by race and culture within "desire, projection and identification."[69] It was the sense of community surrounding its members which was thought by many

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[67] Currid. (1995). Op.cit., p 178.
[68] ibid.
[69] Dorothy Rowe. (2004). "Cultural Crossings: Performing Race and Trans-gender in the Work of moti-roti". *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's*

oral history informants to be one of the most important things about the Paradise Garage.[70] Brian Currid in his writing on the complexities of relationships between 'black' House music and 'white' American gays believes that House music becomes, in the context of the Warehouse (in Chicago) and Paradise Garage (in New York) "explicitly African" in its sensibilities, and claims a space for the black queer as both queer and black.[71]

Currid suggests that:

> The "blackness" of House might first be described as an authorial production of the black queer, as she claims House as somehow expressive of her own sense of subculture. In this narrative, House is "My House", and is traced in a genealogy with other Black music - of course disco, but older soul, and, crucially, gospel as well. Not only is the music then part of this identity performance but the narrativisation of the "history " of House also becomes important to this performance of identity[72]

A 1981 photograph shows McDiarmid and his then lover, Roger Cromwell, standing in the living room of Cromwell's West 12th Street apartment in front of McDiarmid's holographic Mylar work *Rapper Dapper Snapper* (1981). This photograph [Fig. 27] locates the art work in its interior space as a community artefact. It is both backdrop to, and expression of, the shared sociality, sexuality, sensuality and visual and aural affect of the (utopian and ecstatic)

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*Practice*. G. Perry. Malden, Mass. Oxford UK. Carlton, Australia, Blackwell**:** 138-155, p144.

[70] Berry. (1992). Op. cit., p275.

[71] Currid. (1995). Op. cit., p 182.

[72] ibid.

world of underground dance clubbing and the cultural world which both surrounds it and makes it.

The art work employs the same appropriated 'embroidery' and 'mosaic' design conventions adopted in the two similar works, *Miss Thing* and *Party Time* discussed above. The intensity of light and colour in the work, characteristic of the dance club and the night-time city, animates the everyday-ness of the domestic space. The title suggests rhythm, repetition, speed, and the 'attitude' associated with both gay male urban subculture and Rap music - the kind of intersections of hip style and street knowingness that McDiarmid had always been interested in.[73] This was a spatial and temporal moment when Rap music and Hip Hop culture had not yet become inimical to gays. In the early years of Rap, this music was played by Larry Levan, as part of his mix, for (primarily) gay male dancers at the Paradise Garage.[74] As Glenn A. Berry puts it, "The uptempo (about 118 b.p.m.) beat of the Hip Hop of artists such as Afrika BamBaata could blend with New York style House, encouraging a certain amount of musical crossover between the Hip Hop and House crowds."[75]

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[73] Jeff Chang. (2005). *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip Hop Generation*. New York, St Martins Press for a discussion of the creative competitiveness of Hip Hop culture, "Style as Science", as he puts it, p111.
[74] Berry. (1992). Op. cit., p32.
[75] Berry. (1992). Op. cit., pp56-57.

The radical social critique carried by early Hip Hop culture, and its visual manifestation in graffiti, was one that McDiarmid was able to adopt as another creative link in the appropriative drive of his work as we saw with the 1983-84 graffiti-based works. Soon after he took up residence in New York, McDiarmid placed himself within a community of African-American gay men both in his private world, in the more public world of the dance floor and in the patterns of urban sociality discussed in the previous chapter. Robert Cromwell and his room-mate Roger Blackmon were friends from Ohio. Cromwell's apartment on W12 Street with its view directly south to the twin towers of the World Trade Centre, was the centre for a time of McDiarmid's familial and social world. Roger Blackmon (Cromwell's housemate mentioned above) was a home-based DJ with a separate room set up as a DJ booth with sound pumped through to the living room shown in this photograph.

McDiarmid, whose African American musical interests predate his time in New York, had his taste and knowledge expanded not just by Larry Levan at the Paradise Garage but also by Roger Blackmon. He himself learned to DJ here although he had been making his own audio tape compilations for years. Through his relationships with these men, and through other encounters, McDiarmid's social world was extended to include a racial and cultural diversity he allowed to impact on his work. John Leland

in his history of 'hip' in America notes its very formation in the interstitial spaces between black and white. Hip he says is a "a dance between black and white; a love of the outsider; a straddle of high and low culture; a grimy sense of nobility; a language which means more than it says."[76] *Rapper Dapper Snapper's* vibrant hip energy refers to contemporary Hip Hop culture and to McDiarmid's inter-racial visual and aural world. The work's glitz and glamour captures an affective historical space in which cultural, racial and sexual difference were a cause for excitement, optimism, personal (cultural, emotional and intellectual) expansion and an associated sense of utopian potentiality in the idea of 'community'.

House music "critiques and metaphorically reorders the dominant styles of the performance of gay identity, serving as a force of pluralisation, multiplying and remixing the pasts, presents and futures of gay community," says Brian Currid.[77] House music "insists on its "anti-whiteness" and, according to Currid, it is a musical form which "refigures the operations of race and class within constructions of gay identity, providing an alternative narrative in which gay, black men are not marginalised, but central to the history of gay community and identity."[78] *Rapper Dapper Snapper*, I suggest, is a celebratory artefact for a self-

[76] John Leland. (2004). *Hip, The History*. New York, Ecco and Harper Collins, p10.
[77] Currid. (1995). Op cit., p 173.
[78] ibid.

designated community, materially referencing, like other quilt and embroidery-derived work by this artist, the older communal and familial domestic quilts and embroideries which inspired it.[79]

## *Lost in Music:* [80] Paradise Garage

McDiarmid had been introduced to Paradise Garage and its membership system by a friend, the Australian artist Sam Schoenbaum, who had lived in New York since 1978. Sam had been a helpful guide, for McDiarmid, to what was cool and sexy for an adventurous gay man from the antipodean periphery who was passionate about becoming, at least a participant observer, and at best (more accurately in McDiarmid's case) a player, in his urban heartland of choice. Paradise Garage, as a gay male mainly Black and Hispanic club, had a members-and-guests-only policy.

I have outlined above how 'underground' cultural phenomena seek a separate, protected space away from potential harassment and prohibition and this was true of Paradise Garage. The club, aimed not to be exclusive or elitist but to retain control of its entry criteria, protect its clientele from police intervention relating to liquor licensing laws (the club did not serve alcohol) and from

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[79] It is worth mentioning that American quilting and rural domestic craft traditions are of course by no means white-only cultural phenomena. The naming of the quilting pattern "Underground Railroad", mentioned above, clearly carries a shared tradition.
[80] *Lost in Music* by Sister Sledge was on the top 100 play-list for the Paradise Garage. See Brewster and Broughton. (1999). Op. cit., p390.

homophobic or racial harassment.[81] David Depino, former assistant to DJ Larry Levan, denies any suggestion that the membership system at the Paradise Garage was elitist or discouraging to disadvantaged people. "No, it was for the street kids. The only reason why there was membership and everything were the laws in New York. If you made your club private you could stay open the hours that you wanted to. You [could] do things you couldn't otherwise do. So membership was just there to make you feel an actual part of something and so the police could not dictate [to] you."[82] Depino recalls that there was an "equal mix of Latino, black and white. They didn't care who you were, famous or whatever, you had to be a member."[83]

Located in a former trucking-garage on 84 King Street in the west-side commercial trucking district of lower Manhattan, the club formally opened in 1977 and closed in 1987.[84] The movement towards gay male self-determination in the 1970s coincided with the re-invigoration of African-American musical creativity in

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[81] Andrew Holleran in his novel *Dancer from the Dance* also explains how a club could lose its edge if it admitted a mainstream, more conservative, clientele: "We had to abandon places when they became too professional, too knowing, too slick. Places we had loved … were written about now in *New York* magazine, *Newsweek*, and *GQ*, and then, the final stage of death, we would pass their doors one evening and see, where we had once thronged to begin these rites of Dionysis, a mob of teenagers and couples from Queens whose place it was now." Holleran. (1979). Op Cit., p116.
[82] Berry. (1992). Op. cit., p41-42.
[83] Berry. (1992). Op. cit., p28.
[84] Some writers, date the club's beginnings from the pre-opening 'construction parties' but their accounts vary in the time when they consider these to have started, Fiona Buckland believing they began in 1976 and Mel Cheren noting that they began in April 1977. Perhaps Cheren should know best as he was one of the club's backers and the lover of its founder Michael Brody. See Fiona Buckland. (2002). *Impossible Dance: Club Culture and Queer World Making*. Middletown Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, p.xiv; and Cheren. (2000). Op cit., p.184.

Disco, House, and Hip Hop. Underground dance clubs like the Paradise Garage created a space for new musical developments which became intertwined with inter-racial gay night life. The possibilities of musical and sexual ecstasy were enhanced by easy availability, and comparatively minimal policing, of marijuana, cocaine and designer (chemically compounded) drugs such as MDA, the latter drug being uniquely suited to the enhancement of both dancing and sex. By the end of the seventies, Disco had been commercialised, commodified, mainstreamed and, according to Currid, "perhaps bleached."[85] Clubs like the Paradise Garage in New York and the Warehouse in Chicago with their ground breaking DJ's, Larry Levan and Frankie Knuckles respectively, revived the vitality of dance music and created a hedonistic, non-mainstream music and dance practice in which a form of utopian hope was integral.

As I have noted, the Paradise Garage is remembered for its dynamic racial, ethnic and cultural mix; "In the Garage we had blacks, Anglos, Jews, Spanish, gays, straights, everybody in one situation with a peaceful thing on their mind."[86] Its DJ Larry Levan, its state-of-the-art sound system, lighting technology and its dedication to making each night at the club like a large private party, are remembered as the club's unique style. The Garage, as it

[85] Currid. (1995). Op. cit., p 174.
[86] Kevin Hedge, a member of Blaze, a New Jersey-based dance music production team quoted in Fikentscher. (2000). Op. cit., p. 61.

was known, is still recalled as "the most influential underground dance venue in New York City," a place which provided the opportunity for a "celebration of individuality and community at the same time."[87]

Australian artist Peter Tully, McDiarmid's former lover, and friend and roommate in New York at this time, thought, "there was only one [club]. And it was called Paradise Garage. [It] was a black and Puerto Rican disco with a sprinkling, a handful, of whites. As a gay club it had the best music, the best sound system, the best lighting, the best artists."[88]

## Dance as political and ecstatic transcendence

"Disco was the revolution," writes Richard Dyer of the utopian impulse behind Disco, the earlier music and dance form out of which House had its genesis.[89] House music, according to Gilbert and Pearson, "seems to bespeak a persistent longing for - and belief in the possibility of - a future better than the present."[90] They refer to the "the explicit utopianism" of many House anthems,

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[87] Ibid.
[88] Peter Tully interviewed by John McPhee in Mc Phee, John (1991). *Peter Tully: Urban Tribalwear and Beyond*. Canberra, Australian National Gallery. PeterTully also found inspiration for his art work in the dance floor at the Paradise Garage. His costume/sculptural work *Ceremonial Coat for the Grand Diva of the Paradise Garage* is in the collection of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. His self-designated *Urban Tribal Wear* was inspired in part by the dress and performativity he observed and participated in at the Paradise Garage.
[89] Richard Dyer. (1979). "In Defence of Disco". *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*: pp 410 - 418.
[90] Gilbert and Pearson. (1999). Op. cit., p168.

"especially those with their origins in gay, black America."[91] McDiarmid's engagement with this utopian sociality impacted on his work and his life and was among other things an extension of his liberationist politics.

The social practices of Manhattan night-life, as described here, were part of a queer world-making practice to which McDiarmid's work is a contribution. Play is symbolic action which is "rarely *mere* play," say Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. Play, they suggest "articulates cultural and political meanings."[92] Relegating politics only to the realm of the serious consigns subordinate classes, and other outsiders, to contesting state and class power "within a problematic which has positioned them as ignorant, vulgar, uninitiated - as low."[93] Disco, out of which grew underground clubs like Paradise Garage and House music, had been very much relegated to the cultural 'low', as vulgar, 'artificial', 'synthetic', cheap. The white and homophobic "Disco Sucks" movement of 1979 which, "declared [Disco] dead while it was still walking the streets," characterised the music and the dancing as "mindless", "repetitive", "synthetic", "technological" and "commercial", while the men who it was claimed danced to the music were "unnatural", "trivial", "decadent" and "artificial".[94]

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[91] ibid.
[92] Stallybrass and White (1993). Op. cit., p43.
[93] ibid.
[94] Walter Hughes. "Feeling Mighty Real: Disco as Discourse and Discipline", Rock and Roll Quarterly, Summer 1993, p 7.

McDiarmid's creative practice, as I have stated, was concerned throughout with what I am calling [proto] queer community world-making. In his self-designated 'disco quilt' suite of works under discussion here, he willingly embraces precisely those ‘negative’ characteristics outlined above. He is happy to adopt the trappings of a 'low' cultural designation and the work of the period 1979-1981 is frankly and confidently 'artificial', 'technological, 'synthetic’, 'trivial, 'unnatural', 'decadent', 'repetitive and 'commercial'. Even 'mindless' - if that implies transcendent states of losing one’s mind and potentially gaining one's self in an ecstatic hedonistic excess. A willing leap out of the Apollonian limits of the everyday into the Dionysian ecstasies of night time in the city.

As Paradise Garage did not serve or sell alcohol, the dancing and eroticism of its spaces was associated with other sorts of pharmacological transcendence. Marijuana, cocaine and MDA, in a variety of sequences and combinations, along with poppers (amyl nitrate), were the drugs of choice for most, although there were others. Drugs and sex and dancing were intrinsically linked in the sociality of this club and it is "an indisputable fact that 'drugs' are central to contemporary dance culture", claim Jeremy

Gilbert and Ewan Pearson.[95] Richard Dyer also notes that marijuana use was associated with a different kind of masculinity from the masculinity associated with alcohol consumption. As he sees it, a more "effeminate", "hippie", alternative version of masculinity.[96] The "self-dissolving and regathering", as Vital Ronell puts it, made possible with the consumption of certain drugs, was part of the utopian and ecstatic specificity of this time and place.[97] A kind of "hallucinated plenitude and pure communication," to use Ronell's terms, are part of what I propose as the realm of the ecstatic associated with the underground clubbing experience.[98]

Janet Wolff, has also noted that, through dance, subjects may "become labile and unmoored, breaking loose from [their] fixings."[99] Underground dance clubbing has sometimes been conceived in terms of both losing and gaining the self. Gilbert and Pearson describe the dual affect of both "a radically self-sufficient containment" and the "collapse of identity in an atemporal unity" which was able to be achieved at dance clubs such as Paradise Garage.[100] Dance parties and clubbing have been linked to utopianism and the ecstatic by dance floor aficionados themselves

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[95] Gilbert and Pearson. (1999). Op. cit., p138.
[96] Richard Dyer. (2002). *The Culture of Queers*. New York and London, Routledge p17
[97] Avital Ronell. (1992). *Crack Wars: Literature Addiction Mania*. Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, p60
[98] Ronell. (1992). Op cit., p74
[99] Wolff. (1995). Op. cit., p77.
[100] Gilbert and Pearson. (1999). Op. cit., p173,

and by cultural historians. Janet Wolff writes that dance itself is often associated with freedom, liberation, and escape.[101] She sees recent (1995) critical interest in Mikhail Bakhtin, the carnivalesque and the grotesque body, as evidence of a concern with the body as the site for the potential unsettling of cultural and gender oppression.[102]

The Paradise Garage's ground-breaking sound system, engineered by Richard Long, created a new kind of powerful, viscerally experienced, and 'warm' sound.[103] Aural stimulation; rhythm; a specific kind of vocal narrative often referring to liberation, survival, triumph against adversity; community solidarity and sexual and musical ecstasy, along with the freedom to create individual and/or mutual dance styles with the self-selected 'hard-core dancers' the club attracted, created what many contemporary observers refer to as a feeling of being in 'paradise'. The visual stimulation of lights, strobing and colour, produced by an inventively controlled lighting rig, combined with the exciting visuality of a multi-racial, creatively and diversely dressed and presented, crowd of energetic dancers added to the sense that this was an extraordinary place. The utopian and ecstatic impulse of the dance floor experience at such a club was both implicit and explicit.

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[101] Wolff. (1995). Op. cit., p69.
[102] Wolff. (1995). Op. cit., p76.

Sharing of the specially designed space and cultural practices of the dance floor, seemed to offer the possibility of transcending, at least for a time, the isolation, hierarchies and daily oppressions of ordinary existence. Oral history accounts suggest that the very mundanity of daylight existence itself could be mediated within the night-time existence of a club such as Paradise Garage.[104] A club like the Garage had its own network of connections requiring insider knowledge to enter; its membership-only entry conditions have been mentioned and it was largely a word-of-mouth clientele who attended. The club was located away from designated midtown and uptown 'nightlife' locations (Studio 54 for example was on 54th Street in midtown Manhattan) in a locality which then needed a certain cultural savvy to enter with confidence.

The Garage had none of the plush and celebrity focus of a club like Studio 54. It had a self-selected clientele of hip people in-the-know who arrived at the right time and knew why they were there. "The garage got going with the hard core dancers around 4 or 5am" says Judy Weinstein, herself one of these hard core

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[103] Many observers note the 'warmth' of pre-digital House sounds. Stephen Alkins DJ, personal communication with the author, August 1999.
[104] See Fikentscher. ( 2000). Op. cit; Buckland. (2002). Op. cit. and Gilbert and Pearson (1999). Op cit. for detailed accounts of these cultural practices.

dancers.[105] The people who were serious about music and dancing "stayed until the ending sometimes till noon the next day. People showed up late because they wanted to hear the really deep stuff, what became known as sleaze music."[106]

## Conclusion

McDiarmid made the shiny, reflective dance club works, of the period 1979-1981, shortly after taking up residence in New York. The works simultaneously embody, affirm and propose the utopian and ecstatic impulses of the dance floor and the gay male sexual and social revolution of the 1970s and early 1980s. The utopian world that is affirmed and embodied in *Klub Kwilt*, *Rapper Dapper Snapper*, *Miss Thing* [Fig 28], *Party Time* and *Disco Kwilt* [Fig29] is one of sexual and musical ecstasy, inter-racial resonance and harmony and visual and aural opulence.

The work captures the optimism in gay male New York before the AIDS epidemic, urban redevelopment and changed city laws altered night time urban sociality in the city. The 'disco quilt' works I have been discussing in this Chapter are conceived, in my account, as part of a collective narrative which (as Brian Currid writes above) involved a "string of memories and associations … within the thoughts and actions of the dancer on the dance

[105] Vince Aletti, "The Dancing Machine: An Oral History", pp 273- 282 in Waldrep, Shelton, Ed. (2000). *The Seventies: The Age of Glitter in Popular Culture*. New York and London, Routledge, p278.

floor".[107] In these quilting- and embroidery-derived works the artist proposes an aesthetic and a system of signs as part of his creation of a set of 'community artefacts' which celebrate the collective 'narratives' of the dance floor. Referencing feminine domestic aesthetic traditions, this culturally paradoxical work is materialised in shining, synthetic reflective materials which create a dazzling surface excess evoking the visuality of the night time city and underground dance floor. These works evoke (what we now know was) a brief ecstatic and utopian political and cultural temporal space whose affect the artist sets out to both express and propose within the work itself.

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[106] Dancer, Richie Rivera quoted in Aletti. (2000). Op. cit., p279.
[107] Currid. (1995). Op. cit., p 178.

Fig. 21 *Klub Kwilt* 1979

Fig. 22 *Klub Kwilt* 1979 (detail)

Fig. 23 *Party Time* c1980 Fig. 24 *Party Time* c1980 (maquette)

Fig. 25 *Wild Thing* c1980 (in situ in the artist's kitchen East 12th Street New York) Fig. 26 *Wild Thing* c1980

Fig. 27 David McDairmid and Robert Cromwell in front of *Rapper Dapper Snapper* New York c1981 c1980

Fig. 28 *Miss Thing* c1980

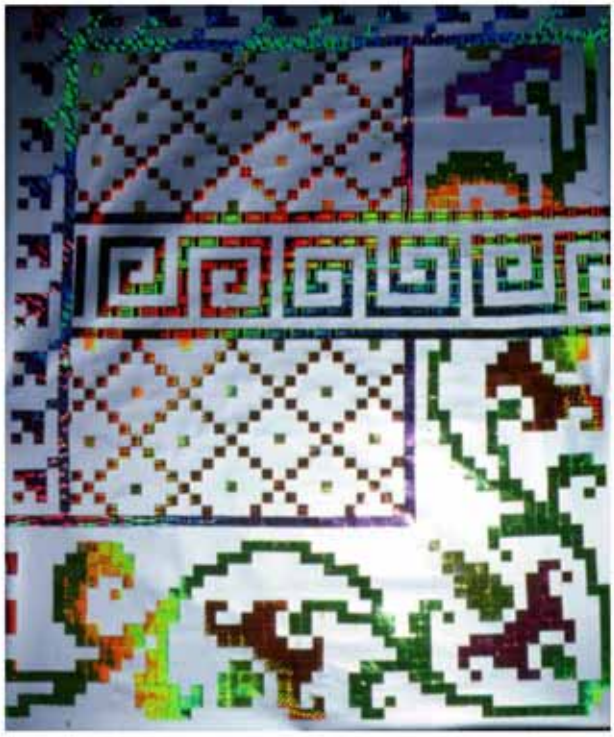

Fig. 29 *Disco Kwilt* c1980

# *4.*
# *I'm here girlfriend what's new*:[1] McDiarmid's performative self-presentation as art practice

*Queer appropriations of the gaze undermine normative codes of spectatorship by creating a reversible look that allows men to be both subject and object of the gaze both spectator and spectacle.*

Joel Sanders: *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*, 1996, "Introduction", p24.

*True subjectivities come to flourish only in communities that provide for reciprocal recognition, for we do not come to ourselves through work alone, but through the acknowledging look of the Other who confirms us.*

Judith Butler *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian reflections in Twentieth Century France,* 1999*,* p28

*Identifications are mobile, elastic and volatile. As sites of erotic investiture continually open to the sway of fantasy, the meaning of a particular identification critically exceeds the limits of its social, historical and political determinations.*

Diana Fuss "Introduction: Figuring Identification" in *Identification Papers,* 1995, p8

1."I'm here girlfriend what's new!" David McDiarmid, *A Short History of Facial Hair*, 1993, p96.

In 1975, the year before his first public exhibition (discussed in Chapter One), David McDiarmid created a sleeveless, black satin chemise-like garment for himself on which he appliqued a hand painted replica of the KY lubricant tube. [Fig. 30.]. The tube 'squirted' its contents, like a tube of (artist's) paint, over the wearer's shoulder onto the hand-painted outline of an artist's palette. The artist thus simultaneously labelled himself as both 'artist' and 'gay man'. An ironic performative play with the idea of 'artist' and 'gay man' thus becomes an embodied creative practice for McDiarmid from the early 1970s and in itself resonates with the concerns of his art work. This chapter will explore McDiarmid's embodied performative practice of dress and adornment as part of his creative oeuvre.

One of the linoleum band-saw cut-out works from McDiarmid's second gallery show in 1977, *The Australian Dream Lounge* [Fig. 11.] discussed in Chapter One, was an iconic artist's palette of the kind seen in popular 1950s print manifestations, similar to the artist's palette motif in *Self Portrait* of 1976 [Fig.2.] discussed in Chapter One. In this case though, the 'palette' is rendered in checked linoleum with furniture legs as 'brushes'. The coffee table in the *Dream Lounge* is another 'artist's palette' with the lights doubling as artist's 'brushes' [Figs. 12 and 13.].

The artist also played with the same overworked popular and commercial icons of 'art  and 'artist' in the creation of his own performative identity. *Self Portrait* from the 1976 exhibition *Secret Love*, as we have seen, showed the artist's groin clad in jockey briefs patterned with the artist's palette design. [Figs. 2. and 31.]. In a similar move, McDiarmid chose an image of himself to appear in the promotional material for the *Secret Love* exhibition [Fig. 32.] in which he is wearing another garment employing the KY logo thus again signifying 'gay artist' for his exhibition publicity. This time the garment is a T-shirt with the KY logo printed on it - inextricably linking the ideas of art, artist, sex, sexual-activism, gay identity politics, personal dress and self-presentation.

## Art and the performative

These moves are part of the artist's ironically toned performative self-presentation which set him apart from his heterosexual artist peers. Unlike some of his male contemporaries, McDiarmid adopted an ironic distance from the idea of 'artist and art', while simultaneously adopting a camp version of conventionalised 'art' labels for himself. This self-conscious personal image creation is, I argue, an integral aspect of the artist's creative practice. In this chapter, drawing on intersections between queer theory, and fashion theory, I articulate a connection between David McDiarmid's performative personal culture of dress, gesture and adornment and his art work. I argue that there is political and

creative coherence between both practices and that the artist's performative self-presentation as gay man is in fact an integral part of his art practice itself.

In describing Oscar Wilde's personal 'self-invention' as the self-designated 'professor of aesthetics', Shelton Waldrep refers to the "broader role of writer as performer that he [Wilde] used self-consciously in an attempt to destroy the binary opposition between art and life."[2] McDiarmid's personal self-invention as first 'gay' and then 'queer' artist, I suggest, is this kind of 'life-as-art' practice. I have shown above how McDiarmid's creative practice was self-referential, indeed autobiographical - a political self-portraiture in which the artist used his own life and politics as the purpose, subject and the means for the creation of his work. The politics of McDiarmid's life and times as a gay man is thus inseparable from the style, content, focus, intention and context of the work. In this current chapter I develop the idea that this practice of multi-valent 'self-portraiture' in his art extends to his embodied self-representation in dress, grooming, gesture and adornment.

## Masculine masquerade: identity, dress and theory

The relationship between identity, dress and subcultures has been a subject of academic interest since the 1970s. Writers such as Dick

Hebdige (1979),[3] Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (1975),[4] Angela McRobbie (1994),[5] Ted Polhemus (1994),[6] and Shaun Cole (2000)[7] have explored how dress and adornment play a part in the formation of subcultural (including gendered and erotic) identity for both individuals and groups. "Identity" as Simon Thrift says, "comes from the outside, not the inside; it is something we put or try on, not something we reveal or discover."[8]

The evolution of queer theory from feminism, gay and lesbian studies and film and literary studies, has further helped to destabilise fixed notions of gender, sexuality and identity. This has fuelled scholarly interest in the gendered and embodied performative practices of dress and cultures of adornment. Within the growing field of fashion theory Elizabeth Wilson (1985),[9] Christopher Breward (1998, 2003, 2004),[10] Caroline Evans (1989,

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[2] Shelton Waldrep. (2004). *The Aesthetics of Self-Invention: Oscar Wilde to David Bowie*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, p X1.
[3] Dick Hebdige. (1979). *Subcultures and the Meaning of Style*. London, Methuen.
[4] Stuart Hall. and Tony Jefferson. Eds. (1975). *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post War Britain*. London, Hutchinson.
[5] Angela Mc Robbie. (1994). "Shut up and Dance: Youth Culture and Changing Modes of Femininity". *Post Modernism and Popular Culture*. A. Mc Robbie. London and New York, Routledge**:** Chapter 9.
[6] Ted Polhemus. (1994). *Street Style: From Sidewalk to Catwalk*. London, Thames and Hudson.
[7] Shaun Cole. (2000). "Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century. Oxford and New York, Berg.
[8] Simon Frith quoted by Noel McLaughlin "Rock Fashion and Performativity" pp 264-285 in Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson. Eds. (2000). *Fashion Cultures: Theories, Explorations and Analysis*. London and New York, Routledge, p270
[9] Elizabeth Wilson. (1985). *Adorned in Dreams*. London, Virago.
[10] Christopher Breward. (1998). "Cultures, Identities, Histories: Fashioning a Cultural Approach to Dress." *Fashion Theory* **2**: . 301-14.
Christopher Breward. (2003). *Fashion*. Oxford, New York, Oxford University Press.
Christopher Breward. (2004). *Fashioning London*. Oxford and New York, Berg.

1997),[11] Joanne Entwhistle (2000)[12] and others have articulated relationships between subjectivity and performative [in]vestment. Additionally, writers such as Christopher Breward, Peter McNeill (1999, 2000)[13]and Shaun Cole (2000) have taken a particular interest in masculinity, identity and dress. Cole in particular has made a detailed study of gay male dress in Western cities such as New York and London in the late twentieth century[14].

Recent writers on embodied performative masculinity have been interested in the notion of 'masculine masquerade' drawing on the much quoted 1929 essay by Joan Riviere on feminine masquerade.[15] Masquerade, following Riviere, was generally seen as the "province of the female" and thus "only effeminate men would adopt a masquerade." The phrase "masculine masquerade" would be an "oxymoron, a contradiction in terms."[16] More recently the idea of masculine masquerade has been explored by a number of writers. As Helaine Posner puts it:

> The masculine, it seems is not a monolithic and immutable gender but a conflation of personal, sexual, social, and historical conditions. Once assumed to be the normative or authentic gender role, defined in

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[11] Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton. (1989). *Women and Fashion: A New Look*. London and New York, Quartet Books.
Caroline Evans. (1997). "Dreams That Only Money Can … Or, The Shy Tribe in Flight From Discourse." *Fashion Theory* **1**: pp. 169-88.
[12] Joanne Entwhistle. (2000). "'Fashion and the Fleshy Body: Dress as Embodied Practice'." *Fashion Theory* **4**: pp. 323-48.
[13] Peter McNeil. (1999). That Doubtful Gender: Macaroni Dress and Male Sexualities. PhD thesis, Sydney, University of Sydney.
Peter McNeil. (2000). "Macaroni Masculinities." *Fashion Theory* **4**: pp. 373-404.
[14] Shaun Cole. (2000). "Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century. Oxford and New York, Berg.
[15] Joan Riviere. (1929). "Womanliness as Masquerade". *Formations of Fantasy*. V. Burgin. New York and London, Methuen**:** 35-44.
[16] Harry Brod (1995). "Masculinity as Masquerade". *The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity and Representation*. A. Perchuk. Cambridge Mass. and London, The MIT Press. Pp13-20, p13.

> marked contrast to the masquerade of the feminine, masculinity is finally revealed to be, like femininity, a constructed identity.[17]

Other recent writers have in turn looked at relationships between space and embodied performative practices of masculinity.[18] In this chapter I shall examine McDiarmid's embodied and invested performance in its time-space locations(s).

## Performing gender

The gender and sexual activism of the 1970s generated substantial scholarship on constructions of gender and by the 1990s gender was being seen "not as something we *are* but as something we *do*."[19] In an essay on masculine masquerade, Harry Brod examines the traditional idea of masculinity as one which is, by definition, not subject to the "kind of deceit and dissembling characteristic of the masquerade."[20] The 'deceit and dissembling' of the 'feminine' masquerade were thought to be "corrupting of masculine virtues", as Brod puts it.[21] "Like the American cowboy, "real" men would embody the primitive, unadorned, self-evident, natural truths of the world, not the effete pretences of urban dandies."[22] Recent fashion theory elaborates the potential in seeing masculinity as masquerade, as Caroline Evans notes. She finds that "the

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[17] Helaine Posner. (1995). "The Masculine Masquerade: Masculinity Represented in Recent Art", in A. Perchuk. Op.cit., p29.
[18] Joel Sanders. Ed. (1996). *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*. New York, Princeton Architectural Press.
[19] Harry Brod, (1995). "Masculinity as Masquerade", in A. Perchuk. Op. cit., p13.
Harry Brod "Masculinity as Masquerade pp21-30 in A. Perchuk. Op. cit., p16.
[20] Harry Brod. (1995). Op. cit., p13.
[21] ibid
[22] ibid

metaphor of masquerade seems particularly apt to describe the way in which men as well as women move through and negotiate subcultural space for themselves." Contemporary concern with the performative formation of gender, she suggests, makes it useful to extend the [masquerade] metaphor to male masquerade.[23]

The current interest in male, as well as female, masquerade has been predicated on Judith Butler's ground-breaking work on the fluidity and instability of gendered identities and her formulation that gender formation and identity is "performative".[24] Butler's formulation of the performative has played a vital part in the development both of queer theory and fashion theory. As Caroline Evans puts it:

> Extending [Butler's] notion of performativity to subcultural identities one could argue that such identities are not ontologically distinct, or pre-existent, but are brought into being, constructed, and replayed through everyday actions, dress, adornment, and other cultural practices." [25]

In McDiarmid's case he both stood knowingly outside of, and at the same time participated in, the masquerades of masculinity being performed within gay male subcultures. Often himself in the vanguard, he was also at an ironic distance. The resonances between, on the one hand, McDiarmid's examination in his art work of the politics of gay male appearance typologies as fetish

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[23] Caroline Evans. (1997). Op. cit., p 181.
[24] Judith Butler. (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London, Routledge, pp24-25
[25] Caroline Evans. (1997). Op. cit., p 181.

and fantasy and, on the other, his own self-conscious adoption of a range of personal imagery and self presentation are discursively connected.

From the 1950s, the gestural (implicitly heterosexual) masculinity of the male artist which had been the global legacy to the Western art world of American Abstract Expressionism was widely current not just in provincial cities such as Melbourne and Sydney but in the Western metropolis. While McDiarmid could dress in the classic chinos and denim image of a late twentieth century Western male artist such as for publicity shots for *The Australian* newspaper taken in 1994 [Fig. 33.] that masculine persona was not enough to satisfy McDiarmid's creative project of playing with multiple and mobile images of himself as 'artist'. In this chapter I refer to recent fashion scholarship, art history and queer theory to place McDiarmid's dress and adornment practice within his creative oeuvre as a whole.

## The art of dress

The scholarship of the 'New Art History' from the 1970s onwards has, while destabilising "art's big ideas," created a "cultural permission" for seeing dress and adornment as significant cultural

practices, as Robert Radford eloquently argues."[26] Radford is convinced that "a culture of irony and self-referentiality [now] equally subsumes both [art and fashion] practices."[27] He argues that the power of the exploration of interstitial spaces between fashion and art by Tracey Emin and others of her generation of 'Young British Artists' is in their ability to use the elaborated "navigating skills required at the edges of cultural boundaries." These navigating skills include the ability to cross "borders of established genres" and to invoke a "skilled aesthetic of fine distinctions."[28]

This exercising of discrimination across borders, and the skilled aesthetic of fine distinctions, to use Radford's terms, is of interest in looking at McDiarmid's embodied practice and its relationship to the materiality of his art work. The artist exercises himself as both an artist who creates, in his art work, multiple and elastic images of gay men and one who engages in multiple personal self-image-making processes in relation to his own embodied self as gay male artist. McDiarmid's own complex intersecting fashion-art practice may be seen as a possible precursor to the kind of provocative art-fashion intersection we now see between Tracey Emin and Vivien Westwood in which the artist sometimes uses

[26] Robert Radford. (1998). "Dangerous Liaisons: Art Fashion and Individualism." *Fashion Theory* **2**: pp. 151-64, p152.
[27] Radford. (1998). Op. cit., p153.
[28] ibid.

Westwood's clothing in her art work or allows her own body to be used in Westwood's advertising campaigns as part of her own embodied creative practice. [29]

Moreover McDiarmid's construction of himself as an object of the male gaze is a manifestation of the kind of 'looking' and 'being looked at' fore-grounded by the hyper-masculinity which was explored by gay men in the major cities of the West (especially in North America) from the 1970s. This undermines conventional narratives of looking in which, as I have noted in the discussion of Riviere, masculinity is seen as stable and men are therefore neither objects of the gaze nor performers for it. This undermining of conventional looking and performance of gender generates a new kind of queer enactment of masculinity, as Joel Sanders writes:

> Queer appropriations of the gaze [which] undermine normative codes of spectatorship by creating a reversible look that allows men to be both subject and object of the gaze both spectator and spectacle.[30]

In his invested and adorned performative practice, McDiarmid is both participating in the stereotypically masculine dress and adornment typologies of gay men in major Western cities from the 1970s onwards and also prefiguring a self-consciously queer subjectivity which will be widely explored from the 1980s both

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[29] Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend, Ed. (2002). *The Art of Tracey Emin*. London, The Art of Tracey Emin, p9.

[30] Joel Sanders, (1996). "Introduction". *Stud: Architectures of Masculinity*. J. Sanders. New York, Princeton Architectural Press: 11-25, p63.

within the academy and on the streets of the West. In this way McDiarmid's embodied creative practice is part of the queer world-making that I suggest, throughout this thesis, is one of the principal concerns of his creative oeuvre.

Intersections between art and fashion are of course by no means new or unique. The Russian Constructivists and the Italian Futurists for example had manifest views on the relationship between dress and wider ideas of culture. The Constructivists designed utilitarian textiles and garments and the Futurist Giacomo Balla wrote a manifesto on male dress. Artist Sonia Delaunay designed garments, textiles and interior products for a wide circle of artists, writers and bourgeois clients through her commercial outlets in Madrid and Paris. The Surrealist-inspired fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli collaborated with Salvador Dali and Jean Cocteau. Dali's design of the fabric from which the famous Schiaparelli 'tear' dress was made prefigured the relationship between David McDiarmid and Australian fashion designer Linda Jackson in which McDiarmid hand-painted fabrics which were incorporated into garments designed by Jackson. Both Jackson and McDiarmid were aware of the historical fashion-art intersections I have mentioned and saw themselves as working within a lineage of dress artists, including Schiaparelli and

Delaunay whom they greatly admired and by whom their fashion output is manifestly influenced.[31]

## Performative masculinities

Arriving in San Francisco for the first time in 1977 McDiarmid described the gay male dress typologies he observed in the streets of the Castro. "the guys dress uniformly in tight Levi's, big lumberjack boots, and Airforce flying jackets … nylon with fur collar; short hair and moustache."[32] The contemporary emphasis on hyper-masculine dress and style expanded the long tradition of gay men using dress and adornment to both signal sexual identity and also disguise it. As Richard Dyer has argued this exercise of sartorial ingenuity provided gay men with:

> … a space to exercise a skill we have had to be very good at, namely self-presentation. Surviving as a queer meant mastering appearances, knowing how to manipulate clothes, mannerisms and lifestyle so as to be able to pass for straight and also to signal that we weren't.[33]

Dyer articulates how a conscious re-inscription of mainstream masculine imagery, what he calls, the "quoting of mainstream masculinity", has the effect of destabilising the supposed

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[31] McDiarmid created original hand-painted fabric designs, in both Sydney and New York, for Australian couturier, Linda Jackson, a long-term friend. Jackson and McDiarmid both had a wide knowledge of fashion history and the history of non-western dress. McDiarmid was an admirer of the eclectic practice of Sonia Delaunay especially the way she combined the creation of a unique range of hand-worked garments with her practice as a painter and print-maker. The collaboration between Jackson and McDiarmid was intimate and detailed. Jackson pre-cut the fabric to accommodate McDiarmid's designs which formed an integral part of the concept of the garment. See Sally Gray. (1999). "Celebrating Hybridity: David McDiarmid's Textile Designs." *Art and Australia* **37**: pp.96-101, and Margaret Maynard,. (1999). "The Red Center: The Quest for 'Authenticity' in Australian Dress." *Fashion Theory* (3): pp.175-96.

[32] David McDiarmid, in San Francisco, to Peter Tully, in Sydney, March 25, 1977. McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

naturalness of masculinity and celebrating the masculine as erotic. These "acts of queering" are brought about by an insistence on "clothes as performance," the decision to see a conventional masculine image and dress stereotype as stylish and "to wear it with irony."[34]

McDiarmid recalled in 1993 that from adolescence he had been erotically and aesthetically energised by advertising and fashion imagery of men.[35] Beginning in the 1970s, as I have shown, and continuing until his death, McDiarmid's art work referenced male film and music stars and icons of a self-designated gay male lineage. In his own performative self presentation McDiarmid also played with the trope of 'star', creating himself in the image of his own version of 'stardom' within his self-created aesthetic and cultural world. In this way he places himself within the kinds of ironic tropes of stardom and celebrity engaged in more publicly by artists, such as Andy Warhol and David Hockney, whose personal self-presentation styles were also iconic, ironic and intrinsic to their respective public persona as 'artist'. In writing about Andy Warhol, Matthew Tinkcom speaks of the "important relation between gay subcultures and commodity culture, namely

[34] Richard Dyer. (2002). *The Culture of Queers*. New York and London, Routledge, p68.

[35] David McDiarmid, interviewed by Carmela Baranowska, 1992, (no date). Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

that of camp ironic practices."[36] Tinkcom sees Warhol's film, *Haircut* as a reminder to us of the efforts required in order to make an appearance within everyday life; "even if we don't function as stars, star culture functions within us as we go about preparing ourselves for the world."[37] Referring to the last scene of the film Tinkcom notes how the figures turn directly to the camera and fix our gaze: "Cool and remote like Harlow or Crawford, the stars of *Haircut* share with us the pleasures of being seen and *knowing* that one is being seen."[38]

## 'Gay Man' and 'Gay Art'

In a photograph taken in 1983 [Fig. 34.] David McDiarmid presents a carefully self conscious personal image which resonates strongly with the specific fetishised gay-male image taxonomies he had proposed in the 1978 suite of work he titled *Trade Enquiries*.[39] In one of the *Trade Enquiries* multiples, entitled *Facial Hair …* [Fig. 35.] McDiarmid had appropriated a pre-existing 'template' image of a man from the gay male press and altered it in various ways to create a taxonomy of gay male 'types' using

[36] Matthew Tinkcom, (1999). "Warhol's Camp". *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject*. F. Cleto. Ann Arbor, Michigan, University of Michigan Press: 344-354, p345.
[37] Tinkcom. (1999). Op. cit., p352.
[38] ibid.
[39] See Chapter One for a discussion of the *Trade Enquiries* work of 1978.

hairstyles, facial hairstyles, and sunglasses. These fetishised gay male appearance typologies were specific to urban gay male life in the West in the late 1970s.[40]

The precise contours and outline of beard, moustache and mouth shape shown on several of the 'types' of man in *Facial Hair …* [Fig 35.] are replicated by McDiarmid in the crafting of his own personal appearance in the 1983 photograph taken on the street in lower Manhattan.[41]

## Creating life-as-art photographic portraits

The group of friends who had coalesced (from Melbourne, Brisbane and elsewhere) in Sydney in the early 1970s and had subsequently shared time in New York, London and other locations were in the habit of creating snapshots of each other as a record of a particular kind of life under creation. These snapshot images were created over a twenty year period in what might be described as a form of 'joint art direction' between subject and photographer in that there were shared ideas operating about the life-as-art which was being created by its protagonists. This self-conscious process of recording images, outfits and occasions

[40] Shaun Cole. (1997). "Macho Man: Clones and the Development of a Masculine Stereotype." *Fashion Theory*(3): pp. 125-40.
[41] The photographers of these snapshots of McDiarmid are not always known. Where possible I speculate about the identity of the photographer. Where the photograph is taken by a professional photographer this is also made clear.

within specific temporal and spatial settings was more formally and publicly undertaken by Sydney photographer and performance artist, William Yang.[42] Nonetheless, each of these friends had her/his own camera and made photographic snapshots (sometimes whole collections) recording the political, personal and aesthetic world-making they were engaged in. The 'portrait' photographs of the artist described in this chapter are nearly all examples of these informal, but highly self-conscious, snapshots.

The casual, shaggy-but-consciously-groomed man in the 1983 photograph conforms closely to one of the 'types' in the 1978 art work [Fig 35, upper right-hand image] albeit that the artist is photographed in New York in winter and wears optical spectacles rather than the 'aviator' sunglasses in the art work.[43] This same 'type' is also the man who appears (without spectacles or sunglasses) in the *Man Quilt* of 1979, discussed above, [Figs. 9. and 10.] and in other works within the *Trade Enquiries* series. The artist's knowing gaze in the photograph almost precisely replicates that of the (upper right-hand) man in the artwork. His chosen clothing (jeans, denim over-vest, padded 'aviator' style

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[42] William Yang was a friend of McDiarmid's and frequently photographed the artist and others of his circle.
William Yang. (1984) *Sydney Diary 1974-1984*, Darlinghurst, NSW, James Fraser.
William Yang. (1996). *Sadness*. St Leonards, Sydney, Allen and Unwin.
William Yang. (1997). *Friends of Dorothy*. Sydney, Pan Macmillan.
[43] The aviator sunglasses will, however, appear repeatedly elsewhere in the artist's embodied performative presentation and in his art work.

jacket) and demeanour, hand in pocket, leaning against the wall with a sideways glance at once obliquely 'cruisy' and at the same time meeting the camera with a street-wise, knowing gaze, appear to signify 'edge', 'outlaw', 'sexual availability'.[44] The setting (against a graffitied wall in a location that signals 'downtown') makes a connection with the idea of urban space and the urban content and style of McDiarmid's art work produced at this time - the photograph is contemporaneous with the creation of the graffiti-based art works of 1983-4 discussed in Chapter Two. While the artist plays, in both the photograph and his art work, with what he later calls the "politics of butch", the play, I suggest, is within a moveable game where fixed identity is not sought but is wilfully destabilised by the multiple images, personas and scenarios the artist chose to employ in his own self-representation, as well as in his art work.[45]

While the 'butchness' of the imagery the artist creates for himself in this 1983 photograph is part of the adoption by gay men at this time of explicitly 'masculine' dress, especially that worn by manual, rural and industrial workers, this is only one of the

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[44] Christopher Breward refers to the wearing of American jeans as a "… badge of a more subversive intent, chosen by rebels and outcasts as a mark of difference and refusal." Adherents Breward notes include, "… broodingly contemptuous film stars James Dean and Marlon Brando, bohemian intellectuals, left-leaning political radicals, feminists, gay men, students and teenage misfits." Christopher Breward, (2003).
Op. cit., p111.

[45] David McDiarmid, (1993). "A Short History of Facial Hair". *Sex in Public: Australian Sexual Cultures*. J. J. Matthews. St Leonards NSW, Allen and Unwin: 91-96, p92.

signals conveyed.[46] There is a somewhat dissonant sub-text created, within the hyper-masculinity of the figure of the artist, by the grey hand-painted sheep suede scarf, (made by the artist as part of his range of Native-American inspired fashion garment design and production)[47] and the careful art direction of the background texture and red colour of the wall which resonates with the red plaid scarf he also wears.[48] This multiple, mobile approach to adornment unsettles any notion of a stable (hyper-masculine or other) homosexual identity and plays instead with identity's complex potentialities. This potentiality is explored by Leo Bersani, Jonathan Dollimore and others who have noted the uncertainties in gay male attitudes towards masculinity itself. Dollimore notes, based on a reading of Bersani, that: "In one and the same gay milieu one is likely to encounter identification with, desire for, and parodies of masculinity." This of course has the effect of unsettling ideas of a unitary homosexual identity or desire.[49] Tensions and resonances between all of these responses to the idea of masculinity - 'desire for', 'identification with', and 'parody of' - are the concern of both McDiarmid's art practice and his self-presentation as gay man and artist in a 'life-as-art' performative creative practice.

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[46] Cole. (2000). Op. cit., p94.

[47] McDiarmid had been inspired by his repeated visits to the Museum of the American Indian (then located in upper Manhattan) to create this range of garments which were sold in retail outlets and to private clients in the USA and Australia.

[48] My assumption regarding the artist's knowingness in relation to setting and stance is based on my familiarity with the way these snapshots, of the group of friends referred to above, were informally 'art directed' by both photographer and subject.

## Identity and dress

*The Fashion System*, Roland Barthes' 1967 work (English translation 1983)[50] has been in part responsible for a paradigm shift in the way fashion and dress are studied and the subsequent evolution of scholarly work in fashion theory.[51] Barthes' work initiated a way of thinking about fashion and dress as a "cultural signifying system", whereby "the social specificity of representations and their meaning across different cultural practices can be investigated."[52] Recent fashion theory is interested in exploring how " an image … an item of clothing … placed into juxtaposition with other items produces a particular meaning."[53] This meaning is "not fixed" but "shifts through time and context."[54] Contemporary interdisciplinary fashion studies engage in cultural analysis of the wearing of clothes as a symbolic performative activity.

This style of scholarly investigation, which has also grown out of feminist scholarship, film theory and cultural studies, is helpful in looking at McDiarmid's mobile personal practice of self-

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[49] Jonathan Dollimore. (1996). *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp321-322.
[50] Roland Barthes. (1983). *The Fashion System*. New York, Hill and Wang, a division of Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
[51] Michael Carter. (2003). *Fashion Classics from Carlyle to Barthes*. Oxford and New York, Berg, p 143.
[52] Breward. (1998). Op. cit., p306.
[53] ibid.
[54] ibid.

presentation. McDiarmid was conscious of the kind of 'self' he was presenting to the world as part of his creation of a performative persona of 'artist'. In this way his practice is usefully placed within a trajectory which includes Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, Andy Warhol, David Hockney and Gilbert and George whose personal self-presentation was part of their creation of themselves as 'artist'.

## *A Short History of Facial Hair,* 1993

Creative engagement, on McDiarmid's part, with the importance of appearances is evidenced in his performed autobiographical essay *A Short History of Facial Hair* (1993) in which the artist presents a prepared text with 35 mm colour slides of images of himself representing a twenty year period of his life. In an ironic camp performance he retells a history of the evolution of his own personal style of dress, hairstyle and facial hair styles during what he calls, "an extraordinary time of redefinition and deconstruction of our identities, from camp, to gay, to queer"[55] He foregrounds his own performative life-as-art against the political, sexual, stylistic, cultural and viral concerns of gay male life in the urban West between the mid 1970s and the mid 1990s.

McDiarmid left in his estate a significant, well-organised and well-documented collection of images of himself, including the 35mm photographic 'portrait' images which he used as the visual content

of *A Short History of Facial Hair*. He was intensely conscious of his own estate planning and clearly intended to leave a visual record of the history of his own appearance typologies after his death.[56] In both *A Short History of Facial Hair* and the performed male appearance codes which animated it, McDiarmid's discerning and pleasurable engagement with a range of masculinities is evident. He draws in this essay on his own art work of 1978, *Trade Enquiries,* and his personal embodied and invested practice. Current, and previous gay male appearance typologies and the visual and cultural nuances of the wider world of style and fashion form the background and foreground to this piece. McDiarmid proposes in *A Short History of Facial Hair* a shifting personal subjectivity which is in productive creative tension with the concerns of his art making practice. This is evident in the way that he not only creates a shifting personal persona based on dress and adornment or in the way he explores body and appearance typologies in his artistic output but also in the ironic camp tone of the performed essay.

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[55] McDiarmid. (1993). Op. cit., p92.

[56] The visual record McDiarmid left of his own appearance typologies cannot be seen as incidental or accidental but as a conscious attempt to leave a record of images of himself of his own choosing. McDiarmid was very conscious of the importance of estate planning for himself and other HIV affected artists in the wake of the death intestate of his close friend and fellow artist Peter Tully in Paris in 1992. McDiarmid participated as a speaker in awareness-raising activities on this matter conducted by the Arts Law Centre of Australia and the State Library of NSW. It can be assumed that nothing he left as his material record is accidental.

## Appearance as fetish

One of the works from the *Trade Enquiries* series, entitled *Sexual Excitement is Produced in Varying Degree by …* [Fig. 36.] consists of dis-aggregated elements of then current gay male facial, body and dress typologies cut-up into separate parts. In this work McDiarmid isolates the beard, moustache and mouth shapes referred to in the discussion above and places them alongside the aphorism, *Men as a class are the fetish*, quoted from a 1976 psychiatric journal article by conservative professor of psychiatry Robert Stoller.[57] In this collaged assemblage Stoller is quoted further by McDiarmid in typed and cut and pasted upper-case strips of text, as follows:

> *Sexual excitement depends on the scenario, disguised as fiction, it is an autobiography in which hidden crucial intra-psychic conflicts, screen memories of actual events and the resolution of all these elements in a happy ending, best celebrated by orgasm. If the chosen characters pretty well fit the parts, they work. They should, however, have just a touch of unpredictability in their behaviour, that introduces the illusion of risk. If unvaryingly predictable, they bore one…*

The quoted text from Stoller continues:

> *Excitement is a mental state a perceived complex sensation that one senses is the product of fantasy.* [58]

McDiarmid appropriates Stoller's writings into this art work and places them beside body typology elements as a skewed political and visual interpretation of Stoller's categories of "fetish",

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[57] Craig Owens notes that Dr Stoller regarded homosexulaity as a "gender disorder" and considered that "feminine" boys who show incipient signs of homosexuality to be "in need of treatment". He noted that Stoller as Professor of Psychiatry at the UCLA School of Medicine was aligned with the "notoriously homophobic North American psychiatric establishment". See: Owens. (1992). Op. Cit., p 222.

[58] David McDiarmid, *Trade Enquiries* (1978) collaged multiples in a series of 200.

"fantasy", "scenario", and "characters." This juxtaposition creates a tension between the world McDiarmid finds himself in, as a gay man, in which pleasure and oppression co-exist, and the idea that there might be a world that could 'become' - perhaps by *twisting*[59] these concepts to inaugurate a politics of pleasure, a politics then being explored as part of the agenda of gay liberation.

The re-positioning of appropriated "injurious language" to use Judith Butler's term is a technique, as I have mentioned, which McDiarmid used throughout his career for positing a different, more mobile and more hopeful, kind of gay male subjectivity.[60] He also experimented, in a shifting and contingent way, with 'fantasies', 'fetishes' and 'scenarios', to use Stoller's terms, both in his art work and in own dress, grooming and performative self-presentation. In drawing attention to the resonances between the 1978 art work and the 1983 photograph above my aim is to show that McDiarmid's performative practice of self-presentation is usefully seen in a dynamic relationship to, indeed as part of, his art practice and his politics of queer world-making.

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[59] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. (1993). *Tendencies*. Durham, Duke University Press, pxii. See the Introduction to this thesis for a discussion of Sedgwick's notion of 'twisting' as part of the origins of 'queer'.

[60] Judith Butler. (1997). *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York and London, Routledge, p40-41. See Chapters One and Six for further discussion of McDiarmid's re-appropriation of "injurious language" into his work.

## Gay male appearance typologies

McDiarmid's vestimentary practice was of course not unrelated to a wider, late twentieth century, gay male exploration of appearance typologies as delineated, for example, by fashion historian Shaun Cole in his book *Don We Now Our Gay Apparel*.[61] Cole traces the emergence of different typologies in gay male dress in North American cities with large gay male populations in the years after Stonewall. He records the adoption of 'stereotypic' male imagery relating to, for example, lumberjack, construction worker, biker and cowboy. He traces the evolution of the (Western) world-wide phenomenon of the gay male 'clone' whose Levi 501's, plaid shirts, manual workers' boots, neat haircuts and various highly recognisable facial hairstyles, notably neat moustaches and trimmed beards, internationalised a highly masculinised gay male appearance code.

McDiarmid both as a gay man and as an interdisciplinary practitioner in the process of visual cultural production was acutely aware of all of these developments. In speaking of the mid 1970s before he first went to the United States in 1977 McDiarmid wrote:

> I also washed dishes in a gay disco in Sydney. It had an illuminated dance floor like the one in "Saturday Night Fever" and the queens wore body shirts and flares. One night I noticed a cluster of men dancing together who wore check shirts, 501's and military haircuts.

[61] Cole. (2000). Op cit.

> They were Sydney's first taste of clones, and they were members of a gender-fuck troupe from LA called the Cycle Sluts. Sydney would never be the same again, "Haughtiness" was replaced by "attitude". The politics of butch had begun.[62]

## Reading dress

The form, colour, texture, movement, history, cultural contexts and references of fashion and adornment were a familiar terrain for McDiarmid. His reading of the aesthetics and cultures of adornment were enhanced by his possession of what Pierre Bourdieu calls appropriate "cultural capital" and by his understanding that aesthetic judgments are not value-free but are produced in political and cultural contexts.[63] In McDiarmid's case this included the capacity to read, analyse and discern images and trends on the street, in mainstream fashion and in popular culture. He was thus in a position to be able to read irony and nuance in dress and adornment and to be able to employ a discerning repertoire in his own invested performative practice. McDiarmid was sufficiently well informed to be able to respond, perversely and ambiguously, to visual and cultural history and contemporary fashion cultures as experienced in magazines, shops, street styles, designers' collections and the various appurtenances and codes of both the fashion industry and 'anti-fashion'.[64]

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[62] McDiarmid. (1993). Op. cit., p92

[63] Bourdieu, Pierre and Passeron, Jean-Claude. (1990). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London and Newbury Park, California, Sage.

[64] For a discussion of anti-fashion see Fred Davis. (1992). *Fashion, Culture and Identity*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, pp 132-33.

McDiarmid's sensibility was enriched by the coded aesthetics particular to gay male culture especially the street styles of urban gay male life, or as he himself put it, the "coded, verbal, visual, physical and aural," worlds of gay male culture:

> It might be the language of the fierce divas in "Paris is Burning" as they "read" and "shade" their sisters into oblivion. It might be seen in the sublime gaze of the gods in Tom of Finland's drawings. Or the ACT-UP t-shirt that says, EARN YOUR ATTITUDE. Or an obituary that reads, MOODY BITCH DIES OF AIDS.[65]

In fashion and dress, as in visual culture generally, much depends on the sophistication of the audience at the moment of reception, on the viewer being able to "appreciate the qualifications, contradictions, calculated ambiguities, and paradoxes," being embodied.[66] This involves being able to read dress historically, aesthetically and sexually using the "rich and variegated" clothing code resources of past and present, to achieve great subtleties and sophistication in both production of an embodied and invested personal image and in its reception.[67] McDiarmid was an avid reader of style publications such as Andy Warhol's *Interview*, and later, the British style magazines *The Face* and *iD*, when he was resident in both Sydney and New York in the 1970s and 1980s.

He was an informal student of fashion history and, like many artists before and since, was accustomed to seeing connections between art and fashion. As mentioned above, he admired Sonia

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Also Ted Polhemus and Lynn Proctor. (1978). *Fashion and Anti-Fashion: An Anthropology of Clothing and Adornment*. London, Thames and Hudson.

[65] McDiarmid. (1993). Op. cit., p96.

[66] Davis. (1992). Op. cit., p 95-96.

[67] Davis. (1992). Op. cit., p 95.

Delaunay's multiple practice as painter and fashion designer and the irony and humour of Elsa Schiaparelli's Surrealist collaborations. He was concerned to rupture the hierarchies and dissolve the boundaries which divide art and fashion.

McDiarmid's creative practice encompassed not only an exploration of male appearance typologies within his art work and in his own practice of self-fashioning but the artist was also engaged in a creative practice as a designer-maker within the fashion industry itself. His fabric and clothing design sold within conventional fashion and design industry environments. He collaborated closely with Australian couturier Linda Jackson in the mutual creation of high fashion garments which were shown in the renowned *Flamingo Follies* fashion collections put together by Linda Jackson and Jenny Kee in Sydney in the 1970s and 1980s. These garments were sold principally through Jenny Kee's Sydney boutique 'Flamingo Park' but also to private clients in Australia and the United States. McDiarmid and Jackson also jointly designed and made garments for each other.

McDiarmid designed and made, in both Sydney and New York, his own range of Native-American inspired lamb-suede garments and a range of garments using his hand-painted designs on Ethiopian cotton. These garments were also sold through the

Flamingo Park boutique. This creative practice within the fashion industry is itself an example of his familiarity with the history and culture of fashion and dress, its languages and its communicative possibilities.

Like many others, McDiarmid saw Andy Warhol's art of self-presentation as an integral part of the creation of the idea of 'Warhol-as-artist'. He was interested in the performative identities created by British artists Gilbert and George in which the art practice itself and the artists' vestimental identities were inseparable. His close friend, ex-lover and sometime collaborator, Peter Tully, also had a creative practice in which his own self-adornment was closely enmeshed with his art practice in what Tully himself called 'Urban Tribalwear'.[68] The destabilising of 'art's big ideas', to use Robert Radford's term referred to above, was a consistent creative concern of McDiarmid and his circle.[69] Both a formal and informal creative practice concerned with fashion and personal adornment was part of this artist's consistent unsettling of received ideas of what is art and what is not.

## Performing the 'Self'

The essay referred to above - *A Short History of Facial Hair* - was written, and first presented publicly as a spoken lecture, for a

[68] John McPhee. (1991). *Peter Tully: Urban Tribalwear and Beyond*. Canberra, Australian National Gallery. (no page numbers)

forum entitled *HIV Towards A PARADIGM* convened by the National Centre for HIV research at the University of Queensland in April of 1993. The essay was subsequently published in several gay periodical publications and in Jill Julius Matthews' edited collection, *Sex in Public: Australian Sexual Cultures,* in 1997.[70] The essay gave narrative form to the idea and the practice of a shifting and unfolding performative identity of McDiarmid-as-queer-artist, with the wry implication that such an identity was provisional, experimental, perverse, hip, conditional and ironic.

*A Short History of Facial Hair* was written and performed in the context of the then current conditions of the AIDS epidemic and was also a retrospective autobiographical account of the artist's own performative culture of self-adornment. It crossed discourses of style, fashion, art, sex, drugs, politics and mortality. McDiarmid described verbally and through 35mm documentary 'portrait' images of himself, the evolution of his, and to some extent his community's, personal imaging, grooming, adornment, gesture, attitude, and dress, from the early 1970s to the early 1990s.

> My priority as an artist has always been to record and celebrate our lives. Having lived through an extraordinary time of redefinition and deconstruction of identities, from camp to gay to queer; and seeing our lives marginalised everyday; we all have a responsibility to speak out. To bang the tribal drums of the jungle telegraph - "I'm here girlfriend what's new?" We've always created these languages, as we've created and shaped our identities. I hear our lives in many forms - coded, verbal, visual, physical and aural.[71]

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[69] Radford (1998). Op. cit., p152
[70] McDiarmid. (1993). Op. cit., p92.

In this performed work, McDiarmid ironically proposes a taxonomy of his own facial hair styles - bearded, moustached, clean-shaven. Using this trope, he sets up a framework for looking at the evolution of multiple images of himself as gay man through hippy to clone; gay-lib activist to sexual revolutionary; hustler to dance floor diva to self-styled 'Toxic Queen'.[72]

This essay was written at a key time for HIV-related cultural scholarship and for debates within the academy on the importance of popular culture, sexuality and everyday life. The spoken and published piece inserts itself as a non-academic intellectual and creative intervention into the scholarly domain of work on AIDS and queer theory and the attendant questioning of 'what is serious and what is not'.

> Camp assaults a society that presumes it knows what is serious and what is not. It strives not to imitate this authority [to know what is serious and what is not] in distorted form but to expose it explicitly as inadequate. Hence it does not merely invert the opposition between the trivial and the serious: it posits a stance, detached, calm and free, from which the opposition as a whole and its attendant terms can be perceived and judged. [73]

The expression in both his own dress and adornment, and in his art work, of a coded knowledge of dress and related cultural practices, is important to McDiarmid's queer world-making project. It resonates with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's observation of

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[71] McDiarmid. (1993). Op. cit., p96.
[72] *Toxic Queen* is the title of a limited edition artist's book created, employing a 'fanzine' aesthetic, by McDiarmid in 1992. This is discussed in Chapter Five.
[73] Scott Long, (1993). "The Loneliness of Camp". *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. D. Bergman. Amherst, Mass., University of Massachusetts Press: 78-91, p 79.

the special connections between knowledge and (homo) sexuality. As she puts it, "to crack a code and enjoy the reassuring exhilarations of knowingness is to buy into the specific formula 'We Know What That means'."[74] A particular knowledge and ability to decode dress and appearance was, as I have said, part of McDiarmid's everyday visual practice. His detached but knowing comments on a spectacular Thierry Mugler collection, shown at Studio 54 in September 1979, include the following remarks:

> We went out to an extravaganza fashion parade of fascist/leather Paris chic at Studio 54 … saw a few nice things but it was so straight. Lots of men in suits, with wives in taffeta and American hair. … Lots of $2000 dresses in the audience all looking fresh from Rio, Paris, Milan. …Except the parade was done so well. Fabulous packaging.[75]

## A community of fabulousness

*A Short History of Facial Hair* uses the evolution of McDiarmid's facial hair styles as a framing device to describe the social, political and aesthetic history of his times as a gay man. It is in part a retrospective account of a trend towards the re-coding of the masculine as a sign of glamour, at a time when, as Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton put it, "the masculine won out over the feminine. Masculinity replaced femininity as a site of meaning in fashion."[76] McDiarmid's essay references, in part, a time (the late 1970s and 1980s) when a fetishised, glamorised and eroticised

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[74] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. (1990). *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, California, University of California Press, p204.
[75] David McDiarmid, in New York, to Bernard Fitzgerald, in Sydney, September 7,1979. Courtesy of Bernard Fitzgerald.
[76] Evans, Caroline, and Thornton, Minna. (1989). *Women and Fashion: A New Look*. London and New York, Quartet Books, p55.

masculinity - and homoerotic masculinity in particular - became a leading concern in fashion and lifestyle imagery. Fashion and style publications such as *The Face* and *Arena* were emblematic of this trend. The homoerotic imaging in mainstream style magazines such as these was part of the "emergence of the queer insider as a source of cultural capital."[77]

The adoption of gay machismo, "by taking the traditional signs of masculinity and eroticising them in a blatantly homosexual context, [ensures that] much mischief is done to the security with which "men" are defined in society, and by which their power is secured," argues Richard Dyer.[78] McDiarmid's essay evokes and recounts, with a detached irony, the gay male performative cultures of street, bar and dance floor. It demonstrates a "knowingness, a self-awareness, a lack of innocence, an impatience with the serious and authentic and an embrace of the frivolous," which works on the assumption of complicity with an equally knowing audience.[79] For McDiarmid this audience was the micro-community of those who shared this oblique relationship to visual culture.[80]

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[77] Waldrep. (2000). Op. cit., p8.
[78] Quoted in Jonathan Dollimore. (1996). *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford, Clarendon Press, p231.
[79] Radford. (1998). Op. cit.,160.
[80] I borrow the term 'micro community' from Nicolas Bourriaud. (2002). *Relational Aesthetics*. Dijon, Les Presses du Reel, p58.

The notion of 'being fabulous' in dress, attitude and personal appearance was part of McDiarmid's knowing, frivolous and hip approach to identity as a queer subject.[81] He writes in a 1992 letter to his ex-lover and friend Bernard Fitzgerald the following:

> I filled out our census form this morning. There wasn't a category for fabulousness quotient, or T-cell count, or number of hot boyfriends I've knocked back this week. Nothing like a Gov[ernmen]t form to bring you down. Feel like adding all our dead friends to the household so they wont be forgotten. [82]

For McDiarmid, identity as expressed in *A Short History of Facial Hair*, is an emerging, mobile and situational affair, a matter of "contingent artifice", as Charles Kronengold puts it. In a discussion of black genre films of the 1970s, Kronengold develops the idea of an identity of "contingent artifice" as a starting point, or a space, from which "resistances to the demands of identity" can be created so that a problematised notion of "identity becomes a source of creative tension."[83] In other words the pursuit of an unstable and mobile contingent identity (of artifice) is a form of resistance. It is a resistance to the stable (and containing) identities which, Kronengold suggests, are usually proposed for those who have less power by those who have more.

As Judith Butler says in *Subjects of Desire*: "True subjectivities come to flourish only in communities that provide for reciprocal

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[81] This notion of 'fabulousness quotient' resonates with Ru Paul's camp performance of "Looking Good Feeling Gorgeous", written by Darrell Martin et al, Ru Paul , *RedHot* 2004, RuCo

[82] David McDiarmid, in Sydney, to Bernard Fitzgerald, at Eungella NSW, 1992 (no date). Courtesy of Bernard Fitzgerald.

recognition, for we do not come to ourselves through work alone, but through the acknowledging look of the Other who confirms us."[84] McDiarmid's placement of himself within specific gay male subcultures and communities in New York, San Francisco and Sydney gave him the immediate context for his own performative self presentation. His placement of himself in racially and culturally complex locations, allowing himself to be impacted by Puerto Rican and other Latin cultures and by African American culture further 'complicated' his culture of identity formation.

## Unsettling gender

In *Gender Trouble,* Butler suggests the possibility, that there are ways of 'doing' ones gender identity in which one might disrupt existing hetero/homo oppositions and power relations.[85] She claims that one's choice of 'gender style' can be a way to interpret received gender norms and reorganise them anew. Since culturally constructed gender and sexuality cannot entirely be repudiated we are left with the possibility of exploring and possibly destabilising, or at least making mobile, the way we 'do' the gender construction we are already in. David McDiarmid was engaged, in his dress and adornment practices, in such a

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[83] Kronengold. (2000). Op. cit., p111.
[84] Judith Butler. (1999). *Subjects of Desire: Hegelian Reflections in Twentieth Century France*. New York Columbia University Press, p28.
[85] Butler, Judith (1990). *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York and London, Routledge, p24.

destabilisation. A self-consciously perverse performative presentation of a mobile personal style - involving haircuts, facial hairstyles, garments, settings and demeanour - was part of a queerly resistant identity practice. He enlisted his own body, clothing, grooming and gesture in a kind of performative provisional imaging of 'queer man' and 'queer artist'.[86]

Dress and adornment are a way to engage in resistance to, comment on, and play with, the political construction of the role of the body as primarily an economic one, part of the body's constitution as labour power and sexual subject, in a "mode of subjection", as Michel Foucault puts it.[87] The production of subjectivity within bourgeois society is achieved, Foucault claims, in part though the exercise of "the stereotype". The function of the stereotype is to "reproduce ideological subjects that can be inserted into existing institutions of government, economy and perhaps, most crucially, sexual identity."[88] Foucault's view is that:

> Stereotypes treat the body as an object to be held in position, subservience, submission; they disavow agency, dismantle the body as a locus of action and reassemble it as a discontinuous series of gestures and poses - that is as a semiotic field.[89]

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[86] It is important here to make clear Butler's insistence that performative identity is not to be confused with performance, theatre or masquerade by a pre-existing subject who is in some essentialist sense already 'queer' or 'already' inhabiting a stable identity which can be recovered or uncovered. The performative practice of identity creation is, on the contrary, a becoming and unfolding of an identity yet to exist.

[87] Michel Foucault. (1992). *The History of Sexuality Vol 2 of 3 vols.* Harmondsworth, UK, Penguin, p27.

[88] Quoted in Owens. (1992). Op. cit., p194.

[89] ibid.

Throughout his career McDiarmid enjoyed a shifting and playful performative engagement with received stereotypes of masculine appearance and identity both in his art work and in his own personal self-presentation. Stereotypes - of businessman, dandy, hustler, hipster, debauchee - were engaged by him as serial provisional *personae*. Stereotypes are usually conceived of as limiting and potentially insidious – an entrapment of their subjects as Michael Corris and Robert Hobbs remark in their discussion of the work of African American artist, Kara Walker.[90] However to be politically effective in its task of control, Craig Owens has suggested, the stereotype must remain fixed. Unfixing it releases a subversive potentiality.[91] There is, I suggest in McDiarmid's invested practice, a strategy of resistance in a mobile interrogation and play around pre-existing stereotypes. This is a strategy such as Caroline Evans describes when she writes that an identity that is "fluid and mobile, rather than fixed, might be the only way to resist both recuperation *and* the determining voice of discourse."[92]

McDiarmid shifts, alters, mimics and comments on received stereotypes of masculine appearance and identity. There is an inevitable tension and ambiguity, in McDiarmid's embodied practice, about whether he is appropriating or being appropriated

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[90] Michael Corris and Robert Hobbs. (2004). "Reading Black Through White in the Work of Kara Walker". *Difference and Excess in Contemporary Art: The Visibility of Women's Practice*. G. Perry. Malden, Mass. Oxford UK. Carlton, Australia, Blackwell, pp 104-123, p114.
[91] Owens. (1992). Op. cit., p195.
[92] Evans. (1997). Op. cit., p180.

as he plays into and around the "voyeurism and scopophilia" of masculine sexuality.[93] McDiarmid's 'posing' of the male body and image (his own and those created in his work) in an "uncoding, de-coding, deconstructing" of the official images of the sexual body is part of his destabilising of received stereotypic images of masculinity through a kind of mimetic play.[94]

## Art and image

Within the snapshot modality of recording the lived life-as-art which I have mentioned above, McDiarmid frequently had himself photographed in front of his art work in a posed situation in which his own vestimentary performance resonates with the art work itself. These extant photographs taken as a whole make a study in self-created personal image production and provide an opportunity to examine resonances between the art work and the artist's embodied performative identities.

In a 1986 snapshot taken in West 12th St. Manhattan McDiarmid stands in front of his art work *Disco Kwilt* (1981) in a loose, lawless, available, and somewhat defiant pose. [Fig. 37.] The photograph is taken at the W12 St apartment of his lover Robert Cromwell and Cromwell's room-mate Roger Blackmon, perhaps before or after going out to the Paradise Garage dance club

[93] Owens. (1992). Op. cit., p183.

discussed in the previous chapter. Wearing a flashy, shiny outfit and aviator shades (which suggest after rather than before partying) with sculpted but unshaven facial hair suggesting late nights and serious pleasure, the artist bares his torso in a "languid lean" against the shiny reflective surface of the art work.[95] His placement in terms of space, context and time sets up performative resonances and connections between sex, underground dance clubbing, black music, hipness and night-time discussed in Chapter Three. There is, I suggest, a visual trope of 'blackness' being explored in the flashy, insolent, flaunting of the 'languid leaning' gesture and the clashing liveliness of the shiny willfully 'mismatched' fabrics.[96] McDiarmid thus appropriates the "inventive improvisational aesthetic" associated with African American style.[97] Robert Farris Thompson refers to the "deliberate clashing of high affect colours" and the use of patterns and colours which "argue with" each other as part of the West African visual aesthetic which made its way to the diaspora of the Americas.[98]

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[94] Mary-Anne Doane, quoted in Owens (1992). Op. cit., p201.
[95] Susan Bordo. (1999). *The Male Body : A New Look at Men in Public and in Private*. New York, Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, pp192.
[96] Susan Bordo discusses such 'colourful' dressing conventions in African American culture in Bordo (1999). Op. cit. pp209-210. McDiarmid is photographed here in an African-American household in Manhattan and, with his knowledge of such cultural nuances, would have been acutely aware of a resonance with African American taste.

[97] Kobena Mercer. "Black Hair, Style Politics" pp33-54 in New Formations 3 (1987) quoted in Carole Anne Tyler. (1997). "Passing: Narcissism, Identity and Difference". *Feminism Meets Queer Theory*. S. Weed. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press: 227-265, p241.
[98] Robert Farris Thompson. (1983). *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. New York, Random House pp209 and 217.

McDiarmid is here engaged in an appropriative aesthetic move consistent with his entire creative oeuvre. In this case he has allowed his own performative invested identity to be inflected by his African American community of choice in a re-signification of the meanings he adopts as part of 'the mix' embedded in his style. As Kobena Mercer says, such a "re-signification" as that engaged in by McDiarmid, might involve the "de-politicisation of a style" or, on the other hand, it could "simply be a different politicisation of it."[99] This need not of course be a gesture which is apolitical or conservative, as Mercer himself acknowledges, but can inaugurate another nomadic identity. In this complex, discerning range of vestimental choices made by McDiarmid one might ask as Kobena Mercer does: "So who, in this postmodern age of semiotic appropriation and counter-creolization, is imitating whom?"[100]

This posed snapshot portrait taken before (or after) a night out employs stance, gesture, outfit, grooming, attitude, setting and context to signal a conscious status ambivalence embracing the notion of 'hip' and 'cool' as articulated by the American Beats and derived, as I have a said, from the African American diaspora. The adoption of a self-consciously elaborated personal style was within this context both an assertion of superior taste (the dandyish assertion of an 'aristocracy' of talent rather than of birth.)

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[99] Mercer, (1987). Op. cit., p242.
[100] ibid.

while at the same time an eschewing of the very idea of good taste. McDiarmid, as I have said, admired the work, style and outlaw status of those Beats who were 'out' homosexuals - especially Burroughs and Ginsberg.

Derived from jazz and African American cultural tradition, hipness relates to the possession of the kind of insider knowledge Sedgwick refers to, as noted above, in relation to homosexual culture. McDiarmid was interested in the notion of 'hip' in all its manifestations - dress, music, attitude, sexiness - and his friends repeatedly refer to his 'knowingness' - his ability to know whatever it was that one needed to know to be 'in the know' - about music, film, style, literature, visual culture.[101] While being 'hip' implies insider knowledge, being 'cool' implies a composed nonchalance of the kind embodied in the photograph of McDiarmid we are discussing.[102] Robert Farris Thompson in an essay on the 'aesthetics of cool' notes that the notion of cool is an African American one derived from West Africa. As he puts it, an 'aesthetic of the cool', is a "deeply and complexly motivated, consciously artistic, interweaving of elements serious and pleasurable, of responsibility and play." As noted elsewhere in this thesis, McDiarmid was influenced by African American

[101] Jeffrey Stewart, personal communication with this writer, February 2001.
[102] Robert Farris Thompson. (1998). "An Aesthetic of Cool". *Uncontrollable Beauty: Towards a New Aesthetics"*. B. Beckley. New York, Allworth Press and School of Visual Arts: 371-394, p372.

expressive culture. This was manifested, as we have seen, in his personal demeanour and dress as well as in his work.

In a number of posed images of the artist taken in the early 1980s in New York he adopts various tropes of 'American-ness' linked to notions of hipness, coolness, sexual availability, 'hot' sexuality, and street-wise urban artfulness. These photographs make connections between the artist's imaging of himself and iconic elements of American clothing and masculine demeanour. Dress codes relating to American, including African-American, culture form part of a self presentation practice linked to his adoption of 'America' and 'American-ness' in his life and art, as we saw in Chapter Two in my discussion of the impact of the idea of 'America' on McDiarmid's art.

Levi 501's; Haynes T shirts; chinos; workers' boots; lumberjack shirts; 'long john' underwear; sweatshirts; motorcycle jackets; denim jackets; aviator jackets; baseball caps; 'Oxford' shirts; shiny showy fabrics; Brooks Brothers shirts; Native American derived garments and other aspects of North American 'cool' and stereotypic American male dress found their way into McDiarmid's wardrobe and performative self presentation. In the 1993 essay *A Short History of Facial Hair* McDiarmid noted that by the late 1970s the 'cool' thing for a gay man was to become American-identified in dress and demeanour, and take the 'clever

drugs,' rather than make the hopeless mistake of remaining 'precious', European-identified and reliant on a culture of alcohol consumption (and by implication also be hopelessly provincial):

> Queen's [in Australia] had travelled and acquired a taste for big city pleasures - we all turned into porn stars, we took lots of clever drugs, we dressed down and dirty for sex, and dressed up to go dancing - often confusing those sisters whose model for being gay was precious, alcoholic and European.[103]

The exploratory status ambivalence in which McDiarmid was engaged involved his attitude to sexuality, taste, style and visual aesthetics. It encapsulates his adventurous take on who to choose as friends and companions, and as style influences, in the shifting project of proposing identity within specific, and always changing, temporal and spatial contexts. "Of the numerous identity ambivalences in dress," writes Fred Davis, none can compare to "clothing's preoccupation with matters of sexual availability and erotic taste."[104]

From late 1979 and into 1980 McDiarmid worked formally as a gay male hustler through a male prostitution agency called Chelsea Men. His surviving journal entries for this period show that the clothes, images and *personae* he is able to provide for his prospective clients include "leather, denim, cowboy, construction worker, athlete, suit, jockstrap, boots."[105] McDiarmid notes in his journal note that his description for his file with the agency as

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[103] McDiarmid. (1993). Op. cit., p93.
[104] Davis. (1992). Op. cit., p81.

written down by Ron, the clerk at Chelsea Men, will be: "Lean, athletic, broad chest, light body hair, 7 inch cut."[106] These, now professional enactments of male typologies were for McDiarmid the occasion for a professional embodied exploration of some of the fetishes and typologies from the 1978 *Trade Enquiries* art works discussed in this chapter and in Chapter One. The artist's experience in acting out these stereotypical sexual personae fueled his ongoing creative engagement with gay male sexual typologies.

Sex, art and money are conceived as part of the same economy in *Flesh,* the film by Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey (1968-69) in which Joe Dellasandro plays the hustler.[107] Jennifer Doyle in a discussion of the demeanour of the hustler in this film draws attention to the importance of self-presentation as a reversal of the "passivity" assumed in prostitution. Adopting Gayatri Spivak's notion of "active-passivity", Doyle suggests that:

> In thinking of the hustler as "actively passive" we can read the hustler's affect not as a mask that hides or denies a true self but as a strategic gesture, as a pose that clears the space for his work, a pose that, indeed, is his work. [108]

McDiarmid, far from seeing himself as passive, or a victim, was in choosing the role of hustler, regarding it as part of his creative and sexual development. Writing about the exhibition *Difference: On*

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[105] David McDiarmid, journal entry, Monday September 23, 1979. McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.
[106] McDiarmid. (1979) Op. cit., Journal entry, Friday September 27, 1979.
[107] Jennifer Doyle. (1996). "Tricks of the Trade". *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*. J. Doyle. (Ed) Durham and London, Duke University Press: 191-209, p198.
[108] Doyle. (1996). Op. cit., p199.

*Representation and Sexuality* at the New Museum of Contemporary Art 1984-85, Craig Owens declares that sexuality may be regarded "as a pose … not in the sense of position or posture, but of imposition, imposture."[109] Thus "a certain calculated duplicity has increasingly come to be regarded as an indispensible deconstructive tool."[110] McDiarmid's work of shifting self presentation is such a "calculated duplicity" in the interest of destabilising gender and hetero-normativity while perversely expanding the artist's visual, sexual and creative arena.

In a photograph of the artist taken in the early 1980s at the gay male cruising location of the disused Hudson River piers in west-side lower Manhattan, McDiarmid adopts a pose coolly 'American' in the sense that he implies in the quote above where he describes how he and his peers had learned to "dress like porn star(s)" and dress "down and dirty for sex" [Fig. 38.]. In Levis, white cotton vest and cowboy belt, he leans into the broken masonry of the old pier with the 'languid lean' of the sexually available, backgrounded by a locale which speaks of drugs (*Rush Rules*), risk, excitement and the abjectly urban. This image resonates, in its location and mood, with photographs of David Wojnarowicz taken at these piers, frequently by Peter Hujar.[111] McDiarmid's outfit, grooming, demeanour and location for this

[109] Owens. (1992). Op. cit., p202.
[110] Owens. (1992). Op. cit., p201.

and other images of himself show an awareness that self-presentation and transitive identity-formation is located spatially and temporally. He contrived to have himself photographed in front of other apparently 'opportunistic' backgrounds which, together with the dress and demeanour of the artist himself, construct a proto-narrative setting which speaks of sexual availability and 'cool', 'hip' streetwise-ness. These 'narrative settings' include street graffiti, *Team Slut # 1* (1983) [Fig. 39.] a red neon sign *Hot Stuff* (1982) [Fig. 40.] or graffiti stating *Modern Art is Meretricious* [sic] *and Mostly Bad* (c1980) [Fig. 41.]. In this self-presentation McDiarmid is repeatedly playing with tropes of 'art' and 'artist' and 'queer sexual outlaw'. These inter-connected personae - artist and sexual outlaw - form both the material of his art work and his life-as-art embodied practice of self-presentation as 'artist' from the mid 1970s to the mid 1990s.

The 'mixing up' of the artist's personal appearance, his interest in fashion, and elements of received gay and other masculine imagery in his art work, constitutes both a consistent (but mobile and unstable) creative practice and a form of queer visual politics. It is characteristic of a multiple practice in which biography and self-portraiture play an important part within the artist's work. The mobile 'self-portraiture' of personal embodiment which I am discussing in this chapter forms a creative intersection with an

[111] David Wojnarowicz and Amy Scholder (1999). *In the Shadow of the American Dream*.

interest in 'self-portraiture' within the art work itself from the earliest exhibitions until, as we shall see in the next chapters, the end of the artist's career.

## Styles of resistance

There are of course historical precedents for unconventional dress by male and female artists and intellectuals. Elizabeth Wilson has written about bohemians and dandies and other manifestations of rebellious and revolutionary dress.[112] While McDiarmid may well have early identified himself as what would before his time have been generally understood as 'bohemian' - in the sense of transgressing bourgeois social, sexual and appearance norms - it is clear from what I have written above that he is more likely to have regarded his youthful dress patterns as 'hippy' than 'bohemian'. He may even have possibly from time to time identified himself as a 'dandy', in the sense of dressing and presenting himself as an artist in a way which *exceeded* the male artist dress norms of his time. However he would almost certainly have found both of these terms redundant, not resonating with the 'cool' contemporary hipness he both aspired to and articulated in his essay *A Short History of Facial Hair*. He is perhaps more likely to have considered himself, like Warhol, to be too 'swish' to be

New York, Grove Press, p168.
[112] Elizabeth Wilson. (1998). "Bohemian Dress and the Heroism of Everyday Life." *Fashion Theory* **2**.

regarded as an acceptable male artist by the mainstream art world.[113]

In a posed photograph, taken by Sydney photographer C. Moore Hardy in 1993 [Fig. 42.] the artist elegantly presents himself in contrasting tones of black and white standing in front of *Spiral* (c1992) his black and white adhesive Mylar mosaic work on board. This work, along with several others executed in the early 1990s, explored the idea of the 'vortex' as a metaphor of death and mortality[114]. In this self-composed portrait, the artist adopts the pose of a suave man-about-town, displaying the clean-cut elan of the model in the Australian Pelaco shirt advertisements of the 1950s, or Peter Stuyvesent cigarette advertisements from the 1960s.

Slightly leaning to his right, a burning cigarette in his left hand, with his weight supported on his right leg the artist adopts a studied but casual pose which allows the cut, hang and patterning of his clothing to be shown to best advantage. The clothing itself is a study in self-composition. The geometric pattern-on-pattern he has chosen; black and white checked jacket, differently checked waistcoat and spotted tie resonates with the intricate geometry of the painting behind him. The 'suave sophistication' of the pose is

[113] Thomas Waugh. (1996). "Cockteaser". pp51-78, in J. Doyle. (Ed.) Op. cit. p52.
[114] Two of these 'vortex' works are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art Heide, Melbourne and two are in private collections in Sydney. The artist also made a humorous 'flip-book' for artist Ron Smith entitled *Down the Drain with Dave* which shows a photographic image of McDiarmid optically 'disappearing' into a (death) vortex.

unsettled by the denim jeans which (as noted above) Christopher Breward suggests have come to signify "subversive intent", "difference and refusal."[115] With the (tonally) greying-at-the hairline, neatly-barbered hair, the clean-shaven-with-moustache face, the scholarly gold-rimmed glasses, McDiarmid's demeanour, meeting the eye of the camera with a direct self-possessed gaze, could be saying "You think you know who I am. But take a look. I will continue to puzzle and confound you".

*A Short History of Facial Hair* proposes the possibility of queer world-making through observation and description of the performative dress and adornment practices McDiarmid had noted, and himself participated in, in Melbourne, Sydney, San Francisco and New York from the 1970s to the 1990s. As I have suggested above, the construction of a mobile, discursive personal subjectivity can be construed as a form of queer resistance to gender, social and sexual norms. Camp, as Michael Bronski says, "contains the possibility of structuring and encouraging limitless imagination - to literally create a new reality - it is not only political but progressive."[116]

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[115] Breward, (2003). Op. cit., p111.
[116] Michael Bronski "Culture Clash the Making of a Gay Sensibility" (1984), quoted in, Van M. Cagle. (2000). "Trudging Through the Glitter Trenches," in Waldrep (2000). Op. cit, p138.

As already stated, the notion of bohemianism is insufficient to explain the range, context and codes of McDiarmid's dress and adornment. What takes place in his vestimentary practice is more than an 'arty' or 'bohemian' practice although it shares some characteristics with that tradition. There are however some resonances between McDiarmid's practice of self-adornment and themes in Elizabeth Wilson's discussion of dandyism and bohemia. Wilson traces the notion of dandy from Baudelaire's identification of the dandy as one of "the heroes of modern life."[117]

> The dandy was no mere clothes horse; on the contrary, he was always an outlaw …. Baudelaire further suggested that the dandy's project, the aesthetic creation of an original persona, was in itself a work of art: thus the role of dandy, as Baudelaire described and theorised it, involved the blurring of art and life that was characteristic of bohemia. [118]

This kind of 'blurring of art and life' is certainly characteristic of the documentary record of photographic 'self-portraiture' the artist left in his personal archive on his death. In particular those photographs in which he is photographed before his own art work appear to be examples of a blurring of older notions of dandyism – which was not necessarily homosexual - and contemporary notions of queer subjectivity.

In a self-posed photograph, again taken by professional photographer C. Moore Hardy in 1994, [Fig. 43.] the artist poses in front of the same black and white *Spiral* mosaic work as in the

[117] Wilson (1998). Op. cit., p 229.
[118] ibid.

previously discussed photograph. In this later photograph he wears a similar shiny outfit to the one he wore in the 'languid leaning' photograph with *Disco Kwilt* in New York in 1981. This time the artist employs in his self-composition for the portrait - referencing the *vanitas* tradition in portraiture - the prop of a plastic model of a human skull. The skull symbol, traditionally denoting the transitoriness of life, is chosen as a metaphor for his own impending death. Possibly, given McDiarmid's love of quotation and appropriation, the skull is also selected to create a resonance with Robert Mapplethorpe's 1988 *Self Portrait* in which the photographer's white face emerges from a black ground with his hand holding a walking cane surmounted by a silver skull handle.[119] In the case of this portrait of McDiarmid by C. Moore Hardy, the watch on the wrist of the hand which holds the skull (time-pieces also being part of the *vanitas* tradition) is clearly visible at half past one - presumably in the afternoon. The artist's direct and knowing gaze has the effect of queering what might otherwise be simply a sentimental gesture.

[119] It is important to note that in the 1980s and early 1990s, before the wider availability of 'new generation' AIDS drugs, AIDS was inevitably thought to eventually be a 'death sentence'. Although McDiarmid's AIDS-activist doctor procured for him the latest available pharmaceutical drugs, McDiarmid missed the timeframe in which the 'new generation' of drugs may have saved his life. Use of human skull imagery has subsequently become a common trope in contemporary art, for example in Ricky Swallow's work for the Australian Pavilion at the 2005 Venice Biennale.

## Conclusion

The dynamic intersection between the themes explored within McDiarmid's art work and the artist's embodied self-presentation – part of his art-as-life practice - was an important aspect of McDiarmid's creative practice from the beginning of his career as an artist in the 1970s. The ironic tropes of 'art' and 'artist' expressed in the self-made and designed taffeta evening chemise, mentioned in the opening of this chapter subsequently re-appear, both in the artist's work itself as a whole and in the artist's embodied practice of self-representation, until the end of his career. In the essay *A Short History of Facial Hair* of 1993 the artist created a conceptual vehicle to retrospectively explore the mobile performative self-presentation he had engaged in over a twenty year period of gay male political activism "from camp, to gay, to queer" as he put it. Employing photographs of himself taken over this twenty year period the artist proposes an ironic, perverse, and pleasurable performative dress and adornment practice as part of a creative politics of queer world- making.

I have argued here that McDiarmid's practices of self-presentation as queer artist are part of his art of camp resistance to hetero-normative cultural constraints and to simplistic notions of 'masculinity' and 'male homosexual' identity as well as of 'art' and 'artist'. McDiarmid used his studied personal appearance as an integral part of his creative practice forming a productive

political and creative intersection between self-presentation as artist and the concerns of the art itself. This intersection was always about a perverse artfulness and always about sexual and gender politics. McDiarmid's multiple creative practice is part of a distinctly queer post-modern art practice in which ironic distance and performative sexuality play a vital part.

Fig. 30 David McDiarmid wears KY chemise 1975 Fig. 31 McDiarmid wears KY T-shirt and holds *Self Portrait* 1976

Fig. 32 Promotional material for *Secret Love* Exhibition 1976

**DAVID McDIARMID**

David McDiarmid was born in Hobart in 1952 and embarked on a career of television and film. He studied this at Swinburn Tech. College and after completing the course became actively involved in the making of many successful films and travelled throughout the South Pacific. He now lives in Sydney and has called this show "Secret Love".


photograph: russell shakespeare

Fig. 33 McDiarmid *The Australia Weekend Review* November 1994

Fig. 34 McDiarmid lower Manhattan 1983


Fig. 35 *Facial Hair ... Trade Enquiries* 1978

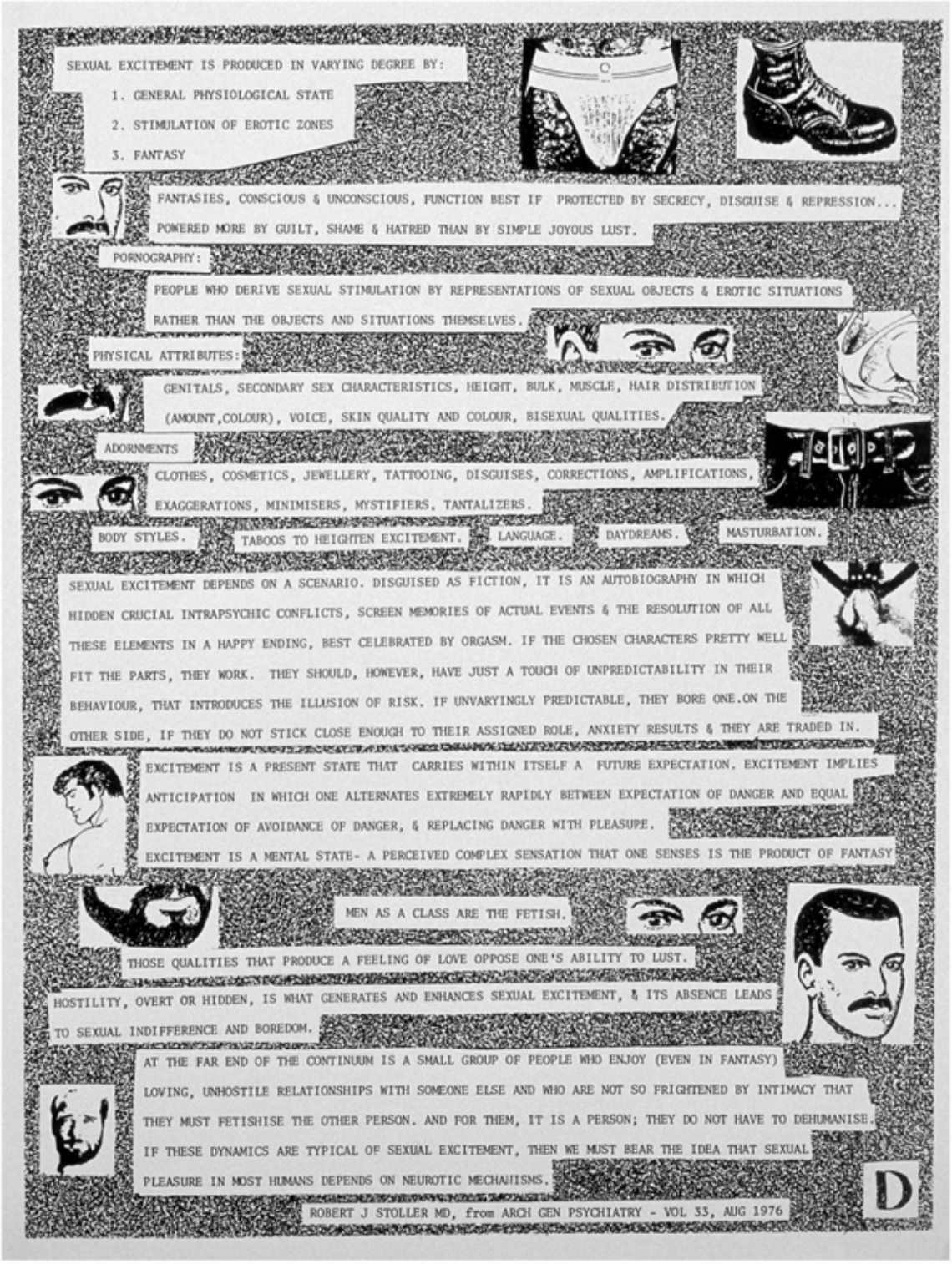



Fig. 36 *Sexual excitement is produced ... Trade Enquiries* 1978

Fig. 37 David McDiarmid West 12th Street New York 1986

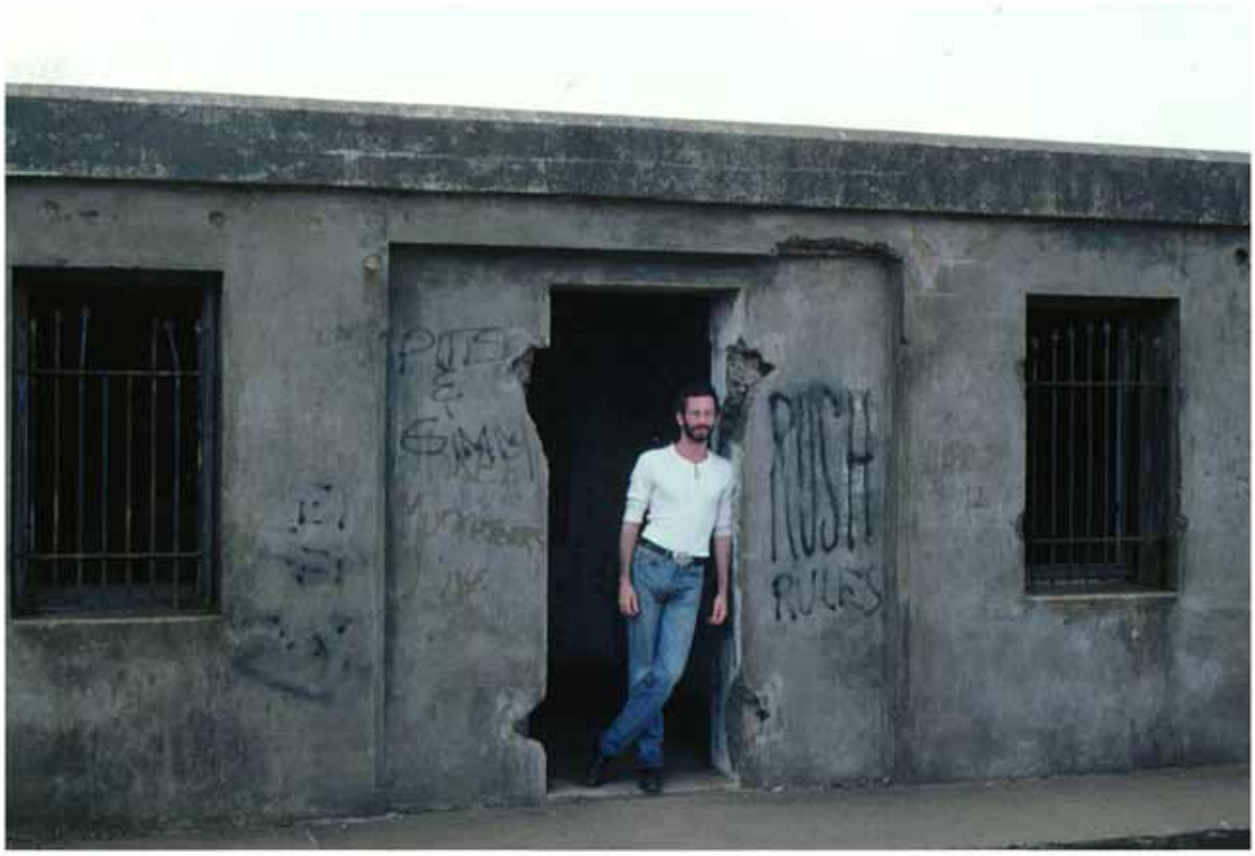


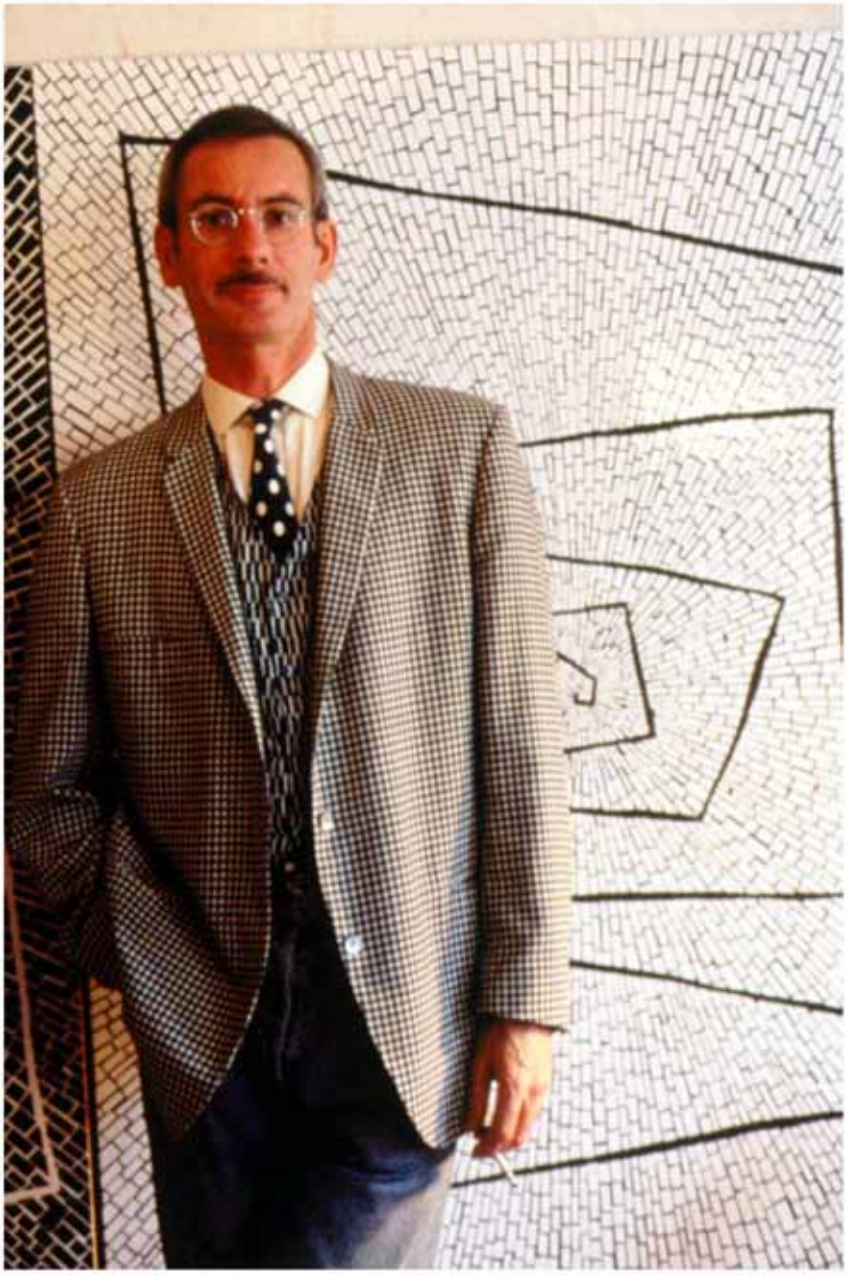

Fig. 38 David McDiarmid Hudson River piers West Manhattan c1983



Fig. McDiarmid 39 *Hot Stuff* New York 1981

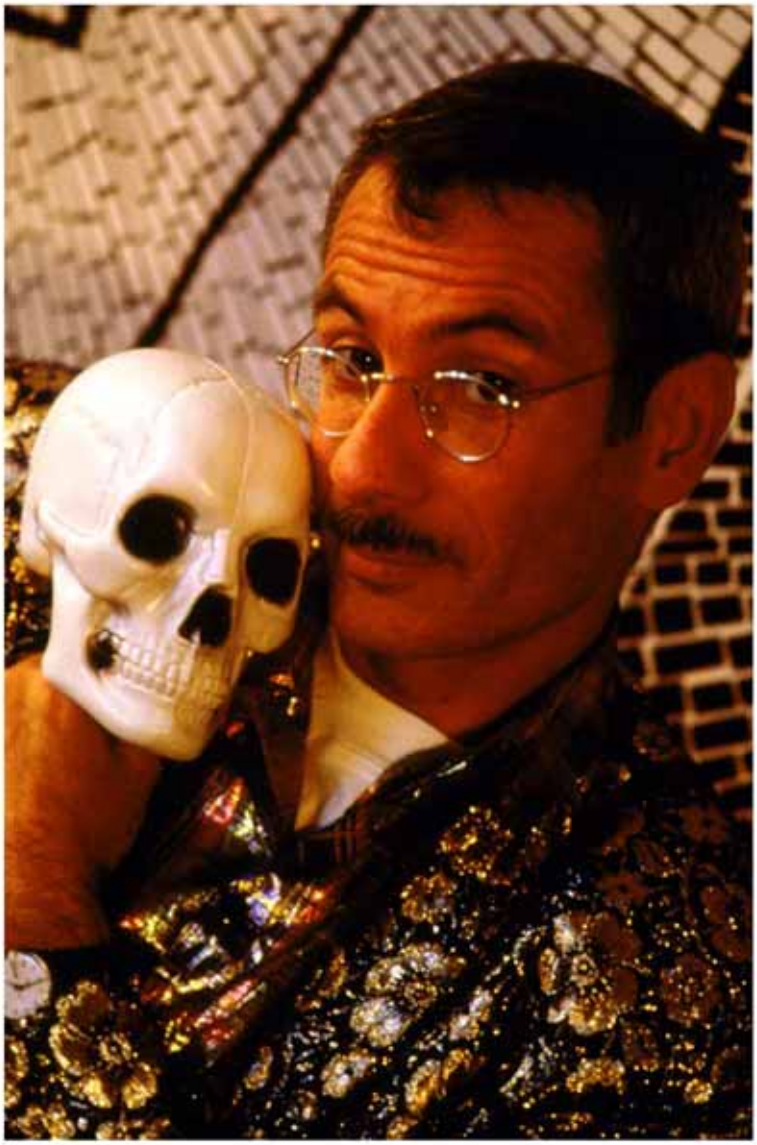
Fig. 40 McDiarmid *Team Slut* New York 1983

Fig. 41 McDiarmid *Modern Art is Meretricious and Mostly bad* New York c1985



photograph: c.moore hardy

Fig. 42 McDiarmid Sydney 1993



photograph: c.moore hardy

Fig. 43 McDiarmid Sydney 1994

# 5.
# *Toxic Queen*:[1]
# Art and AIDS 1983-1992

*Thus it was just as I approached middle age that the AIDS epidemic became the most determining fact of gay life in the United States. This meant that much of what had been most vital in my life - most adventurous, experimental, and exhilarating; most intimate, sustaining, and gratifying; most self-defining and self-extending - began slowly but surely to disappear*

Douglas Crimp: “Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction”, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics,* 2002, p14.

*Around 1983, I started painting images related to the [AIDS] epidemic. Those first images were sombre, sentimental and full of yearning. I often used a traditional Valentines Day message - "Hand and heart, shall never part, when this you see, remember me". My friends and fuck buddies were dying horrible deaths. I was convinced I would be dead within two years. I was calm and rational. I felt sad for two years. Then I had an HIV antibody test. I was positive.*

David McDiarmid: *A Short History of Facial Hair,* 1993, p94.

1. *Toxic Queen* is the title of David McDiarmid’s limited edition xeroxed 'artist's book', 1993.

Douglas Crimp's eloquent personal account, quoted below and on the previous page, of the impact of AIDS on his gay male social, political and sexual world provides a fitting opening to my discussion of David McDiarmid's AIDS-related work made between the mid 1980s and the early 1990s. Crimp is slightly older than McDiarmid who was born in 1952, but both were at the cutting edge of the sexual, political, intellectual and creative urban queer world-making in New York and elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s.

> Thus it was just as I approached middle age that the AIDS epidemic became the most determining fact of gay life in the United States. This meant that much of what had been most vital in my life - most adventurous, experimental, and exhilarating; most intimate, sustaining, and gratifying; most self-defining and self-extending - began slowly but surely to disappear.[2]

From the mid 1980s all of David McDiarmid's art work with the exception of a continuing output of fashion, interior and graphic design projects, relates to AIDS.[3] He was concerned, in the art work, produced in this period, with the impact of the virus on himself, his

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[2] Douglas Crimp. (2002). *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*. Cambridge Mass., The MIT Press, p14.

[3] McDiarmid's fashion and design output continued to be a source of income as it had since the 1970s. His hand-painted textiles continued to be used by Linda Jackson in her high fashion garments. Hand-painted suede garments, of McDiarmid's own design and fabrication, were sold through Flamingo Park boutique in Sydney and to other retail outlets and private clients in the United States and Australia. His painted suede garments also included some personal creative responses to AIDS. These were scarves and wraps made as gifts for friends. Examples of these are in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art at Heide, Melbourne. Other work produced in a non-gallery, non-AIDS context included painted interior floors and murals for friends and for himself. Two of these floors, one in Ivy Street, Chippendale and one in Crown Street, Surry Hills, both in Sydney, were documented in design and lifestyle magazines such as *Vogue Living,* Australia, November, 1993.

friends, his self-chosen community and on the politics of gay male life in the urban West. His work publicly responds to the condition of being himself HIV positive. He explicates in this work the sexual, medical, social and political experience of personally living with the disease and the response of both the gay male community and the wider community to the epidemic. The work both captures and, in some ways, transcends the distress and rage; pathos and humour of a situation in which large numbers of a single group (gay men), popularly characterised by their sexual identity and behaviour, were stricken by the kind of contagious illness that was widely considered in the advanced West to be confined to the past.[4]

The configuration of personal and political crisis faced by gay men in the face of the AIDS epidemic was in turn further determined by the re-assertion, especially in the United States but also in Australia and elsewhere, of traditional tendencies towards homophobia and erotophobia.[5] This all happened quite quickly at the same time as people were becoming ill and dying in frighteningly rapid time-frames and numbers:

> A world, a way of life faded, then vanished. Friends and lovers died, and so did acquaintances, public figures, and faces in the crowd that I had grown

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[4] Cindy Patton has described the advent of the AIDS crisis at a time when polio, cholera, bubonic plague, traditional venereal diseases, childhood illnesses and even influenza had become, in the West; "readily identifiable and quickly cured with minimal long term effect on the patient", Cindy Patton. (1985). *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS*. Boston, South End Press, pp19-20.
[5] Patton. (1985). Op cit., p131.

> accustomed to. People whose energies and resources had gone toward the invention of gay life either succumbed or turned their attention to dealing with death. Gay cultural institutions that had for twenty years been expanding began to shrink as they came under attack or came to be too much associated with illness and death.[6]

In this chapter I discuss aspects of McDiarmid's creative output from the mid 1980s to the mid 1990s, a period of intense productivity and political engagement galvanised by his apprehension of his own mortality and his political response to the public and media characterisation of the AIDS epidemic. The work produced during this period was made in varying techniques and contexts all of which are in some way connected to the cultural politics of AIDS. As well as producing work for solo and group gallery shows, the artist produced political posters and other agitprop work on AIDS and sexuality issues for gay community organisations.

The whole of McDiarmid's oeuvre, as will by now be evident, falls into a number of distinct styles, techniques and series. This is also true of the AIDS-related work from the mid 1980s onwards. The art work made for exhibition between the mid-1980s and the artist's death in 1995 includes the following suites of work: a series of gouache on paper drawings (1990-1991) collectively titled *Kiss of Light*; a series of holographic Mylar mosaic 'combine paintings' (1990-1991) also with the series title *Kiss of Light*; several suites of digital

[6] Crimp. (2002). Op. cit., p14.

laser print works – including the *Standard Bold Condensed* series (1992), the *Rainbow Aphorisms* (1993-95) including the giant rainbow "Q" produced for the tympanum of the Art Gallery of NSW which is discussed in the last chapter of this thesis, the *Ren and Stimpy Aphorisms* (1993-94), the *Gothic Leather Aphorisms* (1994-95) and the limited edition xeroxed 'artist's book' *Toxic Queen* (1992).

At the time if his death McDiarmid was preparing for a solo exhibition at Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne scheduled for late 1995. This computer-generated work was still in progress and stored on his Apple Macintosh computer when he died in May of that year. He had made two trips from Sydney to Melbourne, when he was already very ill in early 1995, to finalise details for this exhibition with gallerist Jan Minchin. His death precluded the completion of that show.[7]

McDiarmid's numerous AIDS-related 'community art' interventions include the safe-sex poster series commissioned by the AIDS Council of NSW (ACON) in 1992 which as a group are possibly his most widely recognised work.[8] Other specifically 'community' focused

[7] The work prepared for the proposed 1995 Tolarno Galleries exhibition is discussed in Chapter Six of this thesis.
[8] As I have mentioned in the Introduction, McDiarmid was engaged, throughout his career in what is often called in Australia a 'community arts' practice.

work of this period includes World AIDS Day posters, Candle Light Vigil and Safe Sex Ball posters and work on floats, ephemeral moveable sculptures, and other creations, relating to AIDS and resistance, for Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parades. He was appointed Art Director of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras in October 1988, the year it changed its name to include the word 'lesbian'.[9] He designed the posters and other graphics for Mardi Gras in 1986 (while living in New York), and 1988 and 1990 (while living in Sydney).

While Douglas Crimp's comments above note the impact of AIDS on gay male urban life, those of playwright and script-writer, David B. Feinberg give an inkling of the consuming internal impact which diagnosis with HIV might have on an artist in the early days of the epidemic and subsequently. It is worth remembering that diagnosis as HIV positive in the 1980s was, based on the evidence then to hand, certain to lead to rapid onset of illness and death. At the same time the illness was ideologically heavily over-determined, in the way that diagnosis with other fatal diseases, such as cancer for example, was not.

[9] This was a political move McDiarmid strongly supported unlike other culturally and politically active gay men he knew. Peter Tully for example was against the incorporation of the word 'lesbian' into the Mardi Gras title.

> No matter what I do or think, AIDS remains the subtext, … AIDS is always in the background, constant as the beating of my heart. If the virus itself hasn't yet passed my blood-brain barrier the idea of the virus has already poisoned my mind. I vacillate between periods of mild anxiety and total hysteria.[10]

According to McDiarmid's own account he lost his first friend to AIDS in 1982, while living in New York. Although he himself was not confirmed as HIV positive until 1986, after a reliable antibody test became available, he said later that he was sure he had already, by the early 1980s, contracted the virus.[11] His first creative response to the virus, made in New York in 1983, was tentative and muted. He says in a later interview, quoted below, that he was at that time unsure how to respond creatively to the situation, both emotionally and formally. The later AIDS-related work executed in Sydney after his return to live in that city in 1987 would eventually be highly resolved, politically uncompromising, radiant and perversely humorous.

## Early work in response to the AIDS epidemic

McDiarmid's first artistic response to AIDS was made before he himself was diagnosed but after, as he put it, (below) many of his "friends and fuck buddies were dying horrible deaths". In his 1993

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[10] David Feinberg. (1997). "Waiting for the End of the World". *Queer Representations: Reading Lives, Reading Cultures*. M. Duberman. New York and London, New York University Press: 319-321, p320.

chronicle, *A Short History of Facial Hair* written and performed, as I have noted in Chapter Four, in the context of AIDS cultural politics, McDiarmid recalled that:

> Around 1983, I started painting images related to the aids (sic) epidemic. Those first images were sombre, sentimental and full of yearning. I often used a traditional Valentines Day message - "Hand and heart, shall never part, when this you see, remember me". My friends and fuck buddies were dying horrible deaths. I was convinced I would be dead within two years. I was calm and rational. I felt sad for two years. Then I had an HIV antibody test. I was positive.[12]

The early work he was referring to includes a piece he annotated, in his 35mm slide documentation of the work, as 'First AIDS Work, 1983' [Figs. 44 and 45.]. Later the work, which is now in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art at Heide (Melbourne) was given the title *So I Walked Into The Theatre*, as if recalling one of the possible occasions on which the artist may have imagined he contracted the virus. McDiarmid referred later to his own preoccupation in the mid 1980s with what he called "the who, when and where of it [AIDS]."[13] He recalled a "straight porn theatre where men went to have sex with other men," as the place where he met his lover of six years, Robert Cromwell, who died of AIDS-related conditions in 1992.[14]

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[11] David McDiarmid. (1993). "A Short History of Facial Hair". *Sex in Public: Australian Sexual Cultures*. Jill J. Matthews. St Leonards NSW, Allen and Unwin: 91-96, p93.
[12] McDiarmid. (1993). Op. cit., p94.
[13] ibid.
[14] McDiarmid. (1993). Op. cit., p92.

This labelling of the 'First AIDS' work' with the title - *So I Walked Into The Theatre* - recalls Roland Barthes' reference to "the darkness of the cinema," as a site of clandestine bliss (*jouissance*).[15] For Barthes there is a potentiality in clandestine pleasure, such as that found in the darkness of the cinema, which offers the possibility of a utopian resistance (of pleasure) to mass culture and political power. I have mentioned above Barthes' conception of a radical political potential in a non-normative, non-narrative, non-coupled and non-reproductive sexuality. Robert K. Martin, writing on Barthes' notion of a radical [homo] sexuality, notes that sexual pleasure is a subversive force for Barthes because he claims it cannot be collectivised and turned to social ends.[16]

McDiarmid's 1983 'First AIDS work' includes the following handwritten text in red ink on satin-finished, floral-patterned fabric:

> *So I walked into the theatre and lit a cigarette. I looked around. Then I saw Tony. He lives in Brooklyn and has a nice beard and greasy hair. He didn't acknowledge me but I expected that. I'd already made it with him several times before and each time he pretended it was the first. He had even told me his name once, and that he lived with a lover. We always have great sex, but he doesn't want me to do anything but stand there. He has an incredible mouth. So we had sex today for the fifth time, after cruising each other for ten minutes. As we buttoned up I whispered in his ear - "We have to stop meeting like this." He smiled and laughed and squeezed my shoulder.*

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[15] Robert K. Martin, "Roland Barthes: Towards and Ecriture Gaie", in Bergman, David, Ed. (1993). *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. Amherst, Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Press, p290.
[16] ibid.

The resonance between McDiarmid's words in this art work and what Barthes has to say about the world of the dark rooms and their bliss is in the fact that they both celebrate a sexuality that eludes containment or enlistment for more ordered procreative purpose:

> Sexual taste, despite the power of collective images, remains stubbornly personal and perverse, a site for the realisation of desires that contradict the order outside the dark rooms [17]

It is characteristic of McDiarmid's creative engagement with his own sexual subjectivity that he would continue to be actively engaged through his art work in a pro-sex, queer world-making even in extreme emotional adversity as he and his community encountered the AIDS epidemic as a personal, political, social and sexual catastrophe.[18]

## Street art appropriated

As in all of McDiarmid's work, his visual eclecticism and appropriative impulses led him to draw for political and creative purpose on what surrounded him. In this case his inspiration was

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[17] ibid.

[18] The fact that the Western world first heard of AIDS as a gay male phenomenon in urban North America should not obscure the fact that gay men were not the only ones then or now to suffer from AIDS. Cindy Patton points out that 'junky pneumonia' in North American cities in the 1970s was later understood to be the earliest Western manifestation of AIDS. Cindy Patton. (1990). *Inventing AIDS*. New York and London, Routledge, pp27-28.

again the urban cruising world of gay male New York referred to in Chapter Two. While the mood and technique of this 'First AIDS Work' is ephemeral, its iconography is clearly influenced by the street memorials which began appearing in New York from the mid 1980s to commemorate those "young Latino and African American men and women who [had] died or [were] dying in epidemic proportions," from street violence, drugs and later AIDS.[19] Martha Cooper and Joseph Sciorra documented these memorials from the late 1980s and noted how when graffiti had been driven "from the subways by zealous municipal officials and dismissed as passe by international art dealers," it re-emerged on "brick and concrete surfaces of apartment buildings and playgrounds."[20] Cooper and Sciorra credit the Latin Catholic tradition of roadside memorials and the recently unveiled Vietnam Veterans' memorial in Washington (1982) as the inspiration for street memorials of this period by artists such as Chico, Tracy, Per, Nomad, Kazo, Solo and Paco.[21]

Symbolic elements, which appear in these street works, and their memorialising impulse, will be appropriated by McDiarmid in the 1983 work under discussion, the graffiti-based work of 1983-84 discussed in Chapter Two and also in his later figurative AIDS work,

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[19] Martha Cooper and Joseph Sciorra. (1994). *RIP: New York Spray Can Memorials*. London, Thames and Hudson, p7.
[20] Cooper and Sciorra. (1994). Op. cit., p9..

which suggests, among other readings, memorialising for the dead.[22] His interest in street art and graffiti did not end when it ceased to be fashionable. It was the inspiration, as we have seen, for the cloth-based work he did for the June 1984 Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery exhibition in Sydney and it continued to inspire his work into the 1990s. The condensed and coded messages and symbols of street art and graffiti were a compelling resource for the kind of communicative connections the artist would make in his work in response to AIDS. He spoke later about his ongoing admiration for street art in New York in the 1970s and 80s; "graffiti was the hottest thing going, hotter than any gallery. The whole thing about language and signs, it was just there."[23]

In many cases the New York street memorials have an explosive energy defying the finality of death and celebrating the ongoing vitality of the dead person's community, friends and family. The

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[21] Cooper and Sciorra. (1994). Op. cit., p8

[22] The NAMES Quilt project is also an obvious example of AIDS memorialising creative work. The Australian Memorial AIDS Quilt Project was established by Andrew Carter and Richard Johnson in September 1988 in emulation of the NAMES Quilt Project established in San Francisco in 1987. See, Gott, Ted, Ed. (1994). *Don't Leave Me This Way: Art In The Age of AIDS*. Canberra ACT, National Gallery of Australia and Thames and Hudson, p25. McDiarmid was ambivalent about the Quilt Project despite his being impressed by its scale and impact. By his own account he objected to what he saw as the sanitising of queerness which he perceived in the project's focus on the general community. He was however involved in creating quilt panels for Carlos Bonnici in 1989, Tony Guthrie in 1990 and Peter Tully in 1992 and he provided interviews and images for the 1994 publication about the Australian and New Zealand quilt projects. See Ponch Hawkes, Ainsley Yardley and Kim Langley. (1994). *Unfolding:The Story of the Australian and New Zealand AIDS Quilt Projects*. Melbourne, Victoria, McPhee Gribble and Penguin Books, pp112-115.

[23] David McDiarmid, interviewed by Carmela Baranowska, 1992, (no date). Transcript McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.

vibrancy of street memorials, their memorialising impulse, along with their sentimental, funerary and other symbolic visual codes also animate McDiarmid's AIDS-related work. In common with this street art McDiarmid would include in his work symbols such as crosses, hearts, flowers, scrolls, skulls, flames, ribbons, flowers, clouds, lists of names of the dead and images of the deceased.

The earliest of McDiarmid's work concerned with AIDS under discussion here [Figs. 44. and 45.] consists of fabric fragments stitched together in an irregular patchwork - a continuing engagement with feminine, domestic and craft traditions. The cloth fragments include the sexually-coded coloured handkerchiefs he had appropriated and quoted in the 1978 *Trade Enquiries* work and the *Man Quilt* of 1979. These fragments are abutted against a girlish aquamarine and white gingham which reads as an apparently sweetly 'feminine' trope in creative tension with the athletic, pornographic and 'street' imagery of men. A tension of a type which is often employed in McDiarmid's work.[24] This cloth ground is densely covered in a discordant, fragmentary encryption in acrylic paint, heat-transferred photographic images and black and red ink. Scribbled messages like

[24] Australian novelist, Fiona McGregor in her novel *Chemical Palace*, only half ironically lists, over two pages of fine type, all the sexual codes purportedly denoted by different bandannas and textiles. She attributes to gingham the role of signalling "Park Sex" within queer subculture ('top' if worn on the left, 'bottom' if worn on the right). See Fiona McGregor. (2002). *Chemical Palace*. Sydney, Allen and Unwin, p101.

those hastily scratched in a phone booth, subway train or on a city wall record the names and phone numbers of potential 'tricks' or the same 'dead friends and fuck buddies', as quoted above, with the strong Puerto Rican and generally Latin emphasis noted in Chapter Two. The men being memorialised here are: *Manuel, Luis, Sal, Rocco, Carlos, Larry, Julio, Felix, Dick, Joe, John, Tito, Bob, Frank, John, Miguel.*

The cloth is also overlaid with conventionalised heat-transfer 'embroidery' border patterns, the same embroidery patterns we noted in the 'disco' works in Chapter Three - Russian and Austrian embroidered border patterns according to the artist's own description.[25] Also superimposed in the jumbled iconography are scattered handprints. This handprint imagery recalls Gran Fury [AIDS activist art] Collective's bloody handprint juxtaposed with the headline "The government has blood on its hands."[26] The handprints also appeared, as we have seen, in the graffiti work of 1983-84 and will be used by the artist in later AIDS work in the 1990s. The

[25] David McDiarmid, in New York, to his mother, Vivien Weetman, in Melbourne,1981, (no date). Courtesy Vivien Weetman.

[26] The handprint and hand outline is a frequently employed trope in McDiarmid 's later AIDS work, such as the work entitled *Love and Hate* (1990). This work uses the words Love and Hate on the knuckles of the hand in a visual trope derived from biker and other transgressive urban subcultures. Imagery such as this is also used in the 1955, Charles Laughton directed, film *The Night of the Hunter* in which a character played by Robert Mitcham has his left hand knuckles tattooed with the word Hate and the right with Love. Other works such as *Hand and Heart* from McDiarmid's,1991, Syme Dodson Gallery show *Kiss of Light* use this Love and Hate inscription in a play with the kind of emotional binaries McDiarmid had engaged throughout his work, such as in *Self Portrait No. 2*, one of the 'graffiti bedsheet' paintings of 1983-84. In the Australian context the use of handprint imagery would also unavoidably be seen as appropriated iconography from Australian Aboriginal rock-art.

handprint icon is a device evoking embodied presence and agency, and also conversely absence, and recalls McDiarmid's adoption of the aphorism *Hand and Heart Shall Never Part, When This You See Remember Me,* referred to above in relation to his recollections about his work of the early 1980s.

Collaged heat-transfer images from gay male pornography, film stills and popular music graphics and from the artist's own previous work appear in a jumble of scratchings and appropriations in a creative mode reminiscent both of Hip Hop street aesthetics and contemporaneous London-based punk graphics. Sal Mineo re-appears in a still from *Rebel Without a Cause*, an image McDiarmid had used in the work entitled *Plato's End* for the *Secret Love* exhibition of 1976. In this 1983 work, an ink drawn face of Sal Mineo and the name SAL, in the same brush-applied ink, appear in the centre of the composition [Fig. 45.]. The affective tone of this memorialising work suggests resignation and sadness, uncharacteristic of McDiarmid's work. This is evoked, not just by the nostalgic appropriations but also by the unresolved technique, apparently provisional materials, the sense of a desultory work-in-progress and the muted 'dirty' hues; blue, brick-red, pink and brown. The work is less polished or contained than all of the artist's work before or since. It feels fragmentary, unfinished and melancholy.

## Coming out with AIDS

In contrast, the work concerned with AIDS produced subsequent to the artist's HIV+ diagnosis in 1986 appears to re-engage creatively and politically and uses the more resolved, even slick, surface-aware techniques he had employed in his art-making from the mid 1970s. This later work rediscovers a voice of political outrage and humour in contrast to the apparent resignation and introspection of the work described above. The work produced subsequent to the mid-1980s refers directly to the virus and the political response it engendered. The artist highlights his own sero-positive status as the starting point of his speaking position as an artist. This is in contrast to many HIV positive gay men prominent in the art world who suppressed their HIV status until it became impossible to do so. For example, Andy Warhol's "shame-filled failure in the face of AIDS" is remarked on by Jonathan Flatley.[27] And Allan Schwartzman notes that "the activist" in Australian art critic, resident in New York, Paul Taylor, "wasn't awakened until his own immune system began to break down noticeably."[28] It was only, according to Schwartzman, when it was impossible to dissemble, that Paul Taylor "celebrated subversives."[29]

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[27] Jonathan Flatley. (1996). "Warhol Gives Good Face". *Pop Out: Queer Warhol*. J. Doyle. Durham and London, Duke University Press: 101-133, p122.
[28] Allan Schwartzman. (no date). "Introduction". *After Andy: New York in the Eighties*. P. Taylor. Melbourne, Schwartz City and the Australia Council: 9-10, p10.
[29] Ibid.

McDiarmid himself refers, in a 1992 interview, to the horror expressed by his friend, artist Peter Tully, at the overt way in which he, McDiarmid, embraced AIDS as a subject for his work:

> My roommate Peter Tully was really upset … he couldn't cope with the sexually explicit nature, [of my work] especially when I started doing things like 'Dear Death' … he thought I was just going to make myself sick, he wouldn't talk to me about it and he just shunned it. It didn't bother me because I always tried to approach things in a very honest direct way. I'm into denial like everyone else but it doesn't work for me ... [30]

Like Tracey Emin's, McDiarmid's trademark in this period of his career became "honesty of self exposure."[31] Like Emin he endeavoured to "retain ownership" of his life by exposing his own experience and that of men like himself through "displays and interrogation of [his] life."[32] McDiarmid's overt embrace of a creative politics of AIDS can be understood as part of the broader context of AIDS cultural activism in the urban West by groups such as the Gran Fury Collective and ACT-UP.[33] He also admired other gay male artists such as David Wojnarowicz who had not retreated, creatively and

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[30] David McDiarmid. (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.
[31] Rosemary Betterton. (2002). "Why My Art is Not as Good as Me? Femininity, Feminism and 'Life-Drawing' in Tracey Emin's Art". *The Art of Tracey Emin*. M. Merck. London, Thames and Hudson: 22-39, p33.
[32] ibid.
[33] Ted Gott. (1994). "Where the Streets Have New Aims: The Poster in the Age of AIDS". *Don't Leave Me this Way: Art in the Age of AIDS*. T. Gott. Canberra, ACT, National Gallery of Australia and Thames and Hudson: pp187-211.

politically, in the face of AIDS and cited Wojnarowicz as his favourite artist at this time.[34]

## Return to Sydney 1987

Shortly after his HIV+ diagnosis McDiarmid made plans to return to Australia knowing that, as a somewhat impoverished artist and uninsured non-US-citizen, his chances of receiving adequate medical care in the United States were non-existent.[35] On his return to Sydney in December 1987 the artist took some time to find what he regarded as an appropriate creative voice for drastically changed times. He recalled in a 1992 interview that he had had difficulty finding a means and method to express what he wanted to be saying politically and personally in his work from the late 1980s:

> I wanted to express myself and respond to what was going on and I wanted to reach a gay male audience. I wanted to express very complex emotions but I didn't know how to do it.[36]

He remembered that he had felt at the time (the mid to late 1980s) that none of the methods, materials and styles he had hitherto used

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[34] David McDiarmid, Super 8 interview with Mandy Smith, April 1990. Transcript McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.
[35] McDiarmid had in fact been travelling back and forth to Australia in the mid 1980s. While still living in New York he visited Sydney for his Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery solo show *New Work by David McDiarmid* in June 1984 and he was in Sydney for a group show in which he was represented at The Print Source Gallery, in February 1985. He would continue to travel to and from New York after he resumed residence in Sydney in 1987.
[35] David McDiarmid. (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.
[35] ibid.
[36] David McDiarmid. (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.

were sufficient for the task of creating art appropriate to the circumstances in which he found himself. He felt that neither, what he called, his "abstract and pretty" work (such as the 'disco quilt' works I discussed in Chapter Three) nor his "complex and art literate" work (such as the overtly political work of the 1970s) were sufficient to the task.[37] As I will show, the artist found the creative means, after his return to Sydney, to encompass the two polarities he describes here and to invent new creative modalities to express the "very complex emotions" generated by the contemporary political, social and sexual climate.

McDiarmid's first dedicated AIDS intervention in a gallery context was the February 1991 solo exhibition *Kiss of Light* at Syme Dodson Gallery in Sydney.[38] For this exhibition, organised to coincide with the 1991 Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival, McDiarmid created figurative work, in both gouache on paper and reflective holographic foil mosaic, to evoke an eroticised, highly masculine embodiment of the AIDS-impacted gay male sexual subject. These male figures are the artist's creative vehicle for the carriage of a social,

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[37] ibid.

[38] Some of the work in the 1984 exhibition at Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery had approached the subject of AIDS including the 'First AIDS Work' referred to above. The 1991 Syme Dodson show was the first exhibition the artist devoted entirely and overtly to post-AIDS cultural politics.

personal and sexual affect in the context of the atmosphere and experience which had been generated by AIDS as both a political and a personal phenomenon.

## *Kiss of Light*, gouaches 1991

As part of his Syme Dodson Gallery solo exhibition, in February 1991, the artist created a series of simultaneously tender and assertive gouache on rag-paper figures of men. Rendered in pastel colours these eroticised male bodies carried the energetic gesture and demeanour of gay male pornography. The mobile muscular bodies were visibly 'marked' by symbols denoting both the virus itself and the social status accorded to the sero-positive gay man. With titles such as *Kiss of Death*; *Dear Death*; *KS Kiss*; *Yes/No*; *Maybe*; *Burroughs Wellcome*; *Money Bags*; *Tried and Tested; Friends of Friends; Love and Hate* and *Body Language* they forcefully and directly engaged the ambivalence, uncertainty, fear and rage which characterised the gay male community's response to AIDS. They encompass the mortality, physical and emotional suffering, pharmacological, medical and government politics and anti-erotic backlash he and his community were suddenly obliged to confront.

"The homosexual is stigmatised, but his (sic) stigma can be hidden." Esther Newton remarks.[39] Therefore, she says, it is "of crucial importance to homosexuals themselves and non-homosexuals whether the stigma is displayed so that one is immediately recognisable or is hidden so that he can pass to the world at large as a respectable citizen."[40] I have discussed, in Chapter One, how McDiarmid, at the beginning of his career, adopted and re-positioned homophobic labels as an affirmation of a self inscribed, mobile, [proto] queer identity. He continued with this strategy in his later work. He noted in an interview in 1993, "Its not a new thought, but the worst homophobes often are homosexuals."[41]

This became, from McDiarmid's viewpoint, a particularly pertinent observation as the AIDS crisis created, what he saw as, a homophobic and sex–phobic backlash both within and outside of the gay male community itself. The artist recalled that in 1988 on the occasion of the design development process for the 1989 Mardi Gras Parade, the use of the kinds of re-appropriated homophobic labels he had used in his work in the 1970s was regarded by at least one Mardi Gras board member as an "insult" to the gay community. The controversial words which McDiarmid, as parade artist, had proposed using as

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[39] Esther Newton. (1993). "Role Models". *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. D. Bergman. Amherst, Mass., University of Massachusetts Press: 39-53, p48.
[40] ibid.

"graffiti tags" at the head of the 1989 Mardi Gras parade included "poofter, lesso, faggot."[42] This, 1988 response, enraged McDiarmid who regarded some Mardi Gras board members as "middle level unimaginative bureaucrats … [furthering their public service] career ambitions."[43] While the reaction to the artist's creative proposal may appear surprising, coming from those responsible for overseeing the production of one of the world's largest gay street parades, it was perhaps, a measure, of both the post-AIDS homophobic backlash and the presciently radical import of McDiarmid's early work *Trade Enquiries* of ten years before, which as we have seen, also employed a queer re-appropriation of homophobic "injurious language".[44]

McDiarmid chose now to radically mark himself, through this post-AIDS work, as the doubly stigmatised HIV+ homosexual man. The work entitled *KS Kiss* [Fig. 47.] for example is a small (20X16 cm), poetic evocation in gently applied, purple pastel gouache of the male erotic body marked with the undisguisable stigmatic purple lesions of Karposi's Sarcoma (KS). KS was one of the first AIDS-related medical mysteries to confound the medical profession when young men began to contract what was previously a disease of elderly men.

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[41] David McDiarmid, interviewed by Paul Canning, March 1993. Transcript McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.
[42] ibid.
[43] ibid
[44] This is Judith Butler's term and is discussed above and in Chapter Six.

The figuration in this work evokes the complexity and ambivalence of an energetic sexuality marked by contagion - the 'kiss' that can give KS and the stigmata, not to mention death, that comes with active infection with HIVAIDS. In this series the artist again uses an appropriated version of Sidney Nolan's Ned Kelly mask, used in the previously discussed *Mr Man* of 1984. The square head will be used for much of the subsequent figurative work including the famous Safe Sex posters commissioned by the AIDS Council of NSW referred to above.[45] The style, content and technique of these 1992 posters was derived from the *Kiss of Light* gouaches which had been widely viewed in the context of the 1991 Mardi Gras festival. The ACON posters were commissioned shortly afterwards [Fig. 46.].

## Fear of sex

*Friends of Friends* [Fig. 48.] is a muscular, eroticised male figure in pastel orange gouache, robustly presenting a disclosed anal view and marked with the names of the friends, lovers and 'friends of friends' who have been affected by AIDS. This robust anal posture will re-occur in the work of this period as McDiarmid boldly asserts anal sexuality in a new, emphatically embodied, politics of AIDS. Douglas

[45] The Hindu *sauvistika* (anti-clockwise-facing points as opposed to the Nazi swastika which has the points facing clockwise) used to transect the stylised square head and contain the letters of the word 'KISS' was changed to intersecting straight lines for the ACON-commissioned posters derived from this work indicating the possibility of political sensitivity

Crimp, Leo Bersani, Cindy Patton, Lee Edelman, and others, argue that it is the fore-grounded anality of gay male sexuality, construed as what Crimp calls the "fantasised, phobic image of anal sodomy," which makes gay male sexuality so profoundly unacceptable to hetero-normalising sexual discourse.[46]

AIDS had the effect of reactivating stigmatisation of male homosexuality and energising a discourse in which "fear of male–male desires, and fear of anal penetration … collapsed gay sexuality and straight sexual anxiety under the sign of anal sex."[47] Bersani, in his essay "Is the Rectum a Grave?" notes that gay male anal sexuality can be construed, by hetero-normative discourse, as a "suicidal" sacrifice of masculinity in that the latter is understood to mean mastery in active penetrative sex.[48] This notion became conflated within popular AIDS discourse with the idea of the gay 'AIDS victim' as wilfully, 'suicidally' responsible for his own infection. Lee Edelman also traces how this view of gay male sexual subjectivity is implicated in the discourses around the 'causes' of AIDS. He analyses the operation of discourses that propose that, "the gay male anus as

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to the use of this provocative, culturally ambiguous symbol in the latter, more popularly promulgated work.

[46] Crimp. (2002). Op. cit., p279.

[47] Patton. (1990). Op. cit., p118.

[48] Leo Bersani. (1987). "Is the Rectum a Grave?", in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*. D. Crimp. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, MIT Press, and October: pp 196-222.

the site of pleasure gives birth to "AIDS" as a figuration of death"[49] Hetero-normative and homophobic discourse around AIDS at this time was not confined to straight society and ensured that gay men were attributed with a threefold contagion - social, medical and sexual - sometimes by themselves.

McDiarmid, not to be intimidated by what he saw as an anti-sex backlash, both inside and outside of the gay male community, remarked in his speech at the launch of his Safe-Sex posters at Sydney's Museum of Contemporary Art in April 1992:

> It is easy for us to forget that words and images which reflect self-acceptance and pro-gay sex values, especially in this Age of AIDS, are considered offensive and threatening to large sections of the public. Even within the gay community, to which these posters are addressed, there is fear of sex.[50]

McDiarmid asserts in the overtly sexual and political works, exhibited in the *Kiss of Light* exhibition, that safety cannot be arrived at by denying an engaged sexuality. Beyond a plea for equal rights, or an accommodation of the normative backlash, this was a powerful claim for a particular kind of queer subjectivity.

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[49] Lee Edelman. (1994). *Homographesis: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*. New York and London, Routledge, p99.

[50] David McDiarmid, speech at the launch of his, AIDS Council of NSW commissioned, Safe-Sex Posters at the Museum of Contemporary Art ,Sydney, April 7 1992. Transcript in the artist's estate.

## Embracing a self as 'low other'

McDiarmid's figures in the 1991 *Kiss of Light* works are 'marked' by AIDS while they are simultaneously robustly sexual and vibrant. They have not succumbed to victimhood or the desexualising and normalising impulses of the re-activated closet. The work is a defiant response, outing the flawed concept of "diseased pariah," and throwing it back into the face of its creators.[51]

In this AIDS related work McDiarmid willingly embraces himself as 'low other' making use of this as a way of troubling received notions of 'high' and 'low'. The *Kiss of Light* gouaches do this in a poetic figuration of a 'grotesque' AIDS body. The grotesque designates "the marginal, the low and the outside."[52] In elaborating the Bakhtinian notion of the 'low other', Peter Stallybrass and Allon White refer to received "cultural categories of high and low."[53] "The high/low opposition …[is] a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense making in European cultures," they say. A defiant embrace of low 'pariah' status as HIV+ gay man was a confidently queer move on McDiarmid's part which, as I have mentioned, unsettles received

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[51] *Diseased Pariah News* is the title of a satirical magazine, founded in the USA in 1990 for HIV positive people, which boldly embraced the stigma of AIDS and used black humour to face-off anti-sex attitudes and negative stereotypes attaching to AIDS and to homosexuality. McDiarmid appropriated the cover style of this and similar publications as a visual and political trope in a 1994 work he titled, *Plague Boy.*

[52] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. (1993). *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, p23.

[53] Stallybrass and White (1993). Op. cit., p3.

notions of 'high' and 'low'. An example as Stallybrass and White put it, of how the "low troubles the high".[54]

Acknowledging, and in the same stroke contesting, the socially constructed categories of the so called 'truth of AIDS' with its 'origins', 'victims', and 'carriers', McDiarmid forces the issue of the manner in which sexually-normative culture had re-animated 'diseased pariah' status for gay men in the face of the virus. Simon Watney, writing in 1988, coined the term "spectacle of AIDS" whereby the subject of AIDS is apparently 'correctly' identified. He says:

> This 'truth' of AIDS. resolutely insists that the point of emergence of the virus should be identified as its cause. Epidemiology is thus replaced by a moral etiology of disease that can only conceive homosexual desire within a medicalised metaphor of contagion. Reading AIDS as the outward and visible sign of an imagined depravity of will, AIDS commentary deftly returns us to a pre-modern version of the body, according to which heresy and sin are held to be scored in the features of their voluntary subjects by punitive and admonitary manifestations of disease.[55]

In elaborating the effect of Watney's 'spectacle of AIDS', Jonathan Flatley describes the construction of "the person with AIDS as someone with whom no one could possibly identify, the loss of whom need not be mourned."[56] The 'AIDS victim' is someone who is "withered, wrinkled, and loathsome of visage". This 'correct' reading of AIDS and its sufferers was one in which "any possibility of positive

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[54] ibid.
[55] Simon Watney. (1994). "The Spectacle of AIDS". *Practices of Freedom: Selected Writings on HIV/AIDS*. S. Watney. London, Rivers Oram Press: 48-61, p50.
[56] Flatley. (1996). Op. cit., p121.

sympathetic identification with actual people with AIDS is entirely expunged from the field of vision."[57]

McDiarmid was acutely aware of these ideological complexities in his own personal experience, that of his peers, as a receiver of social messages through print and electronic media and in the response of governments and medical authorities to AIDS and its sufferers. Watney noted that the 'correct' identification of the subject of AIDS relies on a notion of a 'general public' which does not include gay men. Watney describes this so-called 'general public' as "a homogeneous entity organised into discrete family units over and above all the fissures and conflicts of both the social and the psychic."[58] This idea of the 'general public' includes the 'innocent victims' of AIDS while 'homosexual subculture' is the location of the 'culpable' victims whose 'lifestyle', according to certain Christian and other conservative social groups and mainstream media, is the 'cause' of the disease. As Watney puts it, the 'truth' of AIDS, "resolutely insists that the point of emergence of the virus should be identified as its *cause*."[59]

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[57] Flatley. (1996). Op. cit., p122.
[58] Watney. (1994). Op. cit., p50.
[59] ibid.

## The *Kiss of Light* mosaics

McDiarmid manages, in the mosaic work he created for the *Kiss of Light* exhibition, to encompass these political complexities which AIDS gave rise to. The material used for the 1979-81 'disco quilt' works, the reflective holographic Mylar film, is again used to create works, (discussed in Chapter Three) the largest of which is 270 X 240 cms, which embody a powerful luminous affect. The reflective material is, in this case, carefully cut into tiny irregularly shaped pieces and 'tiled' into mosaic patterns inspired by the mosaics at the Hearst Castle at San Simeon and the Getty Villa in Malibu, both of which McDiarmid had visited and photographed on his first trip to California in 1977. Instead of selecting the bright jewel-like hues of the 1979-81 reflective Mylar works, McDiarmid chose Mylar samples which were comparatively 'monochromatic'. Although none of this material can finally be monochromatic, given that its embedded facets reflect all of the colours of the spectrum, the silvery tones of the less chromatic Mylar samples give the work a particular transcendent radiance. The degree of 'colour' in the these 1990-91 works is thus solely dependent on the kind and amount of light which shines upon its surfaces as well as the physical position of the viewer in relation to the work.

There is an element of transcendence created by the luminosity of these works with related religious and spiritual associations, referenced in the title of the series, *Kiss of Light*. The iconography, symbolism and luminous materiality of the work all reference both death and transcendence. The signs, symbols and text, derived from the memorialising street art and graffiti, referred to above, are inscribed onto the bodies, in these figurative works, as conveyers of a bold resistance to normalising views of gay male sexuality. They celebrate the gay male urban way of life threatened by AIDS itself and by the social and political responses to it.

In his introduction to his edited volume *Camp Grounds* David Bergman refers to a strategy he calls "The Liberace Effect" for countering homophobic abuse.[60] This "highly effective use of camp," he says, employs a strategy to become such an "exaggerated example of what you in fact are that people think you couldn't possibly be it."[61] The large reflective holographic Mylar mosaic works evoke a full-bodied figurative embrace of an eroticised excess. They resist, with the camp glamour of reflected rainbow-hued light - Bergman's "Liberace Effect" - the ideological onslaught which promulgated a

[60] David Bergman. (1993). "Introduction", *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality.* D. Bergman. Ed. (1993). Amherst, Massachusetts, University of Massachusetts Press, p14.
[61] ibid.

particular negative characterisation of gay men and AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s.

## Abjection and radiance

McDiarmid was at pains, as we know, to find a way to both reflect and transcend what he found within and around himself, in the context of AIDS, both inside and outside of his community. He found the creative means, in the employment of the tiny mosaic fragments of reflective holographic material, to create an effect of both proposing and reflecting a point of view. As Fabio Cleto says:

> The beams of light are produced [in a diamond] precisely because of the reflection of an outer source upon and through its multifaceted surface. The more numerous the facets, the more precious and exclusive the jewel (and camp is a '22 carats' jewel – not bad really).[62]

The works set up a visual dynamic which troubles ideas of restraint, sentimentality and bourgeois good taste in relation to sex, death and disease while offering a defiant resistance to neo-puritanism, and anti-sex self-oppression in the face of public responses to AIDS. The works' outrageously shiny, reflective surfaces surpass even the 'disco quilt' works for 'cheap tricks' and attention seeking while their vibrantly erect phalluses, and muscular eroticised torsos defy notions of a wrecked or prohibited gay male eroticism.

[62] Cleto. (1999). Op, cit., p6.

The myriad reflective planes held within the Mylar film are excessively multiplied by the artist's use of the tiny mosaic fragments thus creating a dazzling visual opulence. In *Body Language* [Fig. 50.] McDiarmid creates a figure of muscular erotic vigour defiantly exposing his anus with the palms of his large hands at the extremity of powerful arms and shoulders. The torso, arms and legs are inscribed, in a memorialising gesture, with the names of the artist's friends and lovers: *Tony, Carlos, Brian, Alan, Carl, Paul, Chris, Keith, and Herb*, who have already succumbed to the disease. This time the references are to those who have died in Australia. The name of AIDS is inscribed within the *sauvastika* symbol which is in turn tattooed onto the square head of the figure which appears to be turning obliquely towards the viewer. Also looking at the viewer from within the figure's disclosed anus is a holographic winking eye, resonating with Crimp's 1991 comment that "most people are afraid to look gay sex … square in the eye."[63]

## Self Portrait as HIV+

In a series of four works from the 1991 exhibition, jointly titled *Self Portrait 1 - 4*, [Fig. 51.] the artist posits a self-inscribed identity employing graphic symbols from street art and graffiti. One of these

[63] Crimp. (2002). Op. cit. p198.

four ‘self portraits’ is a decorative composition made up of overlaid graphic devices: a stylised Valentine's Day heart; the inverted triangle with which the Nazi's labelled and marked out homosexuals for forced labour, deportation and death and the graphic symbol for infinity. The four corners of the work are marked With H, I, V, +. This ‘self-portraiture’ is a graphic symbolic mapping of the artist’s socially-defined status. That is he is sero-positive, a gay man, an historically despised other and an affective sexual subject approaching death and infinity.

Another of these grouped self-portraits simply represents the artist with the square mask-like head he employed in all the figurative works for this exhibition, inscribed with the *sauvastika* and the inscription H, I, V, +. Another shows the square head with the *sauvastika* inserted and the letters A. I. D. S. being engulfed with flames. The fourth is a spiralling vortex denoting death, oblivion and infinity.

The reflective holographic Mylar mosaic works included in *Kiss of Light* have an uncanny sense of a self-aware pre-death authorship. Seen as a series, the works prefigure death, invite it - *Dear Death*

[Fig. 49.] - embrace it while simultaneously giving materiality to a robust, vibrant and luminous figuration. The artist fiercely occupies his chosen vantage point of imminent mortality with humour, irony, outrage and powerful erotic, even ecstatic, affect.[64] This resonates with Jacques Derrida's claim recorded in the collection of utterances and essays by Derrida on the several occasions of the deaths of writers and theorists who were close friends and colleagues. It is "as if they [the now dead writers] were living posthumously before their death as if they had found some way not simply to utter some prophetic intimation of their own death but enact [an] impossible speech act."[65]

McDiarmid finds the creative means of materialising resistance and also a transcendent luminosity in the holographic Mylar mosaic work from the *Kiss of Light* exhibition. Inscribing the signs of viral status onto a powerfully homo-erotic masculine figuration, these works celebrate and memorialise the ecstatic hedonism and eroticism of the gay male sexual revolution while proposing its continuation. This pre-death creative enactment is part of a fierce refusal to disembody, de-sexualise, de-politicise or disappear himself in the face of the

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[64] I have noted above that until the 'new generation' of AIDS drugs were available, from the mid 1990s, AIDS implied an inevitable and fairly rapid progress towards death. McDiarmid's death, despite the best efforts of his medical support team, in May 1995, only just predated these pharmaceutical developments.

[65] Jacques Derrida, (Eds Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas) (2001). *The Work of Mourning*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, p23.

*spectacle of AIDS.* It enacts, in the context of the artist's imminent mortality, Derrida's "impossible speech act".

The shamelessly showy material and technique used in these works, along with the iconography and gesture derived from street art and

pornography, exist within the tension of good taste/bad taste, high/low binaries of Western culture, discussed above, with which McDiarmid was concerned in all of his work. The luminous works with the "Uncanny potential of the superficially satisfying image," insist on a world of ecstatic queer sexuality and re-invoke the utopian ecstasies of the artist's and his community's recent past.[66]

The *Kiss of Light*, bodies are simultaneously marked with Stallybrass and White's 'low other' status and with resistance. The Mylar mosaic work is both superficial - immensely aware of its surface - and serious, visually entertaining and confronting, bitterly humorous and profound. These are multivalent works, being at once *memento mori*, sex-positive political statements and glittering re-invocations of the eroticised club and street world described in Chapter Three. They contain a deadly serious insistence on the sustainability of his world by an artist acutely aware of being cut off in his creative prime. They

also simultaneously evoke a transcendent embrace of this mortal fate. In the title of the series - *Kiss of Light*, in the works' marks of infinity and vortex, in their apparently affectionate welcome to *Dear Death* as well as in their visual incandescence and their apparently 'infinite'

reflective holographic depth, they are arguably an ecstatic approach to the boundless brink of death itself.

## *Toxic Queen* 1992

From 1992 McDiarmid's long term fascination with the juxtaposition of text and image translated into works which employed mainly or wholly text. Most of his work between 1992 and his death in May 1995 is computer-generated, commercially printed, text-based work. Both the camp sense of play and the fiercely resistant wit which had also animated the *Kiss of Light* works, was to appear in this work including the limited edition 'artist's book' *Toxic Queen* of 1992 [Fig. 52.].

I have noted that McDiarmid's creative practice was consistently an appropriative one. From his earliest collages and drawings of 1976; *The Australian Dream Lounge* of 1977; the *Trade Enquiries* suite of 1978; the 'quilts and embroideries' of 1979-81, the graffiti derived work of

65. Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend. (2002). "Eminent Domain: The Cultural Location of Tracey Emin". *The Art of Tracey Emin*. M. Merck. London, Thames and Hudson: 6-21, p13.

1983-84, and the pornography and street-art inflected work of the *Kiss of Light* series, he used pre-existing imagery, artefacts, iconography and cultural tropes. These are collected, adapted, cut, pasted and mixed into the work in a synthetic, cumulative communicative process. This kind of process is the basis of the *Toxic Queen* book.

While working as Art Director of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, McDiarmid had taken the opportunity to teach himself to use the Apple Macintosh computer in the Mardi Gras office. He was appointed Art Director for Mardi Gras in October 1988 and ceased employment in July 1989. He was subsequently re-employed by Mardi Gras from October 1989 to February 1990 to design the 1990 street parade. It was in this later period that he trained himself to use the computer (in addition to the approximately 60 hours per week which he, according to his own account, spent doing sculptural design and fabrication work, along with community volunteers, for the 1990 parade).[67]

"Mardi Gras bought a $22,000 computer and I fell in love with it," he recounted. "It's an Apple Mac 11CX - top of the line graphics machine

[67] David McDiarmid. (1990). Mandy Smith interview. Op. cit.

and it's a dream."[68] McDiarmid taught himself the skills in Photoshop and Illustrator which would provide the basis for the computer-generated, graphic and text-based work he produced for the remainder of his life. He also, in 1992, bought, with grant monies from the Australia Council, a colour photocopier for his studio and used it to create - using a fanzine aesthetic and technique - the limited edition xeroxed artist's book he titled *Toxic Queen*. This work appropriated pornography, film stills, newspaper and magazine clippings, advertisements and other published imagery which was juxtaposed with his own witty and ironic text - his self-invented faux 'news headlines' - to create bitingly humorous communicative barbs. The appropriated material, the artist regarded as a form of cultural archive he had collected over a twenty year period. He considered that this material, and the way that he re-positioned it, encapsulated a gay male aesthetico-sexual history of his time, from the 1970s to the 1990s.[69]

The graphic style and approach of *Toxic Queen*, while being inflected by Situationist and punk aesthetics, had evolved from the experience of designing the graphics, layout and text for the obituary for his friend Peter Tully who had died in Paris in August 1992 of AIDS-

[68] David McDiarmid in Sydney, letter to Paul Angelo in New York, March 1989 and October 1989. McDiarmid estate papers, State Library of NSW.
[69] David McDiarmid. (1993). Paul Canning interview. Op. cit.

related complications.[70] The obituary had been devised by McDiarmid, jointly with Jack Allen, Tully's friend and former roommate, and others.[71] Taking a full page of the Sydney gay newspaper *The Sydney Star Observer*, the obituary's bold Helvetica text read: *Moody Bitch Dies of AIDS* and was juxtaposed with a photograph of the dead artist.

The obituary, which McDiarmid reproduced in *Toxic Queen* [Fig. 53.], created a sensation and something of a cultural watershed between those who read it as a queer performative act and those who thought it was in bad taste. This debate fuelled McDiarmid's move into his subsequent biting text-based work, including *Toxic Queen* in 1992 and the *Rainbow Aphorisms* in 1993-94 which will be discussed in the last chapter.[72] In the introductory statement to *Toxic Queen*, entitled *What's the Point?* the artist writes the following:

> *My best friend died in August this year. He died crazy and far from home, from about five infections brought on by AIDS. We had lived and worked and travelled together for twenty years, after being boyfriends for two years. He died without leaving a will. Within three weeks of his death, his family cleaned out all of his belongings, leaving me with some old towels and sheets and sneakers, plus his medications, which they felt I could use.*
>
> *My ex-boyfriend in New York died in September this year, he died in hospital from heart failure brought on by AIDS. When I saw him in April this year he'd just had his leg amputated, brought on by an infection caused by a simple biopsy performed last year. He wanted to die but his mother felt she could cure his AIDS. These stories are not unique. Variations happen as you read this, all around the world. My work*

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[70] See Simon Ford. (2005). *The Situationist International: A User's Guide*. London, Black Dog Publishing; Matias Viegener. (1993). "Kinky Escapades, Bedroom Techniques, Unbridled Passion, and Secret Sex Codes", in Bergman. Op. cit., pp 234-258; Dunne, Stephen (1995). "Inter/erupt! Queer Zine Scene." *Media International Australia* **78**(Queer Media): pp53-68.
[71] David McDiarmid, interviewed in Hawkes, Yardley, Langley, (1994).Op. cit., pp112-113.
[72] David McDiarmid. (1992). Carmela Baranowska interview. Op. cit.

> [for this book and the exhibition which launched it] *grew out of anger, frustration , confusion – not my usual inspirations. But one quality that queers have always had is the ability to transform our "given" situations into something better, by any means necessary.*
>
> *These works are made by a queen who refuses to be bitter and twisted, tempting though it may be. I intend to keep on feeling angry and fabulous at the same time.*
>
> *And to Peter's sister, I spit on your face and sing "Love Sensation."*
>
> *David McDiarmid, October 1992, Sydney.*

*Toxic Queen* rages at the circumstances of these deaths (Peter Tully and Robert Cromwell), the responses of the families, the many other deaths, the acts of insult, elision and oppression AIDS brought back into the foreground for gay men, the ongoing-ness of the closet and the homophobic violence which AIDS renewed. The work appropriates contemporary Sydney newspaper clippings referring to "poofter bashing" and teen violence against gays, archival newspaper material relating to the 1978 Sydney gay rights demonstrations and the Stonewall events of 1969, A 1979 *New York Post* headline *Horde of Drag Queens Terrorising 42nd St*. and newspaper obituaries for friends, including Peter Tully's described above. The juxtaposition of image and text creates a fiercely insistent humour which celebrates gay liberationist history and defames hypocrisy. It embraces and celebrates a robust masculine eroticism. The best porn stars from McDiarmid's twenty year collection process appear, juxtaposed with text: *Yes* [Fig. 54.].

## Telling a queer story, perversely

This work acts as a kind of summing up in the manner of *A Short History of Facial Hair* of many of McDiarmid's sexual, political and aesthetic concerns of the period of his career. His growing awareness of, then recent, developments in queer theory also provided an additional impetus to create a new kind of queer political communication.[73] *Toxic Queen* is an example of McDiarmid's sense of responsibility for recording what he saw as the history of his [gay] times. He made this sense of responsibility clear in *A Short History of Facial Hair*. The cover of the cardboard box which encloses the book, *Toxic Queen,* establishes an up-front resonance with his whole oeuvre and the twenty year period he refers to above, by re-appropriating the man's head which he had used as the basis of the gay male appearance typologies he invented for *Trade Enquiries* in 1978. McDiarmid again draws on Sal Mineo in a page of *Toxic Queen* [Fig. 56.]. He employs photographic imagery of the star which he had previously used in *Plato's End* for the *Secret Love* exhibition of 1976 and his 'First AIDS Work' in 1983. The superimposed text, *Thrill Me Kill Me*, references the now lethal connection between sex and death

[73] McDiarmid was consistently interested in the intellectual, political and cultural context in which his own work might be located. Books in his collection at the time of his death included work by Simon Watney, Douglas Crimp and recent texts in cultural studies. He had heard Douglas Crimp speak at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney in 1995.

and renewed homophobic violence precipitated by the AIDS backlash.

Another page of *Toxic Queen* uses the image of a teenage muscle boy superimposed with the text: *8 Teens Kill Poofter Laugh in Court* [Fig. 58.] thus drawing attention to the renewed homophobic violence discussed above and the light penalties often imposed by courts for these crimes. The persistence of the closet is noted in the page with text stating: *Label Queen Weds Beard Makes Money*. This text is juxtaposed with the words *Calvin Klein* and superimposed over one of the, then iconic, Calvin Klein underwear print advertisements photographed by Bruce Weber, featuring in this case Marky Mark Wahlberg [Fig. 60.]. The whole of *Toxic Queen* is uncompromisingly eroto-pornographic. It is insistently un-closeted about intersections between AIDS, sex and death. The page stating *Funeral Rites Now Queer Special* has the text juxtaposed with a 'nine-inch' penis porn image shot in a bathroom [Fig. 57.]. The page *Dead Sex Fever AIDS Drug Thrill,* another simulated tabloid 'headline', has this text superimposed over a stolen Tom of Finland leather-clad erotic 'hero' [Fig.61.]. The work, *Toxic Queen,* as a whole celebrates the sexual diversity of the gay male urban world with appropriation of, for example, carefully collected promotional material for the Mineshaft backroom bar in New York, wryly placed advertisements for 'buttock

enhancing underwear' – superimposed with the text *Make Passers Buy* or a print ad for *Chicks with Dicks*.

The eroto-romantic sentimentality of earlier work is revisited in the pages of *Toxic Queen* which, like McDiarmid's work of the 1970s, uses sheet music and lines of popular songs replete with sexual yearning. The 1978-79, Gibbs Brothers song with the lines:

> *Here I Lie Lost in a Lonely Part of Town,*
> *Night and Day There's a Burning Down Inside of Me,*
> *Held in Time in a World of Tears I Slowly Drown,*
> *Burning Love With a Love That Wont Let Me Be.*

is overlaid on a print image of a huge penis clipped from the artist's porn collection [Fig. 55.].

Three pages of *Toxic Queen* celebrate the dance club Paradise Garage (discussed in Chapter Three) [Figs. 62. to 64.]. McDiarmid's club membership ID card for 1986-87 is superimposed on an image of rapper LL Cool J and text describing the kind of inter-cultural dance floor relationships at this club I have discussed in Chapter Three. An obituary for Paradise Garage DJ, Larry Levan, is superimposed over an appropriated Tom of Finland image of Black leather-men. A letter from a New York friend, Paul Angelo, describing the 1992 memorial service for Larry Levan is superimposed in pink text over a Black denim-and-cotton man, also appropriated from Tom of Finland.

This layered 'history' of heroes, ecstatic moments and gay male urban subcultural 'folklore' is executed in the ephemeral, 'messy', 'inaccurate' and 'irresponsible' aesthetic associated with punk fanzines. On the page of *Toxic Queen* emblazoned with*: Closet Chokes Norman Bates - Queer Theory* [Fig. 59.] the artist returns to the strategy he used in the 1976 *Secret Love* exhibition of 'outing' a gay Hollywood movie star Anthony Perkins, co-star in the role of murderer Norman Bates, in the Alfred Hitchcock directed film *Psycho* (1960). The 'fandom' celebrated here is not the popular Hollywood kind. The work is a celebration of a queer 'hero' in a cultural twist needing a special kind of 'insider knowledge' of the kind that Matias Viegener claims is associated with gay male subculture and its expression in the aesthetic he calls "camp punk". "Access to this [insider] knowledge is gained by knowing its code, the jargon, the symbolic values, and the allusions to obscure references" is how Viegener puts it in his discussion of camp punk.[74]

While *Toxic Queen* operates, as I have said, as a kind of 'summary' of McDiarmid's sexual, political and aesthetic history of the approximately twenty year period to that date, the politics embodied in this 1992 work is of a very different kind from the work of the 1970s. The earlier 'outing' of male Hollywood stars, for example, was

[74] Viegener. (1993). Op. cit., pp235.

an affirmative, even affectionate, 'Hey look who we are.' The optimistic 1976 work outing film stars, discussed in Chapter One, entitled *Secret Love* [Fig. 1.] executed in a decorative modality in pretty pink plastic is a fairly straight forward celebratory move in the context of a hopeful gay liberationist politics of 'honest' disclosure. The later *Toxic Queen* work is a much more overt act of queering. It doesn't 'ask' for anything either implicitly or explicitly, it simply manifests an insistently queer consciousness. 'Truthfulness' is seen in a much more complex and queerly inflected way than the 'honest disclosure' of 1970s identity politics. The work sites itself within a political and aesthetic terrain similar to that which characterises the disruptive and assertive directness of ACT-UP's queer cultural politics.

The text- and image-based work McDiarmid developed from the mid 1990s is derived from neither the liberal democratic rights- and identity-based politics of his art of the 1970s nor the optimistic camp performativity of some of his work of the early 1980s. The later work, of the early 1990s, was fiercely insistent on a confidently queer, *twisted*, (to refer again to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conception of queer quoted above) counter-hegemonic speaking position. McDiarmid insisted in this work that it was time straight society stopped pruriently looking at homosexual men and started listening

to them.[75] By this time the impact of AIDS, together with his continuously uncompromising sexual politics had created in this artist's work what would remain until his death a resolutely queer speaking position; that is one in which the *authoritative* nature of a complex, perverse queer subjectivity was assumed.

## Conclusion

The work McDiarmid produced in response to AIDS was a continuation of concerns he was engaged in through the work of his whole career. In a defiant insistence on the centrality and importance of his own sexual subjectivity he appropriated materials and ideas from gay male history and iconography and contemporary urban subcultures. The eclectic range of visual sources he employed included pornography, fanzines, advertising, graffiti and street memorials. He used commercial and 'cheap' materials not normally employed in art-making in a consistent love of the 'superficially satisfying image'. McDiarmid continued to mix up 'high' and 'low', humorous and serious and in this case, to use his own words from his introduction to *Toxic Queen* quoted above, 'bitter and twisted' and 'fabulous'.

[75] This resonates with Douglas Crimp's discussion of the politics of representing people with AIDS, see D. Crimp. (1992). "Portraits of People With AIDS". *Cultural Studies*. L. Grossberg, C. Nelson and P. A. Treichler. (1992) New York and London, Routledge, pp117-133.

What is new in McDiarmid's art discussed in this chapter is the work's unequivocally 'queer' speaking position. A semantic and syntactic *twisting* enables a perversely humorous linguistic excess which in turn is able to encompass an insistently queer experience and point of view. It was after all, as I have noted above, the conditions of the AIDs epidemic which had given birth to 'queer' out of a combination of the gay community's shocked realisation of the (shocking) reality of hegemonic culture's lack of care, the legacy of the gay liberation movement and urban hedonism. In the work we have been discussing McDiarmid emphatically surpasses the social democratic, equal-rights-based and identity-establishing politics of the work from the 1970s and early 1980s and shifts into a self-legitimated queer speaking position which itself *exceeds* received notions of legitimacy.

This 'surpassing' is expressed in a visual excess of colour and surface, itself in excess of anything the artist had hitherto produced. The recently developed digital generation and print technologies and digitally produced reflective commercial materials were contemporary techniques and materials which allowed the artist to metaphorically *exceed* the limits of the world which the AIDS epidemic had generated for gay men in the West. The modes and

techniques he devised to this end are able to support ranges in mood from cold rage to transcendent luminosity.


Fig. 44 *So I Walked Into The Theatre...* 1983

Fig. 45 *So I Walked Into The Theatre...* 1983 (detail)


Fig. 46 *Safe Lust* ACON Safe Sex Poster (1 of 5) 1992


Fig. 47 *KS Kiss* 1990

Fig. 48 *Friends of Friends* 1990

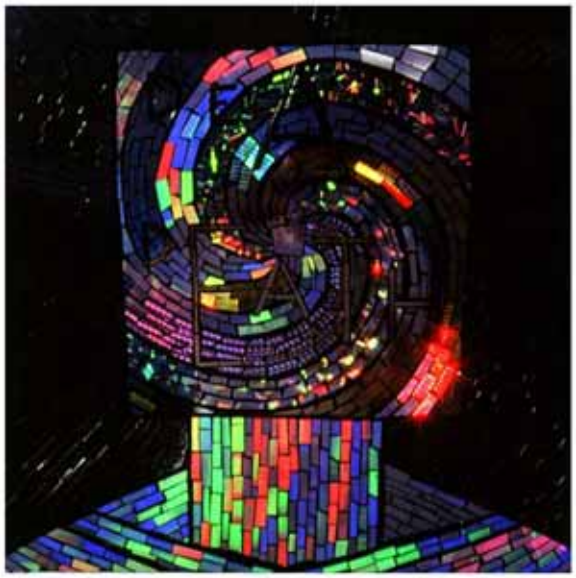



Fig. 49 *Dear Death* 1990

Fig. 50 *Body Language* 1990

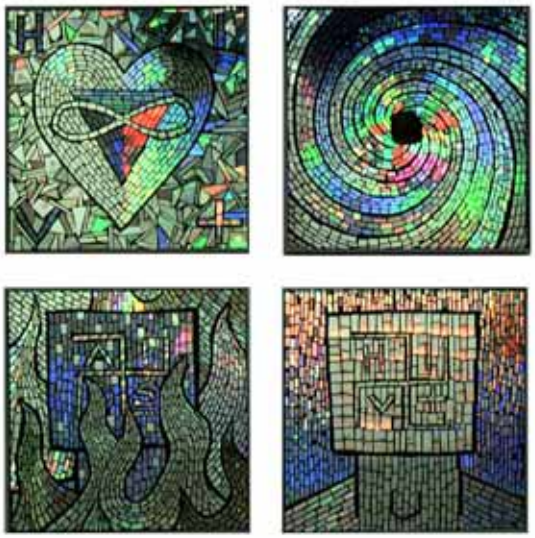


Fig. 51 *Self Portrait 1-4* 1990

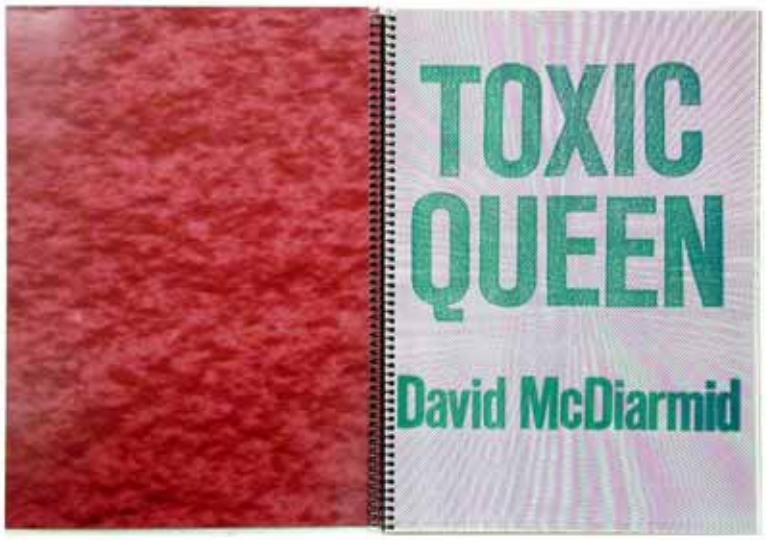
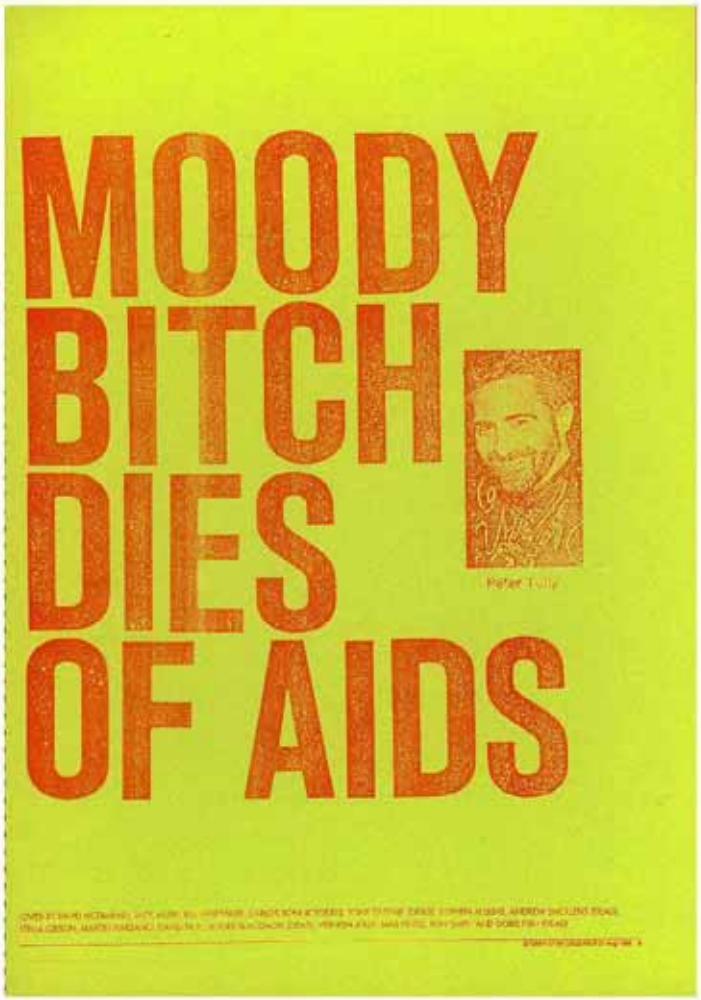
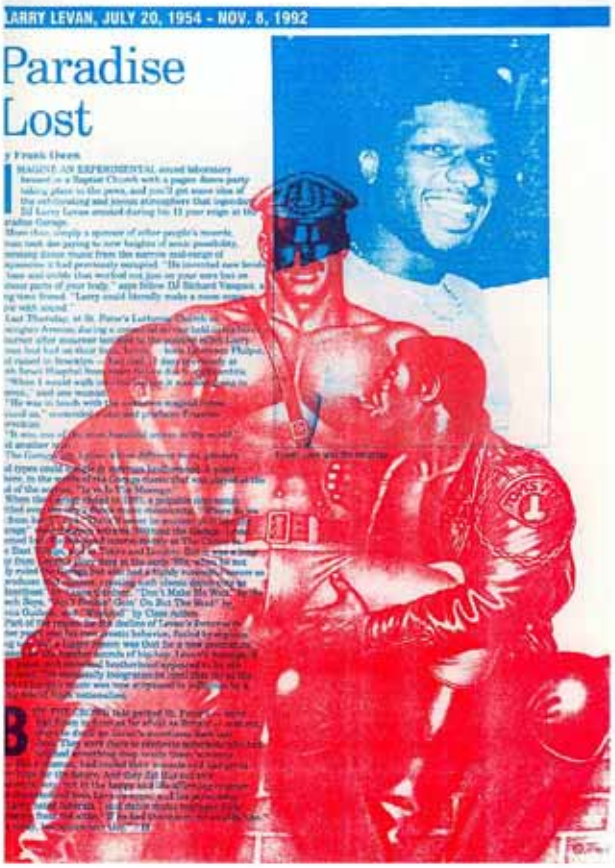


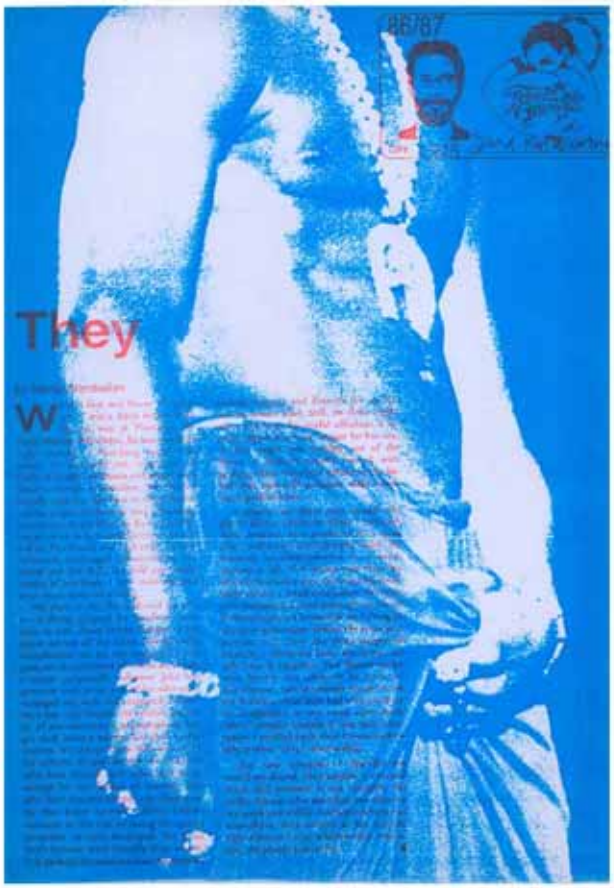

Fig. 52 *Toxic Queen* 1992 (cover)

Fig.53 *Moody Bitch ... Toxic Queen 1992*




Figs. 54-61 *Toxic Queen* 1992



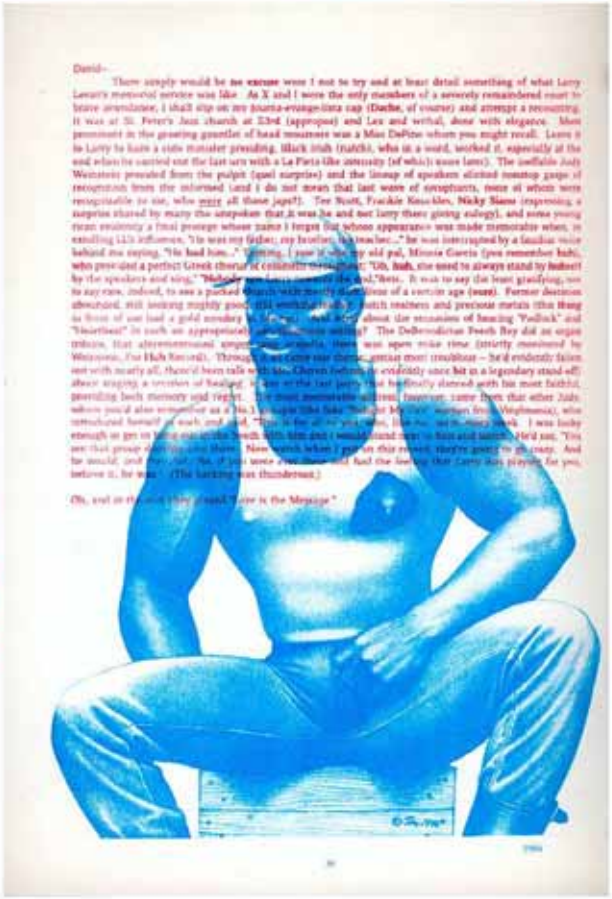



Fig. 62 *Paradise Lost Toxic Queen* 1992

Fig. 63 *Paradise Lost Toxic Queen* 1992

Fig. 64 *Paradise Lost Toxic Queen* 1992

# *6.*
# The Full Spectrum: *The Rainbow Aphorisms* and 'Final Work' 1993- 1995

*Resistance, in whatever form it may emerge, is always latent in, the legacy of, the present, which may stifle certain clear cut struggles but cannot contain the impulse to challenge it. The past provides the resources by which such challenges may be mounted, not directly, not through repeating what was successful in the past (there can be no repetition without an identity of circumstances, which in historical events, is never possible) – that is, not through learning – but through its capacity to disrupt the present with forces the present has not actualised.*

Elizabeth Grosz: *The Nick of Time*: *Politics, Evolution and the Untimely,* 2004, p 256

*I Want a Future That Lives Up to My Past*

David McDiarmid, *Rainbow Aphorism*, 1994

In this final chapter of the thesis, I discuss McDiarmid's last work, executed in the last two years of his life. The artist's late work, as I have mentioned in discussing the *Toxic Queen* book, consolidates all of the creative and political concerns of the artist's career. Working within the "sense of pre-death authorship," I mentioned in Chapter Five, McDiarmid continued to respond to and comment on his own mortality, the ongoing conditions of the AIDS epidemic and the twenty-year period of gay history which he saw as his time. The later work has a distilled aesthetic play as if all of the multi-dimensional means, methods and techniques the artist had employed throughout his career were now refined into the disciplined emphasis of (still excessive) rainbow hue and outrageous aphoristic text.

In February 1995, McDiarmid produced a large site-specific work for the tympanum of the neo-classical façade of the state Art Gallery of NSW [Fig. 65.]. Commissioned for the 1995 *Australian Perspecta*, a biennial survey exhibition of Australian contemporary art, the work was a large rainbow-streaked, rococo-styled "Q" laser-overprinted on a fuchsia vinyl ground and affixed to the architecture of the building. In this work, the artist seized the rhetorical opportunity to brand the art museum as queer. It forms part of the radical, queerly inflected, "rainbow" output, which was

produced up to the point of the artist's death in May 1995.[1] As the artist became more ill, the skill at computer graphics and digital printing he had developed from the late 1980s enabled an ongoing creative methodology which would sustain his artistic practice until his death. It allowed for continuous production of work in circumstances where day-to-day health issues impacted on mood and mobility. To be able to continue to create in the same space as domestic life (as opposed to a separate studio) meant a high level of productivity and creative energy until the end of the artist's life. Nothing needed to be lifted, or reached for. No materials needed to be brought in. The only outside production needed was the Canon laser copying service in downtown Sydney, a short walk or bus ride from his apartment in Campbell Street, Darlinghurst.

## The power of the aphorism

Language and text, as we have seen, was a strategy McDiarmid employed in his art from the 1970s onwards. His earliest work juxtaposed language and image. The graffiti work of 1984 was almost all text. We can recall for example the sharp verbally provocative titles of the work from the 1976 *Secret Love* exhibition. Linguistically coded and teasing titles from that show included,

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[1] The rainbow *"Q"* was also produced as a separate *Rainbow Aphorism* work, a multiple on paper. It was later reproduced as the cover of the "Queer Media" edition of *Media International Australia* **78** (Queer Media): 53-68, six months after the artist's death.

among others mentioned in Chapter One, *KY Country*, *Myra Lives, Trick No 7*. I have noted also, the use of concise epigrammatic titles in the 1991 *Kiss of Light* show; titles such as *Mighty Real*, *Body Language, Dear Death.* The book, *Toxic Queen* had advanced the emblematic use of language as a means to convey a whole meaning, frequently without much visual support. The fake 'headlines' such as *Funeral Rites Now, Queer Special*, or *AIDS Victim Dies Alone, Family Profits* simultaneously referenced the virulence of tabloid newspaper responses to AIDS and wittily encapsulated the artist's angry response to the conditions created by the epidemic.

Like Oscar Wilde, before him, McDiarmid was fascinated by the power of the aphorism to contain a whole conceptual and cultural world. He explored the concise performative capacity of the aphorism to convey an encoded meaning which needs a particular audience or sensibility for its completion.[2] He did this in the suite of text-based works produced in 1993-1994, known as the *Rainbow Aphorisms*. The first of the many examples of these were made for a Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Festival exhibition, entitled *Nine Artists*, at Barry Stern Galleries in Sydney, in February 1993.

[2] Shelton Waldrep. (2004). *The Aesthetics of Self-Invention: Oscar Wilde to David Bowie*. Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press. p9.

Computer-generated and laser-printed on bond paper these works consisted of bold, rainbow-hued, upper case, sans-serif text superimposed on a ground which is itself printed in full spectrum rainbow colours. The text shouts, provokes, teases and insinuates. Wry, ferocious and succinct witticisms leap at the viewer who must labour to 'make sense' of them. The viewer thus must 'complete' the meaning. That is, s/he must complete the meaning of the aphorism itself, reclaim its implicit cultural context and its related encoded values, along with the aesthetic value implied in the materiality of the work itself as a rainbow hued, commercially printed, serial, ephemeral object.

McDiarmid's late art work employs, among other strategies, what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as a *"grammatica jocosa". Grammatica jocosa* is the term Bakhtin uses to describe a play in which language is used to reveal "erotic and obscene or merely materially satisfying counter-meaning." This counter-meaning enables a "plural, unfixed, comic view of the world."[3] McDiarmid was concerned, as we have seen in all of his work, with the creation of a counter-world and counter-meaning. This was an unfolding, 'becoming,' self-created world and meaning which would hopefully more closely resemble his insistently queer

[3] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White. (1993). *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, New York, Cornell University Press, p11.

imaginary. A reality, which would cleverly undo, or at least unsettle, the hegemonic reach of normative thinking.

'Sense making', in relation to these linguistically grounded works, will of course depend on the 'eye' (or the ear) and the cultural position of the beholder, who will 'read' its meanings according to that position. Some will be confounded, insulted and annoyed. Others 'hip' enough to be 'in the know', in the sense we have discussed above, will have their cultural kudos, and perhaps sense of community (always a concern of this artist) affirmed. McDiarmid returns in this suite of work to the encoded referencing of gay male sensibility and cultural specificity he had employed from his first exhibitions *Secret Love* and *Trade Enquiries* and, as we have also seen, in his *Toxic Queen* work.

However the visuality of the *Rainbow Aphorisms,* like the *Kiss of Light* mosaics, shamelessly works off the "power of the superficially satisfying image" as Many Merck and Chris Townsend put it. [4] The play with what might be misinterpreted as a facile and childlike aesthetic of pure full-spectrum colour is the final distillation of the artist's career-long interest in the decorative. In one sense, nothing could be more 'simple' than the

[4] Mandy Merck and Chris Townsend. (2002). *The Art of Tracey Emin*. London, p13.

full spectrum, especially when computer generated. You simply include the chromatic 'everything' which the graphics program allows.

## A camp trickster

Within this 'simple' solution however is all of the history visual culture, and of colour and decoration, which the artist had been interested in for the duration of his career. It is another example of the employment of the superficially visually pleasurable that the artist had worked on all his creative life. While the *Rainbow Aphorism* work delights and entertains with its opulent, apparently childlike colour, it also plays a 'trickster' game of coded textual meaning, saving the greatest rewards, as I have said, for those who 'get it'. The work *Honey, Have You Got It?* [Fig. 66.] for example, refers in an in-group way to the AIDS virus but also equally to the simple enquiry – Do you get it? In other words are you hip to what's going on?

I referred in the Introduction to the idea of the trickster figure as one of the animators of McDiarmid's creative vision. Originating in both Western cultural traditions and as part of the African American lineage of hip, the trickster is the outsider who teases, speaks in code, unsettles moral certainties, and generally disrupts, partly through "working the gap between words and their

meanings." This playful and perverse character "undermine[s] all the positions on the board."[5] Tricksters don't merely work in a social democratic way towards a simplistically 'better world'. They undo the certainties of the current world including certainties about who's on top and who's not and what is understood to be 'right', and what is understood as 'wrong'. They are individualists who provocatively poke at culturally received myths. The trickster's revelations, like camp humour and irony, first circulate among the initiated "the enlightened few."[6]

McDiarmid's *Rainbow Aphorisms* employ an encoded camp and hip sensibility to convey ferociously witty messages encased in sugary colours. The main playground for tricksters, as John Leland remarks, is language, as McDiarmid shows in work such as *Fierce Bitch Seeks Future Ex- Husband* [Fig. 67.]. These works have the overloaded, overdone language which 'shades' its opponents in the manner of the divas in *Paris is Burning* (as McDiarmid remarks on in his *A Short History of Facial Hair*), who "read and shade their sisters into oblivion" or in the manner of the competitive intensity of language and attitude in Hip Hop lyrics and performance.[7] The confident queer excess and competitive thrusting edge of the *Rainbow Aphorisms* 'shade' the works'

[5] John Leland. (2004). *Hip, The History*. New York, Ecco and Harper Collins. pp162-163.
[6] Leland. (2004). Op cit. pp164-166.

viewers with the intensity of both their language and their visuality.

The works in this series juxtapose the trivial and the deeply serious, an emblematic ploy of camp. The 'cheap trick' of unrestrained rainbow colour along with outrageous humour and deep import in the work *Darling You Make Me Sick* [Fig. 68.] echoes Jack Babuscio's account of the politically communicative potential of camp. As Babuscio puts it, camp through its style, aestheticism, humour, and theatricality, allows us to witness 'serious' issues with temporary detachment. He claims that one of the strategies of camp is a "bitter-wit" which is a means of dealing with a hostile environment and creating a more promising reality.

> Society says to gays (and to all stigmatised groups) that we are members of the wider community; we are subject to the same laws as "normals"; we must pay our taxes and so on; we are in short, "just like everybody else". On the other hand, we are not received into society on equal terms; indeed we are told that we are unacceptably "different" in ways that are absolutely fundamental to our sense of self and social identity. In other words the message conveyed to us by society is highly contradictory: we are just like everyone else, and yet … we are not. It is this basic contradiction, this joke, that has traditionally been our destiny.[8]

Not surprisingly, as Babuscio says, this contradiction has produced particular perceptions of the world. It produces a knowingness about the hegemonic world's lack of receptiveness to

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[7] David McDiarmid. (1993). "A Short History of Facial Hair", in *Sex In Public: Australian Sexual Cultures*, Jill J. Matthews Ed, St Leonards, NSW, Allen and Unwin: 91-96, p96.
[8] Jack Babuscio. (1993). "Camp and the Gay Sensibility". *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. D. Bergman. Amherst, Mass., University of Massachusetts Press: 19-37, p27.

alterity and other forms of complexity. It produces particular expression in artistic efforts, like McDiarmid's. "Like other oppressed groups gays have developed skills out of … the need to concentrate on strategy when the rules are stacked against us," says Babuscio.[9] McDiarmid's *Rainbow Aphorisms* show an acute awareness of the way the world and its rules are stacked. He is one of those artists who, as Babuscio puts it, "are sufficiently sensitive… [to] develop a commensurate ability to isolate, dissect, and bring into vivid focus the destructiveness and hypocrisy of others."[10]

The *Rainbow Aphorisms* cut straight to the point when it comes to revealing and 'outing' the not-so-hidden animosity straight society holds for queers. The work *When I Want Your Opinion I'll Give It To You* [Fig. 69.] asserts a perverse speaking position in opposition to the normative whose centrality it simultaneously exposes and unseats. It turns that centrality against itself, syntactically and semantically shifting the subject/object positions of this riposte. We, as viewers, labour to complete the work's meaning, in the manner I have outlined above in the discussion of the power of the aphorism and Bakhtin's *Grammatica jocosa*. As we do this we become aware of an implicit homophobic utterance which has provoked the work - an utterance which has (implicitly)

[9] ibid.

provoked the riposte which is the work. We cannot decipher it – complete its meaning - unless we place ourselves in the viewing (and hearing) position of its creator. That is, unless we can accept the import of what Babuscio is saying above regarding normative culture.

## *Injurious language*

The bold rainbow epithets both repudiate, and at the same time engage in an embrace of, the "injurious language" of homophobia. The work *That's Miss Poofter To You Arsehole* [Fig. 70.] reasserts a confident queer speaking position by inverting a common insult. This move unsettles, repudiates and potentially overcomes the kind of injurious, labelling insult which may have been casually hurled, perhaps from a passing car, at a gay man by a homophobic speaker. Judith Butler writes on how "injurious speech" which "derogates and demeans" the person to whom it is addressed, can be "returned" to its speaker in a different form. She suggests that it can be cited against its originary purposes and perform a "reversal of effects."[11] In a discussion of language, power and agency, Butler proposes the possibility that in the citing of injurious language against its "originary purposes" the threatening speech act has a "future it never intended."

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[10] ibid.

> The political possibility of reworking the force of the speech act against the force of injury consists in misappropriating the force of speech from those prior contexts. The language that counters the injuries of speech, however, must repeat those injuries without precisely re-enacting them. Such a strategy affirms that hate speech does not destroy the agency required for a critical response.[12]

As Butler says, it's not that the word loses its power to injure but that we are given the opportunity to begin to ask the question: "How does a word become the site for the power to injure?" She claims that the "de-contextualising and re-contextualising [of] such terms through radical acts of public misappropriation," (such as is employed in the *Rainbow Aphorisms*) can create the possibility of agency for the injured subject.[13]

In this de-contextualising and re-contextualising of terms of abuse through 'radical acts of public misappropriation', McDiarmid is engaging in a strategy he has employed for over twenty years in an ongoing creative [proto]queer and queer world-making. He refuses to indulge (by crediting it with legitimacy) straight society's norms and aspirations. In this way he is performing what Butler calls a "felicitous performative act". That is an act, as Butler suggests, from which something follows - a changed view of legitimating social norms, an adoption of a changed,

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[11] Judith Butler. (1997). *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative.* New York and London, Routledge, p14.
[12] Butler. (1997). Op. cit. pp40-41.
[13] Butler. (1997). Op. cit. p14.

reappropriated meaning for injurious terms such as 'poofter' or 'queer'.[14]

The *Rainbow Aphorisms* employ camp linguistic strategies which include, as Karl Keller notes, "the invention of awkward intensities in syntax and metaphor," an extravagance of style and a tone of voice which is "too much" and which entertains with its "flamboyant playfulness." The work, *Its My Party And I'll Die If I Want To* [Fig. 71.] fully intends its excesses. It intends, to use Keller's terms, its "erratic range, its arbitrary intensities." The work engages in what Keller calls a form of heroics; that is a 'heroics' of "the archaic autonomous personality."[15] In other words, in this series of work, McDiarmid establishes a witty, bitter, ironic and excessive speaking position which acknowledges, but refuses to give credence to, a reality outside of its 'autonomous cultural heroics'.

This linguistic twisting and unseating of subject/object power relations resonates with the African American "sport of ritual insult" known as 'the dozens'. The Civil Rights activist H. Rap Brown was known as a skilled exponent of this linguistic signifying form whose virulent energy is encapsulated in the title of

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[14] Butler. (1997). Op. cit. p100.
[15] Karl Keller. (1993). "Walt Whitman Camping". *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. D. Bergman. Amherst, Mass., University of Massachusetts Press: 113-120.

his 1969 autobiography, *Die Nigger, Die*.[16] This wilful troubling of meaning (and of liberal democratic notions of 'tolerance') confuses the viewer, reader or listener unless s/he is 'in the know' in the hip or camp sense I have previously discussed. McDiarmid's work *Hairy Dyke Boy Seeks Shave From Faggot* [Fig. 72.] uses the kind of relentlessly non-complying, outrageous language of Rap Brown's *Die Nigger Die,* defying normative linguistic usage - in this case another faux tabloid 'headline' (or entry in a 'personals' section of a gay newspaper) similar to those created in *Toxic Queen* - while making a humorous, camp outrage of it.

## Beyond blood

The work, *The Family Tree Stops Here Darling* [Fig. 73.] refuses the normative, biologically-reproductive, narrative trajectory which gives both power and legitimacy to heterosexual subjectivity. As Roland Barthes claims, "narrative form" and "family structure" are one. This work brings a stop to that narrative form ends here. Meaning will have to be construed differently, queerly, outside of a hetero-normative linear and productive bloodline.[17] Forms of sexuality which are separated from procreation are "ec-centric, consigned to the margins, to the asides, the footnotes, the prefaces

[16] Leland. (2004). Op cit. P 173.
[17] Robert Martin. (1993). "Roland Barthes: Towards an "Ecriture Gaie". *Camp Grounds: Style and Homosexuality*. F. Cleto. Amherst, Mass. University of Massachusetts Press: 282-298, p292.

of a text," says Robert Martin writing of Barthes' *ecriture gai* and the [ec]centricity of non-normative sexuality.[18]

McDiarmid reclaimed the marginal not only by moving what has been termed marginal to the centre but also by questioning the notion of the margin itself. The sex-positive messages embedded in all of McDiarmid's work are part of a queer political insistence on sexual bliss, heat, energy, transcendence and excess. His work is based on an understanding that by "re-eroticising life" we prevent it (that is life and sexuality) being channelled into something else. In other words his work allies itself with the idea of sexual energy as autonomous, not harnessed to biological reproduction and the productive economy of sublimation which in the West is understood as the basis of culture.[19] This is the operation of the excess and pleasure we have discussed throughout the thesis. That is the *more,* referred to in the Introduction, which reaches *towards* something - beyond the received cultural notions of production, use, and consumption - to a queer culture that is hedonism- rather than consumption-based.

[18] ibid.
[19] ibid.

## The full spectrum

As in all of his work, McDiarmid is conscious in the *Rainbow Aphorisms* of the political, ideological and affective implications of his chosen materials and techniques. His choice of vibrant full spectrum colour gives a passing nod to the rainbow symbolism of gay community politics. The *Rainbow Aphorisms* evoke the 'rainbow flag' of gay activism and identity politics. In their full spectrum colour they also offer a playful visceral pleasure. In the context of the artist's work of this period, they engage another trope of light and dark, luminosity and shadow, different from but resonant with the visual intensities of the *Kiss of Light* reflective mosaics. They juxtapose, as do the *Kiss of Light* mosaics, disease, death, abjection and mortality with excess, pleasure and glamour.

In the case of the *Rainbow Aphorisms* the excess is both linguistic and chromatic. The use of vibrant full spectrum colour is another kind of rhetorical excess. It leaves nothing out employing the 'everything' of the full spectrum using, as I have said, all of the available chromatic resources. It offers another visual surrender, in this case a "descent into colour,"[20] in a form of transcendent bliss and eroticism.[21] The work employs all of the eloquent

[20] David Batchelor. (2002). *Chromophobia*. London, Reaktion Books, p31.

[21] Elizabeth Grosz notes the implicit connections between erotism, excess and art when she says: "there's something about art that is an abundance of excess. Art is the revelry in the excess in nature, but also a revelry in the excess of the energy in our own bodies.".Elizabeth Grosz interviewed by Julie Copeland ABC Radio National 5 June 2005. Transcript at http/www.abc.net.au/rn/arts.

communicative possibilities of colour. The artist makes a choice of light over dark, intense colour over muted and the complete spectrum over a more sober range of possibility. I have discussed in Chapter Three the connections made by McDiarmid between intense colour, ecstasy and sexual abandonment in the 'disco' works. In Chapter Five I referred to the unsettling of abjection and disease by the 'infinite' luminosity of the *Kiss of Light* Mosaics. The *Rainbow Aphorisms* teeter on a fine point between an ecstatic "falling into" colour, and the ironic verbal abrasion of the text itself.[22] They employ the full indecent and seductive artifice, the "culpable eloquence" which intense colour represents in Western art and philosophy, privileging "pure pleasure" over restraint and reason.[23]

## Re-deployment of the artist's gay male lineage

In the *Rainbow Aphorisms* of the early 1990s McDiarmid again references, as he did in the 1970s, his male homosexual antecedents and 'heroes'. In this case he appropriates not photographic images but words and ideas into his work. The series includes ironically slanted, coded references to Walt Whitman; *So Many Pills So Little Time Sweetie* [Fig. 74.] paraphrases

[22] Batchelor. (2002). Op. cit., p37.
[23] Jacqueline Lichtenstein. (1993). *The Eloquence of Colour: Rhetoric and Painting in The French Classical Age*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford, University of California Press, pp100-107.

Whitman's "So many comrades, so little time" which had in turn generated the popular T-shirt aphorism 'so many men so little time' associated with the gay male urban sexual revolution).[24] Oscar Wilde's *Only the Shallow Know Themselves* is appropriated by McDiarmid as a *Rainbow Aphorism* from Wilde's *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (1882). In this latter work [Fig. 75.] McDiarmid engages in a play with normative notions of a unified and authentic subjectivity, which as I have argued throughout this thesis, he was at pains to unsettle through his work and his lived 'life-as-art'. His career-long engagement of mobile performative subjectivity was an implicit critique of the ideas of the 'depth subject' on which normative Western culture is built. The work is thus an implicit critique of the authentic, stable, knowable subject.

Citing an aspect of gay and lesbian history; the 1993 campaign in The United States to lift the ban on gays in the military, the work *Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Die Alone* [Fig. 76.] bitterly and ironically references the 'gay survival strategy' of adopting a low profile and attempting to be invisible, ('Don't Ask, Don't Tell'). This was a strategy advocated by some gay and straight spokes-people in relation to the gays in the military issue. The strategy of 'Don't

[24] Keller. (1993). Op. cit., p114.

Ask Don't Tell' when applied to AIDS and the cultural politics of safe/unsafe sex was potentially lethal and was seen by McDiarmid as an example of the re-instated closet. Silence and the hiding of one's status (whether sexual identity, public performance of that identity, or HIV status) was always a ploy the artist vehemently rejected, echoing ACT-UP's famous dictum in their queer signage of *Silence=Death*.

The work *Miss Thing, Our Skills Are Indispensable to The Advancement Of Civilization* [Fig. 77.] reinscribes a well-tried camp ploy of claiming the 'lineage' of a grandiose, campily self-conscious, 'gay history of the world'. This epithet echoes the knowingly outrageous text of a leaflet entitled "Queers Read This", claimed by some as the founding statement of Queer Nation. This leaflet, reputedly dropped by helicopter on the Gay Pride Parade in New York in June 1990, read as follows: "We've given so much to [the] world [at large]: democracy, all the arts, the concepts of love, philosophy and the soul, to name just a few gifts from our ancient Greek Dykes and Fags."[25] This kind of ahistorical, reductionist "gay chauvinism" of the 'the Greeks were queer like us' type, is absurd, especially post-Foucault, as David Halperin suggests.[26] But as an artist McDiarmid is taking a deliberately

[25] Quoted in, David. M. Halperin. (2002). *How to do the History of Homosexuality.* Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, p16.
[26] ibid.

excessive, camp ironic slant on a notion of a 'queer world history'. As Halperin says:

> It is possible, after all, to recruit the queerness of past historical periods not in order to justify one or another partisan model of gay life in the present but rather to acknowledge, promote, and support a heterogeneity of queer identities, past *and* present. There is more than one strategy for entering into a queerer future"[27]

McDiarmid is wittily both asserting and proposing, in this work, a queerer future in a continuing enactment of the queer world-making he has undertaken throughout his career. I have proposed, throughout this thesis, that this queer world-making has been the project of his oeuvre as a whole including his 'life-as-art' performative creative practice discussed in Chapter Five. The work in the *Rainbow Aphorisms* series was animated both by what Karl Keller calls camp "flamboyant playfulness" and McDiarmid's bitter anger at his own and his community's situation in the post-AIDS homophobic backlash and what he experienced as the energetic reassertion of hetero-normative hegemony.[28] This hegemonic re-assertion was painfully apparent to McDiarmid in the case of the post-death funeral and estate arrangements for some of his friends, and community members, who had died of AIDS-related conditions. Often the queerer world these men had been able to make in their lifetimes was unmade after their deaths by their families who insisted on large religious funerals and other

[27] ibid.
[28] Keller. (1993). Op. cit., p114.

arrangements against the express wishes of the dead person and his living friends.

As I noted in discussion of the *Toxic Queen* book, McDiarmid was disappointed that his long term friend and collaborator, Peter Tully, had been neglectful enough to die intestate. He was also bitterly aware that this circumstance allowed Tully's 'next of kin' to be defined in the conventional manner for the purpose of dispersal of Tully's estate. In particular McDiarmid was upset that, without appropriate pre-death estate planning, there was no formal plan in place to ensure the appropriate dispersal and management of his friend's artistic and creative legacy. This complicated state of affairs motivated McDiarmid's active involvement with estate planning workshops and publicity for AIDS-affected artists in collaboration with the Arts Law Centre of Australia and the State Library of New South Wales. It also impacted on his work including the *Rainbow Aphorisms*. The work *Don't Worry, Die Young, Be Happy, Make A Will* [Fig. 78.] translates the fatuous popular catch phrase, 'Don't Worry, Be Happy' into an angry queer-centric comment on the situation of men like himself. The *Rainbow Aphorisms* suite, like all of McDiarmid's work, is partly focused on a notion of community activism and education – albeit an entertainingly bitter, witty, camp and excessive version

of this. By this time his work and his community activism around AIDS were intrinsically enmeshed.

## The final work

There is a final suite of computer-generated work which was stored on McDiarmid's computer hard disc, and back-up systems, at the time of his death. As I have mentioned, this work was to have been shown at Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne later in 1995. As his life came closer to its end McDiarmid was, not so paradoxically, determined to 'make-it' as an artist in a clear-cut way he had never before embraced. It was as if there was now a huge urgency to get out what he wanted to be saying before it was too late:

> I wanted to express myself and I wanted to respond to what was going on and I wanted to reach a gay male audience. I wanted to express very complex emotions and I didn't know how to do it…. I was in a bit of a dilemma. I thought, well, how can I get across these complex messages. I didn't think it was simply a matter of saying gay is good.[29]

McDiarmid had seen from the success of his safe sex poster series of 1992 that visual culture could change attitudes and behaviour and actually save lives. The sense of urgency about continuing to produce work, in the weeks and days before his death, while it was fired by a desire to be known and recognised as an artist was also animated by a need to continue to effectively play a part as a

community cultural activist. This seemed ever more important at a time when his peers, and men younger than himself, were still sero-converting and dying of the symptoms of AIDS in significant numbers.

The suite of work, which effectively became his last work, was in digital files which were to be laser printed for exhibition on large sheets of aluminium, somewhat like metal road signage.[30] The work was a kind of distilled signage of a state of mind uncompromisingly perverse. Continuing with the bold Helvetica typeface and the kind of graphic symbolism he had used in *Toxic Queen* and the *Rainbow Aphorisms,* these untitled works are a darkly queer reflection of McDiarmid's then current world.

*Proud To Be Homophobic* is the text in rainbow-hued bold Helvetica, juxtaposed with a pink triangle, in one of these works [Fig. 79.]. The former Nazi symbol which had been adopted by the gay liberation movement and later more emphatically by the queer cultural politics of AIDS, the inverted pink triangle, has superimposed over it the red graphic symbol - used in airports, roads, public buildings – to signify "prohibited". In other words,

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[29] David McDiarmid, interviewed by Carmela Baranowska 1992 (no date). Transcript in McDiarmid estate papers. State Library of NSW.

[30] Gran Fury had used metal road signage techniques in work affixed to fences in Petrosino Park, New York, in the Summer of 1990. See Watney, S. (1991). "Art AIDS New York City." *Art and Text* **38** (The AIDS Crisis Is Not Over): 50-98, interview with Richard Goldstein, pp82-83.

the work suggests, 'queerness' was 'prohibited'. Had the post-AIDS backlash got the better of him? Or was this an ever more perverse re-appropriation of insults in the sense of Judith Butler's concept of a re-arranged "injurious language", as discussed above? The work, it seems to me, is self-evidently this kind of re-appropriation while also being an example of the inverted social, political and linguistic logic of 'the dozens' I referred to above. Like the example given of H. Rap Brown's book title, *Die Nigger, Die*, this apparently self-annihilating text, inverts the liberal logic of tolerance and makes manifest the oppression and hatefulness that both H. Rap Brown and David McDiarmid refuse to pretend is not there within hegemonic culture.

Another work with the text *Fags=Death* [Fig. 80.] imitates the phrasing of ACT-UP's renowned *Silence=Death*. This work is rendered in a somewhat 'cute', friendly, rounded lettering echoing the saccharine friendliness of the juxtaposed 'smiley face' on yellow ground. The whole composition is superimposed onto a rainbow ground. This 'sweet' visual ploy evokes the facile, 'smiley', 'niceness' of unquestioning normative life and the friendly denial embedded within liberal repressive tolerance while it simultaneously insists on a perverse alterity.

This is also evoked in the work which consists entirely of a magenta 'pink triangle' superimposed by a grimly friendly, even endearing, grinning 'smiley' skull. [Fig. 81.] This pre-death articulation of a perverse, funny, grim, impending death is overlaid with a red rococo-styled "Q" for queer, like the giant "Q" placed on the tympanum of the Art Gallery of NSW in February I995, discussed in the opening of this chapter. The work employs a grimly sweet facial gesture in a final act of, perhaps pre-death self-portraiture, pre-empting a post-death reality.[31] This takes place within a communicative modality - self-portraiture - he had pursued for decades as part of his performative practice of enacting a mobile queer 'becoming' subjectivity. This portrait suggests that the artist is, in the work itself, embracing death - and a threatening homophobic reality - while simultaneously laughing. In other words (as McDiarmid says in the introduction to *Toxic Queen* I quoted in Chapter Five) being "bitter and twisted" and "fabulous" at the same time.[32]

Masquerading as a magazine cover, or a logo for a production company, *Vile Homosexual Productions* [Fig. 82.], echoes both the magazine *Diseased Pariah News* referred to in Chapter Five and a work McDiarmid had produced for exhibition in 1993 entitled

[31] Before his death, McDiarmid hand-made, and left for his closest friends, skull necklaces to wear to his funeral, thus enacting a similar pre- and post-death presence/absence.

*Plague Boy*. These all use the trope of 'newspaper headline', or 'magazine cover banner text' to evoke the promulgation of homophobic ideology in the mainstream media and hetero-normative discourse. This is the ultimate embrace of an emphatically queer self and queer world in a perverse affirmation of his creative work – 'vile homosexual productions' - of a twenty-year period.

## Conclusion

In this the last chapter of the thesis I have shown how the artist continued to engage through his work and its implicit cultural activism in a self-defined queer world-making right to the end of his life. The work of the period 1993-95 operates within an *excessive* totalising queer politics inseparable from the artist's sero-positive and "full blown AIDS" status. The *Rainbow Aphorisms* and the 'Final work' upset the liberal, repressive tolerance of normative culture by calling its bluff through an insistently perverse linguistic *twisting*. Reminiscent of 'the dozens' and the historical role of the 'trickster', the semantic and syntactical perversity which the artist employs unsettles notions of what is right and what is wrong and who speaks with authority. Confronting the viewer with the task of deciphering and making sense of the work's linguistic instability the artist refuses to

[32] David McDiarmid, *Toxic Queen,* artist's book, 1992.

resile from the perverse authority of an insistently queer speaking position.

Although produced for exhibition in a gallery context, the import of the work was inseparable from the health, estate-planning and cultural politics of the period which was defined, for McDiarmid and his community, overwhelmingly by AIDS. By the time of his death the artist had gone well past a politics of what he himself dismissively called 'gay is good'. His own impending mortality gave his work of this period a grim humour, an eloquent verbal articulation of the complexities of prejudice and inequality and a full spectrum radiant transcendence.

Fig. 65 *Rainbow Q* Art Gallery of NSW Sydney 1995

Figs. 66-77 *Rainbow Aphorisms* 1993-4





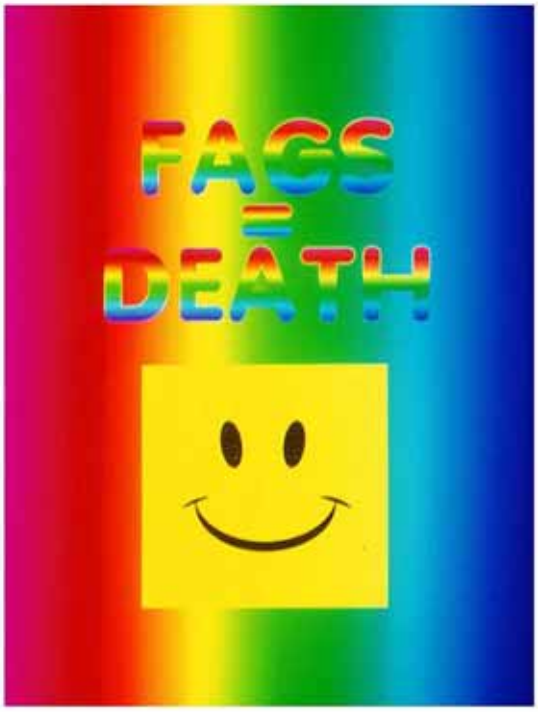


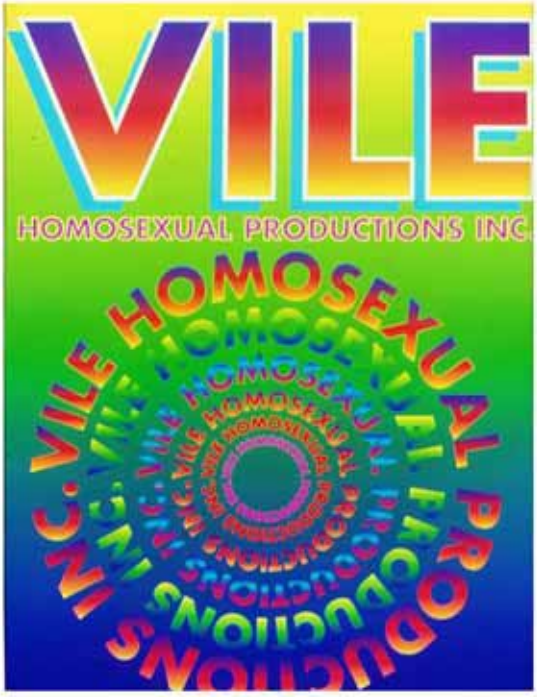






Fig. 78 *Don't Worry... Rainbow Aphorism* 1994


Figs. 79-82 'Late Work' 1995

# *Conclusion*

*There is no invention possible, whether it be philosophical or poetic, without the presence in the inventing subject of an abundance of the other, of the diverse.*

Jonathan Dollimore. *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*. Oxford, 1996, p 332.

*Queer approaches to writing and other cultural production seek less to define a specific and agreed upon historical narrative than to offer possible, contingent ways of reading the past in order to engage with the present in ways that do not rely on normative ideas and behaviours. Indeed to 'queer' history is to challenge, undermine, refute and reconfigure the very notion of norms in 'history'.*

Mark Turner: *Backward Glances: Cruising the Queer streets of New York and London*,

2003, pp 45-6.

*Down the length of a now passing era, a cluster of powerful theories insisted that the prospects for radical and effective action had been definitively closed off. In a set of overlapping claims, it was claimed that the forces of simulation and assimilation would swiftly commodify dissent, making it impossible to take a consistent position outside the capitalist system; or that History had settled at its terminus; or that the horrors of totalitarianism would forever deter those who would otherwise engage in grandiose plans to improve society; or in any case that humans, mere amalgams of impulses buffeted this way and that by desires and flows could hardly be expected to improve themselves. All these claims appear more implausible today than in their prime. Yet in the art world, regularly an intellectual laggard, they are still insistently repeated.*

Julian Stallabrass "Types and Prospects of Radical Art", Australia and New Zealand Journal of Art Vol 4, No. 2 and Vol 5. No. 1, 2004, p189

## Coda

This thesis exists in the resonant historical and cultural space between the temporal and spatial subjectivity of the enquirer, myself, and the subjectivity expressed within the object of the enquiry, David McDiarmid's art. "Subjective identity," Elizabeth Grosz writes, "is always a matter of history." It may extend from "one's life story" outwards as "broadly as one chooses."[1] An excursion into the resonant cultural, historical and personal space, I have referred to, will serve as a framework for my concluding paragraphs.

Had David McDiarmid not died, I would not have undergone the changes Judith Butler refers to and which I have quoted below, and I would not be writing this thesis. The artist would be speaking for himself and possibly numerous Australian and international critics and writers would have discovered his importance and perhaps there would be a substantial body of critical attention to his work.

On the contrary, this is not what happened. He died, I became the executor, I fell in love with his work all over again as a result of

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[1] Grosz, Elizabeth. (2004). *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*. Sydney, Allen and Unwin, p257.

having to handle it (for a time on a daily basis) and I, of course, underwent the kind of transformation, Judith Butler refers to when she says:

> Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned.[2]

Such a transformation is inevitable, she suggests (and I agree) when two subjectivities become enmeshed like this. Dead artist - long term friend and executor. Identification of course is part of this transformation. Inter-subjectivity, as I have said, is the subtext to this thesis and this coda will briefly visit this inter- subjectivity as a way of concluding the thesis as a whole.

I have spoken in the Introduction about Diana Fuss's work on identification (identification *with* and identification *as*) and its relevance for my project. Queer scholar, David Halperin, points out the pleasures to be had from identification in the context of an historical project, when he says: "Historical analysis is no argument against pleasure, least of all against the pleasures of identification, which even the most austere or the most self-aware historical scholar can't resist for very long."[3]

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[2] Judith Butler. (2004). *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London and New York, Verso, p21.
[3] David. M. Halperin. (2002). *How To Do The History Of Homosexuality*. Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, p15.

## The personal is historical

In October 1993, nearly two years before he died, David McDiarmid made, as a birthday gift for me, a small art work which consisted of the words *Beyond Blood* laser printed in bold sans serif typeface onto a plastic lenticular substrate and framed in gold [Figs. 83-85.]. On the back of the work was the following inscription in felt pen, *Happy Birthday Sweetie, Love David '93 XXX*, next to a stylised heart. Written on the frame's support were the words *Remember: we're lucky*, also hand-written in felt pen.

This work grew out of, and was a reference to, conversations we were then having about issues currently being raised around 'blood' and 'non-blood' families by post-death events precipitated by AIDS.[4] Like many who came to political awareness in the counter-cultural, neo-Marxist, gender and sexual liberationist politics of the 1970s, McDiarmid and I had shared an intellectual and affective critique of the role of the normative family as an

[4] This was two years after McDiarmid had, in early 1991, asked me for two favours. One was to stand in for him at the public lectures he had committed to for his Syme Dodson Gallery *Kiss of Light* show discussed in Chapter Five. He and Peter Tully had decided to make a trip to Trinidad and Tobago to see (before they died) the Trinidad carnival, one of those which had inspired the aesthetic which Tully, McDiarmid, Ron Smith and their many collaborators had created for Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. The second favour asked was for me to be executor of his estate on his death. I said yes to the first and subsequently gave two talks at the *Kiss of Light* show. I said I was honoured by the second request but would need to think about it. I subsequently also said yes to that request.

agent of social control and of hetero-normative, gender socialisation. This understanding, inflected by our respective engagements with feminism and gay liberation was reanimated, albeit differently (both differently from the 1970s and differently for him and for me), in the circumstances of the AIDS crisis.

The issues of 'blood' and 'non-blood' families were highlighted by the sorts of events I have discussed in Chapter Five in which the expressed wishes of gay men were ignored after their deaths by their 'blood' families. This overriding, of the expressed wishes of gay men, was understood by McDiarmid and many others as an attempt at an annihilation of the gay community-making and world-making of decades. It was this community- and world-making which, as I have shown, had been the principal concern of McDiarmid's work, as a whole, and of his lived life-as-art.

The work *Beyond Blood* and its handwritten inscription is emblematic for me at the end of the endeavour which is this thesis of the central concerns of this artist's work, and thus of the concerns of the thesis itself. The artist is, in this work two years before his death, re-affirming a politics of 'beyond'. This beyond is resonant with the *more* I referred to at the beginning of the thesis. In the Introduction I referred to a reaching aspiration for the *more* which is implicit in a politics of the kind which we have seen

animated McDiarmid's work. This is the *more,* as I have said, not of capitalist consumption fetishism but a *more* beyond existing political, social and cultural categories. It is a notion of a *more* that the creative political subject stretches to imagine and enact. It is the *more* which also has its potentiality in the liminal spaces *between* pre-existing cultural categories, including fixed ideas of subjectivity and inter-subjectivity.

*Beyond Blood*, the title of this art work, refers to the hetero-normative beliefs and hegemonies which regained strength, as I have discussed in Chapters Five and Six, in the conditions of the AIDS epidemic. The work aspires to a potentiality 'beyond' this lamented return to (an albeit new form of) conservative sexual politics. The work is part of the consistent critique of normative sexuality and sociality which is the endeavour, as I have said, of McDiarmid's whole oeuvre.

The 'Blood' referred to in this work is the blood-line of 'blood family'. That is families of birth as opposed to the self-designated gay and/or counter-normative 'families' which had been created by urban progressives in the West in the counter-cultural conditions of the 1960s and 1970s. This is the same normative family of birth as that referred to in McDiarmid's work *The Family Tree Stops Here, Darling*, the *Rainbow Aphorism* work of 1994.

McDiarmid is referring here in *Beyond Blood* to the family politics he described in the opening statement of *Toxic Queen*, discussed in Chapter Five. In that part of *Toxic Queen* McDiarmid had outlined his response to the complex events which ensued on Peter Tully's having died, in Paris in 1992, without having made a will. I have shown above how David McDiarmid made it his (political) business to involve himself, not just in the safe sex, civil rights and medical politics of AIDS but also in the AIDS-related politics of wills and funerals. *Beyond Blood* is to be read in the context of this politics.

McDiarmid's art work of the 1990s, as we have seen, consistently engages with this pre- and post-death politics. As discussed above, works such as these proposed a queerer pre- and post-death imaginary. *Funeral Hits of the '90s* (1993) the audio-tape compilation of House music, in self-designed 'commercial' cover, now in the collection of the National Gallery of Australia; the inscription, *AIDS Victim Dies Alone – Family Profits* from *Toxic Queen* (1992*); Dear Death* from the *Kiss of Light* exhibition (1991), or *Don't Worry Die Young Be Happy Make A Will* from the *Rainbow Aphorisms* (1993-4) are all emblematic of the artist's fierce determination to have a voice and propose a personal agency on the occasion of his own sickness and death and also after his death. This voice, like that McDiarmid developed in his work

from the 1970s onwards, spoke not just for himself but for alterity itself.

The work, *Beyond Blood* encapsulates the complex past-present-future temporality McDiarmid is working with in his late work such as *I Want A Future That Lives Up To My Past* [Fig 86.] one of the *Rainbow Aphorisms*. What kind of future can a person, who is facing death, who has not biologically reproduced himself and has no religious belief expect to have is the normative question. Not a valid question implies McDiarmid, as his work continues to insist on its alterity and the perverse centrality of the non-normative. A perverse before- and after- death presence is implied in works such as the *Rainbow Aphorism*, of 1994, *Don't Forget To Remember* [Fig. 87.] or the 'self portraiture' of the saccharine 'smiley' skulls of 1995, discussed in Chapter Six. A similar complex futurity is also implied in the skull necklaces the artist made for his friends to wear at his funeral - he would *Be There*.[5]

The present "always spreads itself out to an imminent future," says Elizabeth Grosz.[6] McDiarmid is insisting in these works on a continuing queer speaking position pre-death, and a resonant

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[5] *[Reach Out] I'll Be There*, The Four Tops, Motown, 1966. I mention the skull necklaces in footnote 29, Chapter Six.
[6] Elizabeth Grosz. (2004). *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*. Sydney, Allen and Unwin, p251.

post-death presence after it. The present and the past co-exist says Elizabeth Grosz. They function simultaneously:

> Although the present does not contain the past, they coexist. They function simultaneously. This coexistence of present and past, the way the past grows and augments itself with every present, the virtual potential the past brings to each present, provides it with the capacity to enrich the present with resonances that are not themselves present.[7]

McDiarmid, I suggest in this coda to the body of work which is this thesis, is enacting in some of his late work the kind of past/present simultaneity and futurity Elizabeth Grosz is concerned with in her recent work, *The Nick of Time*: *Politics Evolution and the Untimely*. In this work Grosz sees the past as "our resource for overcoming the present, for bringing about a future." McDiarmid's work is engaged in this kind of forwards and backwards motion. It excavates and archives the gay past, enacts a queer world-making in the present and reaches towards a desired (and simultaneously already lived) futurity. This does not imply a religious concept of an after-life, but instead, a non-linear past-present-future temporal space that allows the simultaneity of pre-death and post-death life.

The complex past-present-future temporality of the artist's late work allows it to be speaking to a future yet to come and one (a future that is) at which McDiarmid, it is implied, will be both

[7] Grosz. (2004). Op. cit., p250

absent and present. I have referred in Chapters Five and Six to the kind of ineffable speech act implied in the both pre- and post-death speaking positions the late work engages in. This speech act is one which posits a future which is already here, yet to become, and one which is simultaneously also implicated in the past. This 'only the present' aspiration in the work is part of the non-linear post-modern present-time approach to history I referred to in the Introduction.

## *Remember: we're lucky*

The handwritten annotation *Remember: we're lucky* on the back of the *Beyond Blood* work continues McDiarmid's insistence on retaining a sense of personal agency and queer performativity within the conditions of the cultural politics of AIDS, his own imminent mortality, in his approach to his own work and his after-death future. As I have made clear throughout the thesis, McDiarmid saw his work as a contribution to gay history and struggles for equality and as an embodiment and an affirmation of a sex-positive world. His work consistently placed itself on edges and in locations in *excess* of norms. It reached towards a different queerer future. In his work, such as the 'disco quilts' of 1979-81, he sought to embody and express the utopian and ecstatic aspiration of this present and future queer world. This ecstatic aesthetic was retained in the reflective holographic Mylar AIDS work of *Kiss of*

*Light* (1991) and the full spectrum visuality of the *Rainbow Aphorisms* (1993-4).

Judith Butler has something to add here, about the retention of the ecstatic, in her recent work *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. Butler remarks on the way that past progressive history is romanticised in relation to the present. As she puts it:

> We tend to narrate the history of the feminist and lesbian/gay movement, for instance, in such a way that ecstasy figured prominently in the sixties and seventies and midway through the eighties. But maybe ecstasy is more persistent than that; maybe it is with us all along To be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself, and thus can have several meanings: to be transported beyond oneself by a passion, but also to be *beside oneself* with rage or grief. I think that if I can still address a "we", or include myself within its terms, I am speaking to those of us who are living in certain ways *beside ourselves*, whether in sexual passion, or emotional grief, or political rage. [8]

The inscription "Remember: we're lucky" is a continuing insistence on an ecstatic that is "with us all along". It is a *being beside oneself* within McDiarmid's work, which as I have shown, is retained throughout his career and until the end of his life in an ecstatic affect and an insistent agency. It is an affirmation of an ec-static agency relating to all three of Butler's categories; sexual passion, rage and grief.

The artist's late work, including *Beyond Blood* under discussion here, insists on a continuing queer moment, one which is not a

[8] Butler. (2004). Op. cit., p21.

faint echo of a previously glorious pre-AIDS time but one which continues to (pleasurably and perversely) *cross, trouble* and *twist* normative culture in the sense in which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick uses those concepts in her elaboration of the meaning of queer, as outlined in the Introduction. From the 1970s until his death in 1995, McDiarmid insisted on an ongoing utopian possibility both in affect and sexuality while simultaneously also insisting on concrete demands for social and political equality.

## Looking forward and looking back

This thesis itself is an enactment of the 'looking forward and looking back' I mention above as a trope within McDiarmid's creative oeuvre. Shelton Waldrep, writing about the specificity of the 1970s, says that to study the seventies now is to "work on what we are trying to remember as much as what we are trying to forget." Not only does this thesis explore the cultural world of the 1970s, it is also itself inflected by that time.

It was the process of immersing myself in feminist intellectual enquiry, inside and outside of the academy, from the 1970s onwards, which gave me a lifelong interest in matters of subjectivity and agency and the idea that the 'personal is political'. To me, as I have stated in the Introduction, it is axiomatic that scholarship is inevitably personally motivated, that complete

intellectual impartiality is impossible. It is in this recognition that I have decided to end this thesis with the personal anecdotal location of myself which opened discussion about *Beyond Blood*

The final thing to be saying about the work, *Beyond Blood*, is that it is implicitly relational. It is made for a particular person, myself, within a shared context. It posits a broader idea of 'family' and 'community' than the normative one. As the thesis has shown, much of McDiarmid's work was collected by gay men who saw the work as an affirmation of their subjectivity and their lives and politics. McDiarmid himself spoke of his commitment to working creatively to advance the legal, social, cultural, sexual and other interests of his chosen community.

This work is relational in a different sense. It is part of the "of courseness" of friendship between women and gay men that Pamela Robertson speaks of and which I have quoted in the Introduction to this thesis. Identification of course is implicated in relationality. And it is also implicated in our attitudes to the past, as David Halperin writes. "Identification" he suggests, "gets at something, something important: it picks out resemblances, connections, echo effects. Identification is a kind of cognition." And it is also a form of desire. "We don't only identify with those who are the same as us, after all; if other people weren't *different*

from us, what would be the point of identifying with them?"[9] The work *Beyond Blood* encompasses a relationality that extends beyond fixed ideas of identity and subjectivity. A relationality which, like the concerns of McDiarmid's whole oeuvre, works to unsettle, *queer* and *cross* such fixed notions of identity, subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. This unsettling, as many have claimed, and as I have shown in this thesis, is the peculiarity of queer.

[9] Halperin. (2002). Op. cit., p15.




Figs. 84-86 *Beyond Blood* 1993


Figs. 87 *I Want A Future ... Rainbow Aphorisms* 1994


Figs. 88 *Don't Forget ... Rainbow Aphorisms* 1994

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