

Homo Eroticus. Films of Wrik Mead

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Texts by Julia Creet + Scott McLeod

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Introduction

JULIA CREET

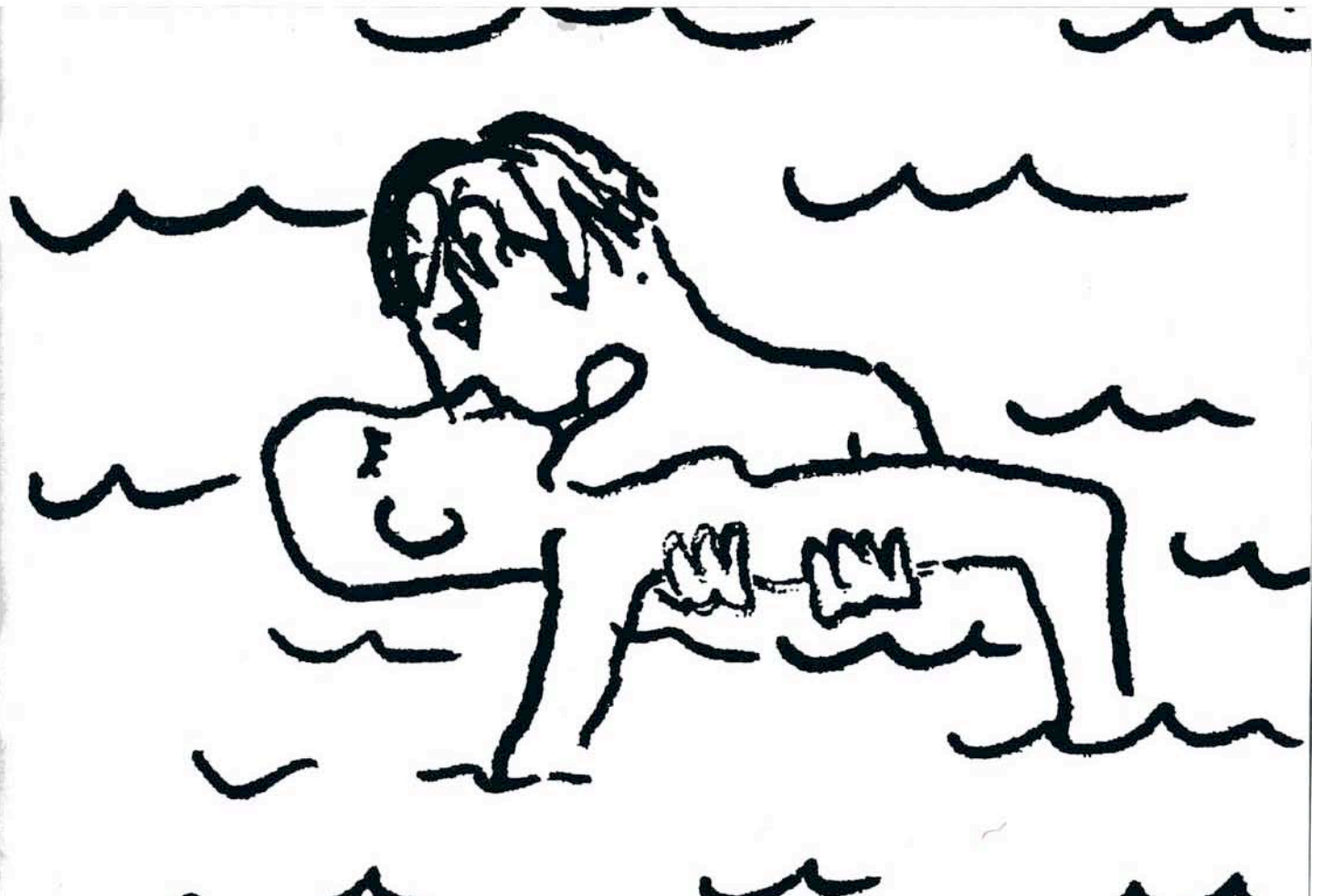
Anyone who has watched Wrik Mead work will probably have a lasting image of him deep in concentration, his tongue working side to side, like a muscly metronome. Shooting pixilated film, where each scene is the product of hundreds of single exposures, is a demanding physical exercise for filmmaker and actor alike. The pixilation combined with the cramped quarters in which Wrik often shoots, out of necessity and for effect, make his films both intimate and visceral. He shot the closing scene of *Frostbite* standing over the actors in my tiny bathtub in his underwear, tongue working overtime.

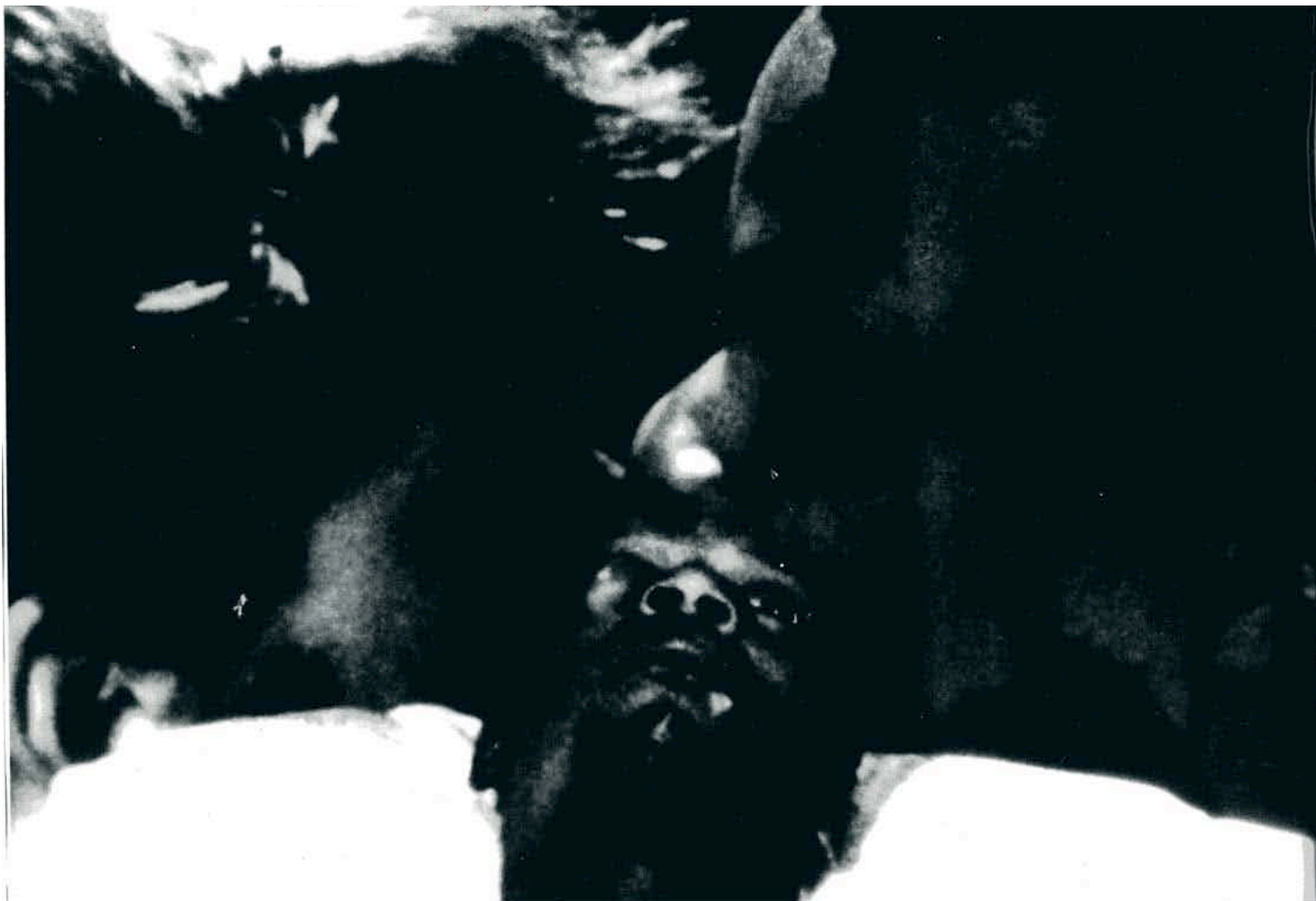
In contrast to the opaque headiness of much experimental film, Wrik's ability to distill an idea has been the basis for some of his most stirring work. In *Closet Case* the slow and jerky unwrapping of a painfully bound body ends in release. Too many pretty films about coming out, Wrik said, he wanted to do something that spoke to the brutality of the experience for many people – in three minutes or less.

Wrik loves to tell a story, also unusual in a genre that has eschewed the seductions of narrative. And he loves to tell stories about his friends. Many of his films are about the way he sees his friends, the way they see themselves – in the kindest possible

way. Isabelle really did want *What Isabelle Wants*, John really was struggling with change as he tried to embrace the wall (*Warm*), and Donna really couldn't decide where she was going to live, where next to move her rocks (*Homebelly*). I'm next. Long morning walks produced a collaborative script for *Guise*, a fairy tale about unstable identities that anyone close to me will probably recognize.

If Wrik's place within the ranks of experimental filmmakers is somewhat suspect, his place within the ranks of gay and lesbian filmmakers is also uneasy. The creepiness of some of his films, *Closet Case* and *Frostbite* in particular, has made audiences expecting affirmation uncomfortable. Wrik's films are based in fantasy, attuned to political realities, but not necessarily grounded in them. Perhaps it is their allegorical quality that has made them internationally popular. They are open to all kinds of viewers even if they have special meaning for particular audiences. Wrik Mead's work is finding larger audiences all the time, and for good reason. As this program shows, his fusion of pixilated technique with his love of story is a powerful mix, one that speaks to the daily fragmentation and quest for linearity in all of us.





Wrik Mead: By Any Other Name

SCOTT McLEOD

For the past ten years, Toronto artist Wrik Mead has been making films of great intelligence, depth and beauty. While his work often adheres to the form of classical narrative, his orientation lies firmly within that of the experimental avant-garde, spinning psychological tales while simultaneously playing with the materiality of film. Completing most of the filmmaking tasks himself, with assistance from his friends and colleagues in the areas of acting and sound, Mead plunders his pet obsessions, returning time and time again to themes of longing and desire, isolation and confinement, ritual and transformation. Mead's films offer a pointed examination of the forces which inhibit the emergence of a queer sexual identity and look unsparingly at the complex challenges which face the development of gay and lesbian relationships. Mead's films usually feature a single protagonist who wrestles with internal and external demons and, following a protracted battle, finally wins. In his fairy-tale universe, the hero endures an intense period of suffering ultimately to fall into the warm embrace of his saviour-prince. While his artistry is often expressed through the vehicle of a fantasy narrative, his critical discernment is rooted in the social and political reality of lived experience. As such, his work powerfully affirms the potential for same-sex unions to transform pain into pleasure.

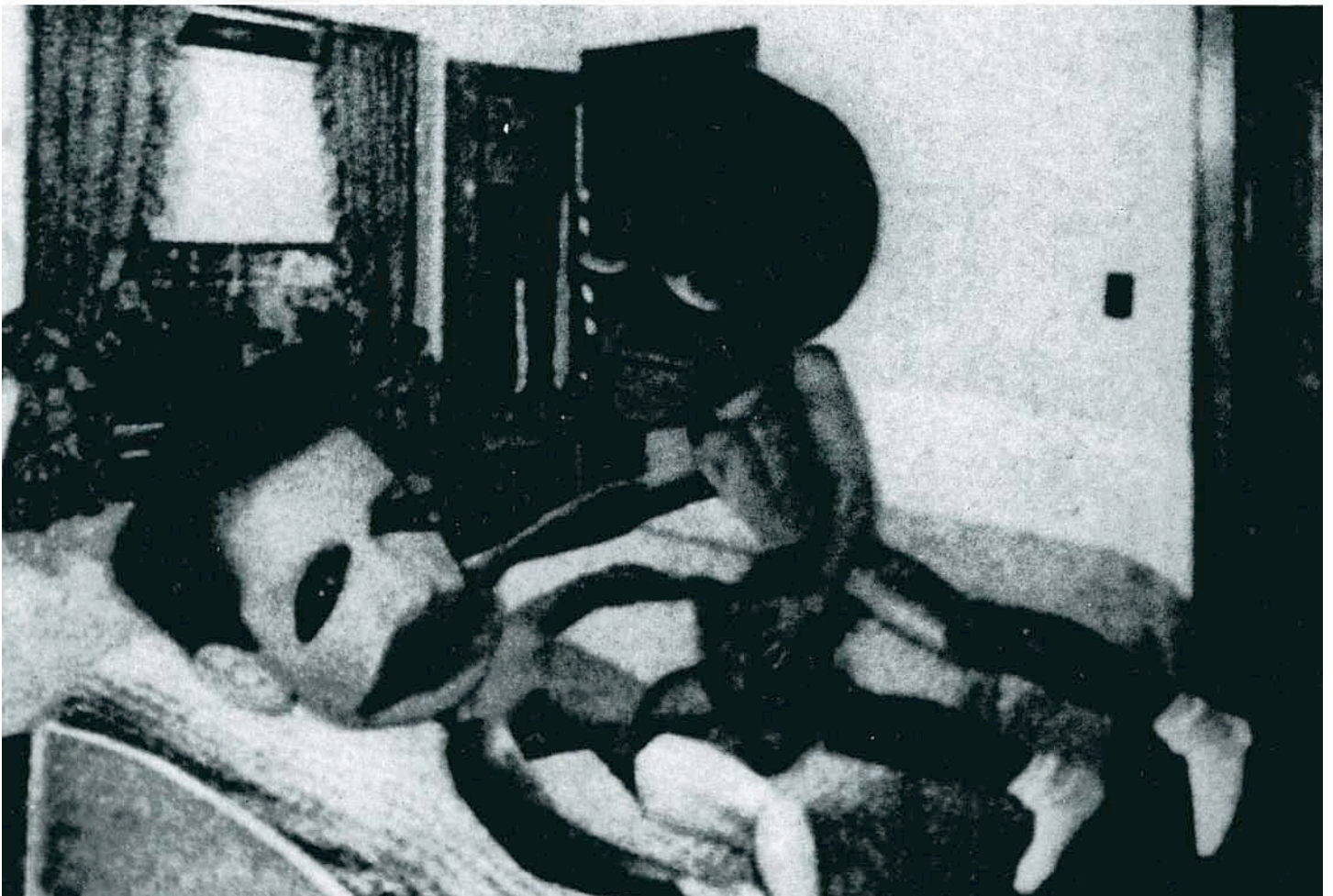
W

Written on the body

“to be naked is to be speechless”¹

In the films of Wrik Mead, solitary figures, fraught with restlessness and desire, are obstructed and manipulated by invisible forces. Their bodies are often unclothed – divested of their power to exist in the world, divested of the signifiers of their place in the world, they are bodies to be acted upon. They are bodies engaged in struggle, bodies in peril, as they attempt to reconcile a burgeoning understanding with the contradictory forces of their environs. They are bodies without agency or autonomy, named and controlled by external forces beyond their control; bodies straining under the pressure to conform to a uniform social ecology, resisting the social imperative towards compulsory heterosexuality. Bodies wrestling with the difficulties of negotiating relationships and forming emotional bonds in a hostile environment. After a prolonged period of gestation, Mead’s filmic bodies are reborn. Empowered, the body claims the word as its own, and with it, the power to name, to create and articulate its identity, its desire.

Embedded in the artist’s name is the “wr” of “writer,” which invokes the claiming of authorship, the owning of authority. Mead is the author of his narrative, and he demands for himself, for all queers, a “happy ending.”





R

Redemption

“... the transmutation of pain and suffering into wisdom must be accounted among humanity’s redemptive possibilities.”²

Aptly and insightfully described by Mike Hoolboom as psychodrama,³ the films of Wrik Mead present minimal and often elliptical narrative situations whose primary function is to evoke in the viewer an emotional or psychological state. His creative strategies, both in terms of formal modes of construction and the narrative’s content, function to shift the viewer away from cognition and to elicit the feelings of a pre-cognitive state. In this formative pool breed longing, apathy, anxiety and despair.

While pain and suffering are currently and may always be part of the reality of gay and lesbian lives, there also exists the potential for pain to be part of the process of growth of the human spirit. Without sentiment, and without minimizing the destructive power of pain, Mead’s films are rife with the affirmation of hope, with the certainty that emotional and psychological anguish can be transcended. Mead repeatedly invokes, through same-sex loving, the power of the subject to envision new possibilities, proffering the spectre of a life redeemed.



Invisibility

[Closet

A consistently recurring theme in Mead's work, the closet is representative of, in the most obvious sense, the forces which obscure, constrict and deny gay identity and experience. In two of his films, an isolated male figure struggles to free himself from confinement: *Warm*, for instance, presents a nude man struggling against an overwhelming invisible presence to become erect and move forward while *Closet Case* presents a man, bound in hood and strait-jacket in a darkened closet, striving for freedom. Whether crossing a threshold or stepping out of darkness into the light, these films conclude by offering the spectacle of the gay male body, liberated, transfigured and sexualized. By literalizing the metaphor of the closet, Mead emphasizes the instability of the relationships between image and language and their referents. His creative strategy leaves behind the closet's fixed space, positing a new open space in which meanings are fluid and possible.

Excised from his given name, the transformation of "Richard" and "Rick" to "Wrik" represents a break with tradition and positions the artist as an independent agent in control of his identity. Mead is the namer, not the named; this is significant for, as a gay man, he has had to deal with the veritable denial of his existence, his reality rendered invisible.]

K

Knowledge

“Knowledge is not itself power, although it is the magnetic field of power.”⁴

In *What Isabelle Wants*, a mannequin comes to life and outstretches her arms. A doll, awakened by the force of the mannequin’s longing, stirs and is drawn towards her. Thus begins a journey – the expression of desire and its response. Ultimately, the doll is drawn into the mannequin’s space and, with child-like arms outstretched, is swept up in a maternal embrace.

In this narrative, desire is a magnetic force of great power. The mannequin, through an act of sheer will, through the strength of her own volition, is granted that which she longs for. At the moment of contact, when “Isabelle gets,” it becomes apparent that the doll is the mannequin’s mirror-image. Isabelle’s power is actualized in the moment of embracing her self. The film posits self-love and self-acceptance as a means to knowledge.

The space in between. The howling wind, the starry sky, the universe unfolds in the space in between. A hand traverses an infinite expanse, the desert of a white bed sheet, seeking to erase the space in between. The atmosphere heavy with tension, the air thick with the bitterness of separation, the alienation of modern life congests the space in between. A vivid body memory, retained from a dream, elides the divide between the living and the dead, and blurs the illusion of the space in between. Disembodied voices, channelled through phone lines, speak into the void of the space in between. Etched across distance, summoning desire, the mind conjures the coveted from the space in between. Crossing the threshold and penetrating the closet, an outstretched hand engulfs the space in between. A leather-clad fisher-king enacts a ritual of life and death; with a kiss, he closes the space in between.

M

Mediation

As a filmmaker who constructs his films by various single frame processes – in-camera, animation, optical printing, drawing and scratching – Mead is highly conscious of framing as a political and ideological device. In *Gravity*, the image is surrounded by an undulating mass of black ink. In *Deviate*, an ornate gilt picture frame, loosely framed by the camera, surrounds a video loop of an image of a departed friend. And *(ab)Normal*, like its predecessor *Homebelly*, presents frames within the frame, a softly jagged opening which, in this case, frames images of wild animals on the “ground” of a domesticated natural environment.

A fundamental assumption of dominant cinema – that the image provided within the frame is whole, complete and fully representative of its subject – is subtly challenged by Mead. Mead’s alternative framing strategies, combined with his informal shooting style, his emphasis on grain, dirt and scratches – all of the manifestations of his low-tech aesthetic, function to position his work in opposition to conventional narrative cinema. By making stylistic choices which emphasize the materiality of the medium, Mead undermines the seamlessness and transparency inherent in the technology itself, characteristics of the medium which are commonly cultivated and exploited by mainstream filmmakers. By undermining the *straight* lines of the film frame, Mead quietly subverts the dominant cinema’s claim to ideological neutrality.



E

Elemental

“At the farthest outpost of the coast, we erect a lighthouse: stone tower and beacon. We become its honorable keeper, but forget that the only purpose of the beacon is to sweep its beam across the ocean and direct ships through the night toward anchor in safe harbour.”⁵

Water. *Frostbite* presents an ocean expanse, a rugged shoreline. The body of a man washed ashore; frozen, it lies amongst jagged rocks and shards of ice. **Earth.** Dragged across the frozen ground, he is brought to a stone tower, a lighthouse, a beacon for the lost. **Light.** Inside the tower, a fire blazes. A video camera is turned on. The man is stripped bare, given an injection, is shaved and cut. **Heart. Blood. Blot.** The heart is the source of life and the repository of love. **Air.** The final task is a ritual submersion. The body, returned to water, emerges revived, gasping for breath. The rescuer’s love is written on the body, carved into flesh. The story closes with a kiss. The elemental nature of Mead’s work is reinforced through his use of sound. In Mead’s soundtracks, industrial noise and repetitive mechanical sounds fuse with the whispering of wind, human breathing, the sounds of sex. Repetitive percussive clicking metamorphoses into a heartbeat. The body of the film pulses with the rhythm of life.





A

Absence

**"All around, unappeased absence,
equivalence of forms,
hand modeling desire." 6**

D

Dreams and Desire

"... like a thing that leaped to him across infinite distances with the speed of light ..." ⁷

***Homebelly* envisions the dreamscape of a sleeping woman, a lonely wintry expanse replete with howling wind. Her sleep is interrupted by a large heavy stone which, with plodding insistence, nestles against her. She pushes it away and returns to sleep, her dreamscape superimposed with the bodies of two nude women. Desire permeates her unconscious and, made palpable, she finally accepts the stone into her belly. She claims her desire as her own and thereby secures a peaceful rest.**

Sleeping subjects pervade the films of Wrik Mead. In combination with his creative strategies – shooting through glass, emphasizing the grain and texture of the film and disrupting temporal continuity through single frame processes – the sleeping figures conspire to induce a sense of altered consciousness in the viewer, a waking dream state in which the frame itself threatens to engulf the image, just as eyelids droop when heavy with sleep.





If a critique of the brutality and oppression perpetuated by the current social order is implicit in the work of Wrik Mead, then his repeated invoking of a “happy ending” is an explicit rendering of the necessity of transcendence. By naming his desire, Mead challenges the imposed limits of a socially constructed identity. In his fantastic tales, the love that dares not speak its name powerfully finds its voice.

Notes

Thanks to Shannon Bell and Gad Horowitz for helping me find the words; Yam Lau for introducing me to the work of Jabès; and k daymond and Steve Reinke for expert editorial advice.

1. Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 4.
2. Tony Kushner, “Introduction,” David Wojnarowicz, *The Waterfront Journals*, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Grove Press, 1996): xiv.
3. Michael Hoolboom, “Out of the Closet: The Films of Wrik Mead,” *Cantrill’s FilmNotes*, No. 89-90 (November 1995): 44-50.
4. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 23.
5. Edmond Jabès, *The Book of Margins*, trans. Rosmarie Waldrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993): 40.
6. *Ibid.*, 70.
7. C. S. Lewis, quoted in *Bartlett’s Roget’s Thesaurus* (USA: Little, Brown and Company, 1996): 295.

Biographies

Wrik Mead is part of a younger generation of avant-garde filmmakers causing a stir in the international arts scene. His films were recently screened as part of a three-city tour of Canadian experimental film in Italy, as well as in Paris, Berlin, New York, Melbourne and Hong Kong. His last five films premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival. A graduate of the Ontario College of Art, his photo-based art has been exhibited in Ontario and Québec. He is currently working on a new film titled *Guise* which is co-written and performed by Julia Creet.

Julia Creet is an itinerant teacher and a contributing editor with *Border/Lines* magazine.

Scott McLeod is an artist, writer and curator based in Toronto. His work has been exhibited across Canada and in New York; his visuals and writings have been published by *semiotext(e)*, *Public* and *VU*, among others. He is currently writing a catalogue essay on the work of Simon Glass, and curating an exhibition entitled *Rare (Ad)diction* for Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography. He is a member of the film and video programming collective *Pleasure Dome*.

Kika Thorne curated *Token + Taboo Part 1*, Wrik Mead's Toronto debut, in the summer of '91. *Pleasure Dome* presents a solo show of her films and videos in July '97.