

M A T I N É E

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RONALD JONES [1952 - 2019]

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Ronald Jones was born July 9, 1952 on what his mother recalled as an “extremely hot and humid day.” The Army hospital at Fort Belvoir, where his father was stationed, welcomed the newborn. “Typical of a mid-summer day around Washington D.C.” was how Warren Jones described the weather twenty-seven years later. The U.S. Weather Report distributed by the Department of Commerce Weather Bureau on July 8, 1952 forecasted humid highs in the middle 80s, with clouds and possibly a few thunderstorms for “District of Columbia and vicinity.” The survey included atmospheric pressure and cloud cover models based on metrics from “approximately 200 selected stations” spanning coast to coast: a surveilling network from which a representation of continental meteorology could be formed.¹ While the data-based forecast produced by experts affirms the personal memories of Jones’s parents, a methodological gulf exists, one that determines the social grounding of knowledge and the unmooring of experience in modernity.

Jones arrived at university in the late sixties. In contrast to their parents’ coming of age in the Second World War and on the Korean peninsula, his generation were incubated in campuses and research laboratories. Through the free speech and anti-war movements, the student emerged as a political subject. Meanwhile, master’s degrees became typical items on the career path to elite participation in any field, including art. By the seventies, schools like CalArts had become a generative scene (or “mafia”) defining sites in and of themselves. Jones earned an MFA and PhD in art history from the University of South Carolina and Ohio University respectively. By the time of his dissertation in 1981, a landmark diagnostic *Report on Knowledge* had been published by Jean-François Lyotard. Commissioned by the Council of Universities of Quebec, *The Postmodern Condition* hypothesized the computer’s transformative role in society. As a state is legitimated through the narrative it tells of and to itself, the postmodern power rests in a ruling stratum of decision makers who control the information regulating social knowledge. In this scenario, the sixties’ strife resulted from a “demoralization of researchers” spurred by the increasing alienation of the knower from the known.²

Jones referred to Lyotard’s text repeatedly over the next decade, with emphasis on *decision makers* as his primary audience. He grasped the role of art — and political art in particular — as “sanctioned forms” furnishing “an oppressive system with sufficient evidence of benevolence, tolerance and altruism.”³ This realism as to the limitations of art to effect change directly kindled a cynical reformist in Jones. Rather than overt confrontations with viewers in an institutional context, Jones sought to engage the collector class durationally in their own arena. Exploiting their appreciation for modern abstraction imparted by higher education, he seeded unsettling referents in reminiscent forms. He fantasized about lunches in which a colleague inquires about a domestically installed work, one for which the collector becomes complicit in delivering its ruse. Jones saw the challenge to received notions of meaning-making as a form of change akin to “a virus that might unfold over several years.”⁴

Jones’s last solo exhibition of new work occurred at Metro Pictures Gallery, New York, in 1998. That year marked his transition from senior critic at Yale to chairing the Department of Visual Art at Columbia University. In 2001 he arrived in Los Angeles to begin a tumultuous stint as the first provost of ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena. His interests were increasingly interdisciplinary, eventually landing him in Stockholm, where he founded The Experience Design Group at Konstfack University. Over the next decade Jones sought to implement a model of education reflecting the corporate desire for “creative problem solving” wherein the “MFA is the new MBA.”⁵ The desire to access centers of political decision-making through supposed back doors left him entangled in the operations of its ivory towers. The final projects of his career involved working with students on designing hospices in Sweden and England, what he phrased as “end of life experience.”

NOAH BARKER

1 Ronald Jones, Untitled (Document Work), Handwritten notes, Weather report, Polaroid on board, 18 in x 24 in, 1979.

2 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, 1984.

3 Ronald Jones, *Nothing Corrupts Like Morality*, 1993.

4 Ronald Jones, interviewed by Ariane Mueller, 1992.

5 Ronald Jones, *From Knowledge Production to Wisdom Creation: Transformation in The Post-disciplinary Era*, 2011.