issue 12 march · april 2006 $7.00

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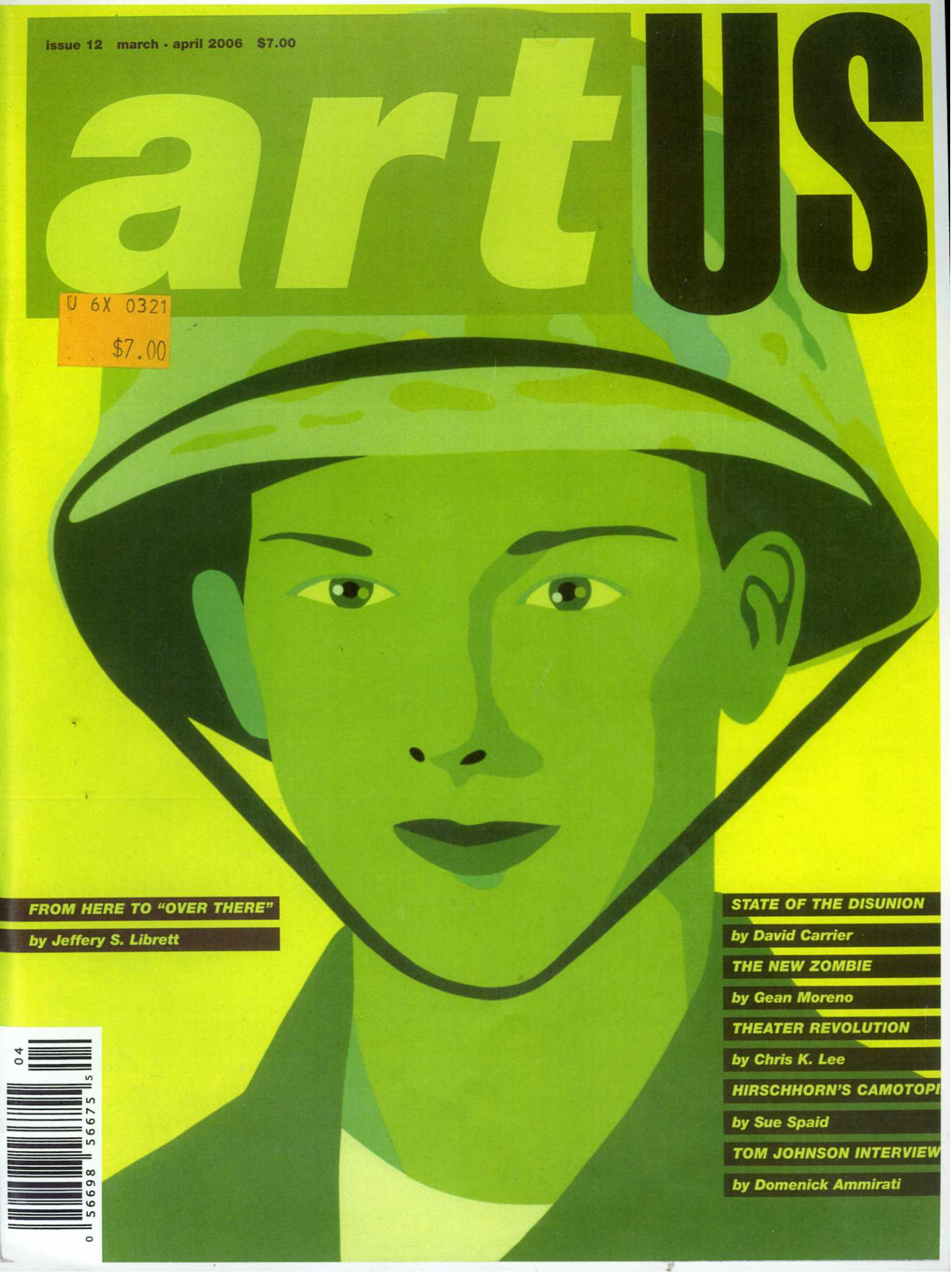

FROM HERE TO "OVER THERE"
by Jeffery S. Librett

STATE OF THE DISUNION
by David Carrier

THE NEW ZOMBIE
by Gean Moreno

THEATER REVOLUTION
by Chris K. Lee

HIRSCHHORN'S CAMOTOPI
by Sue Spaid

TOM JOHNSON INTERVIEW
by Domenick Ammirati

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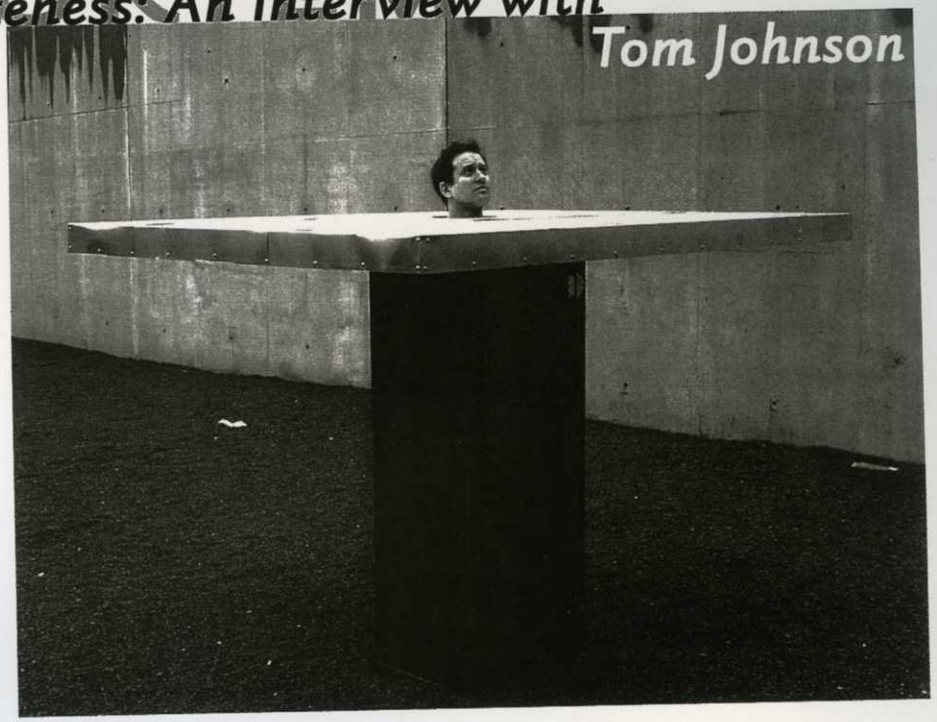
The Theory of Whiteness: An Interview with Tom Johnson

DOMENICK AMMIRATI



Last summer for a few hours every Saturday, a tall balding white man stood in P.S.1's sunny courtyard confined inside a metal locker, his head protruding through a table-like platform, talking to passersby. The piece by Tom Johnson, titled Standing Date *(2005), was an extension of the artist's live and video monologues, sculpture, and drawing, all of which typically involve obsessions with gender, race, and the fundamental ontological questions of being in the world.*

Johnson received his MFA from Bard College in 1999. In the years since, he's worked in New York in positions including studio assistant for Matthew Barney and massage therapist at one of the city's luxury hotels (one highlight: a massage given to ex-President George H.W. Bush). Since 2004 Johnson's work has been the subject of solo exhibitions at New York's CANADA and MIT's Center for Advanced Visual Studies and has been included in shows at New York's SculptureCenter and Arthouse in Austin, Texas, as well as in the first Performa Biennial. Johnson is performing Standing Date *in the courtyard of the Castello di Rivoli, open to museumgoers and non-museumgoers alike, as part of the inaugural Turin Triennial, through January 2006. Tom and I spoke shortly before he left for Italy, two days before Halloween.*

Domenick Ammirati: How are you? Insanely busy?

Tom Johnson: I'm a bit shocked that in just a week and a half I'm going to be standing in a metal box in the middle of an Italian town. Otherwise, yeah, busy. I've been doing a radio performance for that Performa thing, for WFMU.

DA: What did you talk about?

TJ: Well, it's called *Bedtime* [2005] and it's basically me in my bed with a microphone, talking. I'm trying to portray that state where you're alone in bed in an extremely safe yet obsessional place with the covers around you and you're thinking through different thoughts. I recorded it mostly late at night. It has a very meandering, nighttime feeling. I talk about the bed and the night and the way the bed is like the night or the way the bed is like the ocean or the way the night is like the ocean and then I start thinking about how my leg is sort of like a tentacle—because I taped the piece just after they saw that giant squid [first photographed by Japanese researchers on September 28, 2005].

DA: Oh yeah, I heard about that.

TJ: Then I end up telling this story—I don't know where I read it, it was a short story. It's about this high school girl. She's in class where she has a crush on the boy in front of her, and she slides way down in the chair and she reaches her big toe across the space between their desks and she pushes her toe into his body, like through his skin, at the base of his spine. So she kind of fucks him from behind, with her toe, without him knowing, kinda.

DA: Are you sure you didn't invent this story?

TJ: Yeah. But I think I've made incredibly good use of it.

DA: It's very hot and strange. By the way, you never wrote a paper about the dangers of spanking, did you?

TJ: No.

DA: I found this thing online today, "The Sexual Dangers of Spanking" by Tom Johnson. It seemed plausible.

TJ: When you Google me I don't really come up, but there are a number of Tom Johnsons who do.

DA: It's impossible to find you online, your name is so Everyman. But I was thinking that that generic quality functions really well with your preoccupations.

TJ: In that first show I had at CANADA [2001], one of the phrases I used—it was in some of the titles—was "a white transparent medium." Like I was or could be a white transparent medium. I have this fantasy ambition towards this place of transparency; it's the same through all my stuff. Like I could massage anyone, you know, I'm so *clear* inside myself. I could massage George Bush, I could massage this bad person; I can stand right above the lingerie model and massage her breasts, which is a thing I had to do just the other week. But since I'm so *free* inside, I can do it all.

DA: Because you disappear.

TOM JOHNSON, STANDING DATE, "GREATER NEW YORK SHOW", P.S.1, 2005, INSTALLATION DETAIL. PHOTO PHIL GRAUER. COURTESY THE ARTIST & CANADA, NEW YORK.

TJ: Because I dis-a-fucking-peer. Which is the thing that I've been trying to do ever since I was little. And only recently, in art, have I begun this circuitous way of revealing that I now know that I can't disappear. I enact this peculiar presentness while I talk about being transparent. Like the box thing, for instance.

DA: That goal of transparency comes from a very classic, for lack of a better term, Cartesian subjectivity. It's like the idea that the traditionally white-male-defined subjectivity is this universal subjectivity.

TJ: Exactly. And that's like the white canvas. That first CANADA show had to do with different kinds of whiteness, and Wittgenstein, his writing about color, where he talks about the impossibility of conceiving of a thing called a white transparent medium. Then I was like, oh, fuck, I can turn that toward race.

DA: So what kind of reactions do you get from African Americans about your work, both art people and non-art people?

TJ: I've only had just the beginnings of a, whatever you'd say, "reception." The most elaborated responses I've gotten were when I did that monologue at SculptureCenter.

DA: *What a Black Man Feels Like* [2004].

TJ: Originally I was gonna do it as an installation with a number of black male collaborators. There would have been a video version of the monologue, just me talking into the camera, playing on a monitor, and then these performers who would pretend to be other viewers at the museum. They would engage the real viewers in conversations about what I was saying. They could say whatever they wanted. So people would come to the museum and they'd see this white guy, being me, going on and on about race; and then there'd be this black guy, who it'd seem would be just another viewer, who would start talking to them about what I was saying.

To find people who would be up for doing it, I wrote this very articulated three-page summary of the concept of the piece and I posted it on Craigslist. Obviously there were plenty of people who just weren't interested, who didn't respond. But I got a whole bunch of responses from black male performers who felt like there actually was something to work with. And I interviewed, not that many, maybe six or eight.

The responses of people had a certain level of caution. Like, it was slightly dicey, in the sense that they had no idea who I was, as one never does, and then I'm putting forward this proposal of my sincerity and my availability to a real openness about this massive subject. The people who came and met me that were totally up for it were the performance types. A couple of the more theater-oriented people, actors really, wanted to come see it but didn't want to be involved. And then one of them called me back and asked me out. So in my opinion, I feel like he was interested.

DA: It's that sincerity you were talking about. You politely declined?

TJ: Well, I wasn't interested, in part 'cause I'm not attracted to men very powerfully.

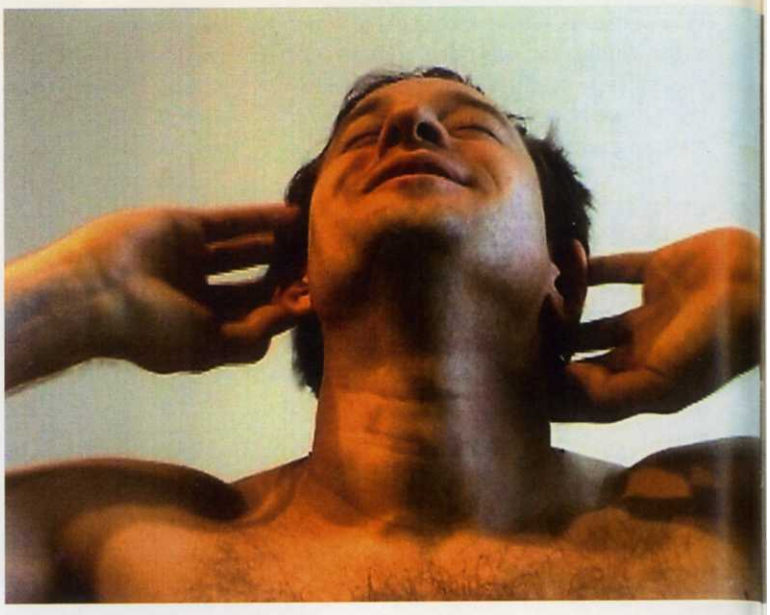
DA: I just have this feeling that if I was black listening to that piece, I feel as if it would make me angry. I would just want you to shut up.

TJ: Well, yeah. I think that would actually be a mistake. In my opinion, that piece offers everyone, both black and white, more room than there had been previously.

DA: What if a white person wanted you to shut up?

TJ: I feel like a white person would want me to shut up just because—and you know, anybody who wanted me to shut up, black or white, would probably want me to shut up for this reason—just because they would think it was nothing but solipsism.

TOM JOHNSON, ME AND MUHAMMED, 2001, COLOR PHOTOGRAPH. COURTESY THE ARTIST & CANADA, NEW YORK.



DA: That's a criticism you risk, certainly.

TJ: Totally. But I feel like it isn't actually solipsism. I feel like it's the opposite. So much of the time art just fucking means nothing to me, 'cause it seems so uselessly interested in its own idiom, and the points that it's making are points that are contingent on the fact that it's one piece of language use reacting to another piece of language use within this frame that's called "drawing," or whatever, and you know, I can't even *care*.

DA: But what's the alternative?

TJ: I'm interested in things that have meaning outside of a kind of reverie-producing pleasure space, that put shit up against each other. Like claiming that I am the same as Kofi Annan. Or even the phrase, "what a black man feels like"—there I'm putting two things up against each other. I'm putting the fact that I feel black men physically with my hands when I massage them up against the understanding of that phrase as "what a black man experiences as a conscious human in this society." Those are the spaces that actually feel useful to me.

DA: To talk more about your method of art making: the kind of self-investigation you practice has a long history at this point.

TJ: Actually, Anthony [Huberman, curator at SculptureCenter] was asking me about the box piece, and he said, you know, the issues involved with it, they're kind of old hat. They were mostly worked out in the '60s or '70s—like the object is actually an experience, even though there is an object, but the real object is the conversation that is ephemeral, and it's not in a gallery, it's outside. He said, you know, it doesn't really seem that interesting as art.

DA: How do you respond to that?

TJ: I think it's totally legit. But I guess the thing that *Standing Date* is most interested in is an actually felt and available response on the part of people who experience it—it's popular, in a way. Being committed to that popularness is what to me feels much more needed right now.

DA: It's funny Anthony said that about the '60s and '70s. Whenever I describe your art to somebody, basically it's like '70s feminist art by a straight white guy today.

TJ: I think that's a good way to describe it. I remember once after college I was with my first real serious girlfriend—my second real serious girlfriend—looking at this compendium of women performance artists, called *Angry Women* [RE:Search, 1991]. It had like an intense Medusa on the front cover. And it just totally blew my mind. This was before I had even admitted I wanted to go to art school or be an artist or anything. I remember my girlfriend being angry with me, because I was taking that idiom away from her. But I wanted to be them. Karen Finley was my hero. I wanted to just lay it all on the fucking line, you know, like, fuck that stupid minimalist box over there. Like, here's my vagina and here's what my blood looks like. Let's start from square one. Let's *actually* start from square one.

DA: Maybe your being a straight white guy is what makes it not old hat. Which brings us to around to the fact that you worked for Matthew Barney. It's so perfect.

TJ: There was anger toward him from the gay male community, that he was stealing their idiom. In a way it's the same thing as me and '70s female artists, or your question about race.

DA: But Barney takes the body in a sort of cryptic, coded direction that has nothing to do with where it came from, that original discourse of liberation.

TJ: But it's meant to. His effort is toward the end of trying to be freer. I feel like when you tell a story about how someone can get trapped, you're telling the story so that it won't happen. And the whole *Cremaster* thing is whether or not the

Tom Johnson, (left) Better Social Realism, *2003 (detail), graphite, plastic laminate, clay. Photo Phil Grauer.* Just Up, *DVD still. Courtesy the artist & CANADA, New York.*

organism is gonna go toward a place of maturity and participation in the world or whether it's gonna remain inside its self-satisfying loop.

DA: Which again relates back to you.

TJ: Yeah. Is it solipsism, or is it not? And that relates, obviously, to masculinity: the model of the man is the guy who's out in the world and who can confront things, and the model of the boy is the guy who's in his bedroom jacking off.

DA: That's a good way to put it. So, in Torino you're gonna do the box piece like a job, six hours a day, five days a week?

TJ: With a long lunch break. I mean, one of the ways that it's different from the '70s is that a lot of that stuff was interested in being what it said it was. If you poked a needle through your flesh, you really were poking the needle through your flesh. I feel like if I was doing that, it would be a significantly lamer piece. It really would be sort of retrograde. Like OK, I put myself into this position of pain? That seems totally self-involved. All of which is by way of saying, if it turns out that six hours is really uncomfortable, I won't do six hours a day.

DA: Do you ever get out of the box and talk to people?

TJ: The few times that I've gotten out of the box, and talked to a person that moments ago I was talking to from inside the box, it becomes much more difficult, for both of us.

DA: Then it's a real interaction suddenly. It's not theatrical anymore.

TJ: Totally. My therapist said that she thought maybe I was interested in "pseudo-closeness." Because in the box piece, I get to have this delicious sense of these people that I don't know—it's like promiscuity. I get to kind of *be with* one person after another. And it's the same with massage: just one person after another, but it's totally safe and easy.

DA: But if you weren't in a box you wouldn't be able to experience it that way.

TJ: No, unless I dealt with some of my shit better.

DA: But so how do people respond to you? The initial impression can be kind of jarring—there's the John the Baptist thing, and the box seems obviously physically uncomfortable.

TJ: People are always relieved that I'm nice and that I try to make them comfortable and answer their questions about the piece. It's kind of like being a host, a dinner host or a talk show host, except for "modern art." There's an enormous amount of work to do on the subject of why art has gotten so incomprehensible to people, why they feel so shut out from it and hostile toward it.

But the discomfort is a strong element. At P.S.1 I talked with a guy who said the box reminded him of a prison in Guinea. When he was young, he and his family had had to flee Guinea and move to the Ivory Coast because his father was going to be sent to this prison—his uncle was already in jail there. The prison was designed to torture you with sunlight, so it had no roof. It was right on the equator, and the sun would just beat down on you in your cell every day. It reminds me a little bit of that Kafka story, about that torture mechanism in the tropics?

Now when I think about the conversation I wonder whether he was just telling me the Africa story I wanted to hear, or whether I was hearing it that way—you know, *Heart of Darkness*, the continent that reveals the "true" human situation, Africa as a dark mirror. And of course that has to do with my work. When I deal with race, essentially I'm trying to re-use the history of white guys seeing black guys as some kind of projection or mirror space, but in a way that makes it very clear that that's what's going on.

DOMENICK AMMIRATI *is currently a fellow in the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston's Core Program. He is an editor of* artUS.

TOM JOHNSON, (LEFT) JUST UP, *DVD GRAB*. WHAT A BLACK MAN FEELS LIKE, *DVD GRAB, PERFORMED AT THE SCULPTURECENTER, 2004. COURTESY THE ARTIST & CANADA, NEW YORK.*