



Wojnarowicz, David (1954-1992)

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A controversial video still from a YouTube edition of David Wojnarowicz' video *Fire in My Belly* (1987).

American artist and writer David Wojnarowicz is critical to the history of late twentieth-century contemporary art. The first American gay artist to respond to the AIDS crisis with anger and moral outrage, he used his art as a polemical tool with which to indict those he held responsible for the AIDS epidemic and to document his own suffering.

Surprisingly, Wojnarowicz had no extensive formal training. Born in Red Bank, New Jersey into a severely dysfunctional family in 1954, he dropped out of high school soon after acknowledging his homosexuality as an adolescent. He was a street kid in New York City at the age of sixteen, turning tricks in Times Square and keeping company with hustlers and other outsiders.

Wojnarowicz found salvation in making art and writing. Yet the rawness of his life experiences would always be the stuff of a highly personal and confrontational art.

As a young man, Wojnarowicz hitchhiked across the United States and lived in San Francisco and Paris for several months. In 1978, he settled in New York.

By the early 1980s he had become, like graffiti artists Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, a vital fixture in the East Village art scene in lower Manhattan.

Wojnarowicz had his first solo exhibitions in New York in the early 1980s. In 1985 he had a major exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. His growing prominence as a nationally recognized artist is witnessed by invitations to participate in the 1987 and 1991 Whitney Biennials at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York.

Wojnarowicz came to maturity as a contemporary artist and writer during a decade when the arts sought increasingly to address issues of gender, race, and ethnicity. A younger postmodern generation of artists gave expression to these concerns in non-traditional media and often worked in multimedia.

For example, Wojnarowicz expressed himself in film, installation art, sculpture, photography, performance art, painting, collage, drawing, and writing. Indeed, he became as fine a writer as he was a visual artist.

Before being diagnosed HIV-positive in 1987, Wojnarowicz tracked in his confessional art a life that vacillated between sensual abandon and despair, bringing into focus a dark vision of existence that drew upon the examples of Arthur Rimbaud and Jean Genet.

Also influenced by Pop Art and the example of the writers of the Beat movement of the 1950s, Wojnarowicz drew upon images of popular culture and uniquely American idioms, though often rendering them ironically or satirically.

Frequently unabashedly homoerotic, Wojnarowicz's pre-AIDS art also often commented trenchantly on a

failure of love in contemporary society. In *Fuck You Faggot Fucker*, a 1984 photographic collage, he juxtaposes the vivid dream of love with its often bleak reality.

Another early work, *Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian* (1982), in acrylic and spray paint on masonite, is particularly interesting for its self-conscious use of gay iconography.

With the onset of his disease, Wojnarowicz turned fiercely political. The tragedy and injustices of the AIDS epidemic within the gay community became the central subject in his art and writings.

He took to task the medical community and the federal government for their indifference to the pressing health issues of gay men. He passionately protested the fact that, as he put it, so many people were dying "slow and vicious and unnecessary deaths because fags and dykes and junkies are expendable in this country."

Wojnarowicz took a public stand against homophobia in published interviews and essays that earned him the vitriolic ire of the conservative religious right, specifically Reverend Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association, Senator Jesse Helms, and John Cardinal O'Connor.

Wojnarowicz was the first American gay artist to step forward in anger and give expression to his moral outrage. His "post-diagnostic art," as he called it, indicted all those he held responsible for the social and private horrors of those dying from AIDS, including himself. Toward the end of his life, his defiant art was a polemical and poignant record of his cruel demise.

Of all the media and formats for which Wojnarowicz is known, the works that combine image and text are the most complex and moving, offering the best summary of his art.

An untitled work from 1992, the year he died, presents a gelatin silver print (a black-and-white photograph) with a text in blood-red ink screenprinted on it. Both the photograph and the text are Wojnarowicz's own.

The photograph is of the artist's joined and bandaged hands, whose palms are opened in a pathetic and imploring gesture. Registering the ravages of disease, the torn and dirty bandages suggest the hands of a leper. Wojnarowicz presents himself as the reviled social outcast.

The text is from the chapter "Spiral" in Wojnarowicz's book *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline* (1992). The last portion of the quoted passage reads: "I am shouting my invisible words. I am getting so weary. I am growing tired. I am waving at you from here. I am crawling and looking for the aperture of complete and final emptiness. I am vibrating in isolation among you. I am screaming but it comes out like pieces of clear ice. I am signaling that the volume of all this is too high. I am waving. I am waving my hands. I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough."

In another gelatin silver print made by Wojnarowicz in the year of his death, he rephrased these sentiments in an extreme close-up of his head as it is half-buried in dirt that barely leaves mouth, nose, and closed eyes visible. The artist offers himself as a living death mask.

Wojnarowicz's grim imagery of rage and despair has its source in the specifics of a dying gay man, yet it also stands, more generally, as a memorial to injustice and human suffering.

He died on July 22, 1992.

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About the Author

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