Born in Flames

The short life and long legacy of David Wojnarowicz

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Always on the edge, David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) was hustling in Times Square by age 10. By the time he died from AIDS at 37, his ferocious words and images had ignited controversy on Capitol Hill and crystallized a community's anger about the epidemic. Wojnarowicz's first full retrospective is at New York's New Museum through June and Grove Press just published his diaries. POZ *asked* Village Voice *staff writer C. Carr, sci-fi author Samuel R. Delany and ACT UP activist James A. Baggett to weigh the impact of this provocative writer and artist.*

Art World Iconoclast

David Wojnarowicz's work emerged directly from his life. He knew little art history, had no training past high school and made a point of not trolling the galleries to see what everyone else was doing. Exposed to unusual hardship as a boy, as a sexually active teen and as a street person, he didn't see his experience reflected in the culture. Art was his antidote.

As a homeless kid, David had sketched on shirt cardboard and pizza boxes. As a raw artist without portfolio in the early '80s, he stenciled New York City's downtown walls with soldiers, burning houses and a man with a target on his face. His sudden emergence as a potential multimedia art star coincided with the precipitous rise of the East Village gallery scene. There, for a brief time in the mid-'80s, the art world cracked open, allowing for new ideas about what an artist could be. Outsiders were insiders -- as long as their styles fell within the parameters of a certain post-suburban Neo-Expressionism. David's apocalyptic subtext -- sometimes it wasn't so sub -- fit right in. In 1984, at the zenith of East Village hype, he had work in 33 different exhibitions. He reacted to the attention by beginning a secret project in an abandoned pier off Canal Street, adding big paintings to the crumbling walls.

Finding the personal in the political and vice versa came naturally to David. He became the AIDS epidemic's visionary witness, raging over each loss as the world's loss, while fatalistic about his own diagnosis. In 1989, photographer Nan Goldin asked him to write a catalog essay for a New York gallery show on AIDS she'd curated, "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing." While David's work always had a layer of moral outrage, this essay burned with a furious vision of real enemies ("fat cannibal" Cardinal O'Connor) and fantastical retribution (dousing Jesse Helms with gasoline).

Controversy over this piece made David a target of the religious right. In 1990, Republican Rep.

Dana Rohrabacher denounced his retrospective, funded by the National Endowment for the Arts. Rev. Donald Wildmon of the American Family Association (AFA) then combed that exhibition's catalog for sexual imagery. Excising fragments from David's densely layered pictures, Wildmon xeroxed assorted penises and sex acts, then mailed the results to every member of Congress.

David sued Wildmon for misrepresenting his work and defaming his character.

After a one-day trial in June 1990, the judge enjoined the AFA from further publication of its pamphlet on David's work, but awarded the artist a mere dollar in damages. Though bitter, David kept a sense of humor. He announced that, depending on how he felt, he would spend this dollar on either an ice cream cone or a condom.

—C. Carr

Student of Desire

David Wojnarowicz was a sexual radical.

What does that mean? He tried to write about sex honestly. He tried to picture it accurately. Although it doesn't say so, the wash illustrations for his book *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline* (1992) are largely from the back balcony of the Variety Photoplays Theater on Third Avenue below 14th Street, before it was closed down as a porn house and remodeled. You can recognize the particular space from among New York City's several sex theaters because of the chairs and the wall on which a man leans, pants down around his ankles, waiting to be fucked.

Being a sexual radical means focusing a certain amount of attention on the details of the act. It means presenting those details without letting them be swept up either by a discourse of sentimentality or by an equally pervasive discourse of horror -- discourses that wait to gather everything to themselves and prevaricate shamelessly about the topic to all who would listen.

Some things most of us would find pretty horrible happened to Wojnarowicz. He was raped by a trucker in New Jersey when he was a kid. In his Vertigo comic book, *Seven Miles a Second* (1996), with artist James Romberger, Wojnarowicz details some of these adventures:

I had been drugged, tossed out a second story window, strangled, smacked in the head with a slab of marble, punched in the face at least seventeen times, almost stabbed four times, beat about my face too many times to recount, almost completely suffocated, and woken up once tied to a hotel bed with my head over the side all the blood rushed down into it making it feel like it was going to explode, all this before I turned fifteen.

Out of context, there's no way to read this except as a confirmation of the horror. In context, however, it becomes a confirmation of the horror survived: survived not as some form of sentimental uplift, but simply in the manner one survives the most boring afternoons in the July heat or the equally dull February midnight. Wojnarowicz got hold of a truth that French novelist Flaubert also knew wonderfully well: sex manifests through desire, and desire functions through absence. Like language, desire is a complex structure of what, just now, we don't have. (That's

why we talk about it; that's why we want it.) We may see it, we may pursue it, we may wander in search of it along a foggy evening waterfront or through the East Village at dawn or along the back balcony of a pornographic movie at four in the afternoon. But even when we clasp the lover to our body, even when one body enters another, and the fluids of one mix with the fluids of the other, absence lies at the core of each. In his prose works, *Close to the Knives* (1991) and the posthumous *Waterfront Journals* (1996), Wojnarowicz the writer made his awareness of this essential absence palpable, page by page.

—Samuel R. Delany

Activist Instigator

Seven years ago, as a final wish, activist and fashion designer Tim Bailey requested that we, his friends -- a rag-tag ACT UP/New York affinity group made up of writers, waiters and various other professionals-turned-activists -- deliver his lifeless, AIDS-ravaged body to Bill Clinton's doorstep. Before then, we'd handcuffed ourselves to an anchor desk during a live news broadcast, deposited a casket full of bloody bones in the Citicorp Building during lunch hour, even orchestrated a demonstration of thousands against George Bush at his summer home. But this idea brought us onto new terrain.

We watched as political funerals in Ireland and South Africa marked the death of citizens lost on the battlefield of might over right. We discussed at length a piece by John James in *AIDS Treatment News*, in which he suggested political funerals for people dying of AIDS in the United States. And we read an incendiary 1991 text by artist David Wojnarowicz:

I imagine what it would be like if friends had a demonstration each time a lover or a friend or a stranger died of AIDS. I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lovers or neighbors would take the dead body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles an hour to Washington, DC, and blast through the gates of the White House and come to a screeching halt before the entrance and dump their lifeless form on the front steps.

Wojnarowicz's work became part of our consciousness as activists. Shortly after he died of AIDS, we organized a memorial procession that began at his loft and wound through the streets of the East Village -- complete with banners, dirge-pounding drums and burning torches. It was a sort of dress rehearsal.

Just three months later, on the eve of the 1992 presidential election, we found ourselves in the streets carrying a real body -- that of another friend, Mark Fisher -- from a Washington Square church up to Republican headquarters in midtown. As we walked beneath umbrellas in the pouring rain, his plain wooden coffin on our shoulders, we passed out flyers emblazoned with a message Mark had written for just this purpose. In it he quoted Wojnarowicz's powerful words.

When Tim Bailey died the next year, we all knew what we had to do. A friend in the funeral business embalmed his too-slender body and we drove it in a rented van full-speed across four state lines to our nation's capitol, where we were met by trucked-in activists ready to conduct his ad hoc funeral right in front the White House. We were set upon by no less than three law-

enforcement agencies and escorted out of town by a dozen police cruisers -- with full lights and sirens.

Tim had wanted his funeral to be fierce and defiant, to make the public statement that his death from AIDS was a form of political assassination. It was David Wojnarowicz who first imagined such an act.

—James A. Baggett

ON THE WATERFRONT

In the Shadow of the American Dream, David Wojnarowicz's truth-telling diaries

1980

Afternoon brings me down to the river, a lazy afternoon with the highway traffic rushing along past me, bringing with it all concerns of the working world, schedules blown away in that traffic, in the breeze from the river as I pass beneath the West Side Highway in between slow-moving columns of cars...

Inside in one of the back ground-floor rooms of the warehouse, there's a couple of small offices built into a garagelike space. Papers from old shipping lines scattered like bomb blasts among wrecked pieces of furniture, three-legged desks, a Naugahyde couch of mint green upside down, small rectangles of light and river and wind over on the far wall. Met this French guy, born in Paris, working in Los Angeles, has this navy blue sweater with buttons that line the left shoulder, allowing me to slowly fumble in shy awkwardness to set them free, lift my pale hands beneath the sweater, finding the lip edge of his tight white T-shirt, feeling the graceful yet hard curve of his abdomen, his chest rolling slightly in pleasure.

We're moving back and forth within the tiny cubicle, an old soggy couch useless on its side, the carpet beneath our shifting feet revealing our steps with slight pools of water. We're moving around, shifting into positions that allow us to bend and sway and lean forward into each other, arms moving so our tongues can meet with nothing more than a shy hesitation, sunlight burning through the river window empty of glass but covered with a screen that reduces shapes and colors into tiny dots like a film directed by Seurat. His mouth parts, showing brilliant white teeth within the tan of his face, hands unhooking the buttons at the front of my trousers, the arc of his back sending indiscernible shivers through my arms and legs -- haunted by the lines of shadows that dip down around his warm neckline, I lean down and find the collar of his sweater and draw it back and away from the nape of his neck and gently probe it with the tip of my tongue.

Later he took me back to his place belonging to a friend of his who is on retreat, and in the shadows of the living room he pulled a gleaming new guitar from its case and proudly rubbed his hands along its neck. We rolled some weed and he made toast and tea and upstairs in the bedroom we got it on again and he fell back into a relaxed state, his arms outstretched and eyelids closed down, his body brown from some faraway sun, and I let one hand slowly explore him, touching, sliding gently over every inch of surface, dipping around the legs, between them,

up the hips, following the lines of muscles, the curve of his limbs, the collarbone, fingers smoothing out his forehead, brushing his temples, dreaming whole relationships against his reposing body.

1988

I feel like it’s happening to this person called David, but not to me. It’s happening to this person who looks exactly like me, is as tall as me and I can see through his eyes as if I am in his body, but it’s still not me. So I go on and occasionally this person called David cries or makes plans for the possibility of death or departure or going to a doctor for checkups or dabbles in underground drugs in hopes for more time, and then eventually I get the body back and that David disappears for a while and I go about my daily business doing what I do, what I need or care to do. I sometimes feel bad for that David and can’t believe he is dying.

1988

THE THING THAT’S IMPORTANT ABOUT MEMORIALS IS THEY BRING A PRIVATE GRIEF OUT OF THE SELF AND MAKE IT A LITTLE MORE PUBLIC WHICH ALLOWS FOR COMMUNICATIVE TRANSITION, PEELS AWAY ISOLATION, BUT THE MEMORIAL IS IN ITSELF STILL AN ACCEPTANCE OF IMMOBILITY, INACTIVITY. TOO MANY TIMES I’VE SEEN THE COMMUNITY BRUSH OFF ITS MEMORIAL CLOTHES, ITS GRIEVING CLOTHES, AND GATHER IN THE CONFINES OF AT LEAST FOUR WALLS AND UTTER WORDS OR SONGS OF BEAUTY TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE PASSING OF ONE OF ITS CHILDREN/PARENTS/LOVERS BUT AFTER THE MEMORIAL THEY RETURN HOME AND WAIT FOR THE NEXT PASSING, THE NEXT DEATH. IT’S IMPORTANT TO MARK THAT TIME OR MOMENT OF DEATH. IT’S HEALTHY TO MAKE THE PRIVATE PUBLIC, BUT THE WALLS OF THE ROOM OR CHAPEL ARE THIN AND UNNECESSARY. ONE SIMPLE STEP CAN BRING IT OUT INTO A MORE PUBLIC SPACE. DON’T GIVE ME A MEMORIAL IF I DIE. GIVE ME A DEMONSTRATION.

— *from* In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz *edited by Amy Scholder, Copyright 1999 the estate of David Wojnarowicz. Reprinted by permission of Grove/Atlantic, Inc.*

For details about the show and book, see "Where to Find It".

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