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# Dispelling the Myth of the One Tribe Nation The Work of David W ojnarowicz

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# Dispelling the Myth of the One Tribe Nation

The Work of David Wojnarowicz

By

Jimmy C. Powell

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## Abstract

The work of artist David Wojnarowicz continues to illicit controversy 20 years after his death. Recently censored at the Smithsonian, his work is an example of the power of art as a tool for resistance and elucidation of not only political oppression, but cultural as well. Wojnarowicz explored the hegemonic relationship between agency and structure, making private moments public to dispel the notion of a 'one tribe nation'. Starting with a theoretical framework based on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of field production and ending with Giorgio Agamben's theory on the state of exception, this iconoclastic artist is examined to explore the power of his work from the late 1970s to the height of the AIDS crisis.

*We are born into a preinvented existence within a tribal nation of zombies and in that illusion of a one-tribe nation there are real tribes.*

Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives* 37

The art of David Wojnarowicz continues to be provocative and controversial 20 years after his death. A man dealing with various issues, none uncommon in our society, such as sexual identity, a difficult home life as a child, abandonment and isolation, Wojnarowicz was able to create works that explored his experiences on the fringe, elucidating the idea of common uncommonness. His work showed a reality that many saw as perverse and degrading, but did so in a way that often displayed a caring and a love that seems almost paradoxical given the often sexual themes. Beginning with a focus on the subculture in New York City that to many exemplified a disease of society, Wojnarowicz exposed a reality that pushed against preconceptions and cultural norms. His work illustrated a truth that transcended the urban landscape and created a means of resistance and power. He dispelled the myth of a homogenous morality by giving a voice to the voiceless. The body of work that David Wojnarowicz left the world is a prime example of the power of art to explicate socio-cultural and political oppression. Through his writings and visual works, the artist was able to convey his ability to see the imposed structures of dominance held in place by political and religious institutions. Through the recognition and resistance of these often taken-for-granted matrices of domination, the artist was able to help raise the voice of the resistance to cacophonous levels at the height of the AIDS crisis. Built on this foundation of the hegemonic relationship between structure and agency, the

body of work created by Wojnarowicz proves that art in the western world has not been commodified into bourgeois irrelevance.

What is the impact of Wojnarowicz's work today? How can it be viewed out of its context of past intolerance? As gays and lesbians have achieved larger social acceptance in the years since Wojnarowicz's death, has his work been relegated to LGBT history? Is his work only to be understood within the context of the AIDS crisis? Can we illuminate the depth and power of his work by examining the cultural norms it challenged? The ability to see the societal structures and articulate the importance of agency takes Wojnarowicz out of his own temporal geography and lands him in the art historical canon as proof that art is indeed a tool, not just for the sublime, but for complex forms of resistance.

Born in Red Bank, New Jersey in 1954 (Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz* VIII) Wojnarowicz's childhood, which afforded little stability, pushed him to question cultural systems in order to mentally survive. Kidnapped from his single mother by his military father, he and his two siblings lived on the run to elude the authorities. It was not until they were returned to the custody of their mother in 1963 (Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz* VIII) that Wojnarowicz realized that his life was not the norm. This custodial misadventure would give him an understanding of perspective and the malleable nature of reality itself. From the value and structural shift he experienced when he returned to his mother's custody after having lived with his father, Wojnarowicz understood that his acceptance of reality was predicated on a prescribed set of norms imposed by others, norms that created a framework of his understanding of the world. Wojnarowicz began selling his body on the streets of Manhattan as a means of escape from an oppressive family life. Hustling became a means of survival for him, as

prostitution proved to be a way to feed himself, and to gain a sense of affection that he had been deprived of in his childhood home. In *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* Wojnarowicz recounts the various needs his street life and prostitution satiated, and the risks that such a life entailed. While he never glorified his days of prostitution, he did recognize the pleasure and temporary feelings of intimacy he experienced. In his journal he wrote, "In loving him [random stranger], I saw great houses being erected that would soon slide into the waiting and stirring seas. I saw him freeing me from the silences of the interior life" (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 17). The juxtaposition of this slaking of the need for intimacy and the violence and instability he experienced as a homeless hustler increased his ability to elucidate social-structural slippages. His lack of the shame that societal constructs call for regarding this kind of victimization allowed him to recognize these structurally perpetuated norms as a societal creation (as opposed to nature or a god). Such norms were contestable and possibly even changeable. Like Marcel Duchamp, the French Dadaist artist whose often controversial art works challenged the very notion of what constitutes art, Wojnarowicz used art to gain a liminal vantage point within the socio-cultural landscape, which gave him a better understanding of the paradigms of our collective reality(ies) that are usually taken for granted.

An understanding of the overarching 'structure' of social reality informed Wojnarowicz's art work; the need this understanding would increase exponentially as AIDS ripped its way into the world. In an *Arts Magazine* interview in 1988 Wojnarowicz described the process he employed to increase access to the prescribed structures that so informed his work. His method involved starting with one element, and then free associating multiple images associated with that element. He then would cull and organize. He notes:

One specific idea is that the world is a place born into with a preinvented existence, where everything's been laid out. Perhaps the most radical thing you can do, then, is use your imagination. With all these different indicators seeming to press on you wherever you go – stopping for a traffic light, walking on the sidewalk instead of the middle of the street, the imagination, to is shaped somehow. But I still think there are keys that can unlock it, you can break through a lot of things...like socialization (Rose 61).

The understanding of a social framework in which players are limited by various normative constraints gave Wojnarowicz's work a texture and weight that would prove valuable in the late 1980s.

As socialization starts at birth, many find it difficult (if not impossible) to extricate themselves from the social context in which they live. This preinvented world Wojnarowicz identifies is what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as *doxa*. Defined as the taken-for-granted beliefs and habits that inform our reality but go unnoticed, Bourdieu states in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*:

Systems of classification which reproduce, in their own specific logic, the objective classes, i.e. the divisions by sex, age, or position in the relations of production, make their specific contribution to the reproduction of the power relations of which they are the product, by securing the misrecognition, and hence the recognition of the arbitrariness on which they are based: in the extreme case, that is to say, when there is a quasi-perfect correspondence between the objective order and the subjective principles of organization (as in ancient societies) the natural and social world appears as self-evident. This experience we shall call *doxa*, so as to distinguish it from an orthodox or heterodox belief implying awareness and recognition of the possibility of different or antagonistic beliefs (164).

Bourdieu's articulation of systems of power relation reproduction gives us a theoretical lens through which we can re-consider Wojnarowicz's work. Socio-structural systems of classification that shape identity and agency reproduce existing power structures. Bourdieu attributes the self-evident quality of doxa to the symmetry between the norm maintaining structure and subjective belief. People fail to recognize that a societally produced paradigm exists; it just *is* and always *has been*.

The power of David Wojnarowicz's work lies in his ability to understand this doxic structure, and the modes of its reproduction. In "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" Clifford Geertz describes culture, noting "...that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative in search of meaning" (Wilk). David Wojnarowicz recognizes this web's existence and reminds us that many are trapped in the web with restricted agency to change the structure. Heterosexism or heteronormality is a good example of this doxic web. The prominence of this structure in the United States, which was widespread until recent LGBT visibility, only recognized heterosexual relationships as legitimate. Homosexual relationships were viewed as deviant and sinful, whereas heterosexual relationships were held up as a required building block of the American family. Heterosexual relationships were the accepted norm, yet Wojnarowicz saw this requirement as an illusion. "Everyone I know has come from a childhood where they suffered some element of abuse at the hands of their parents. They watch the marriages of their parents turn into ugly battlegrounds whose parameters were defined by the four sides of a house" (*Close to the Knives* 255). Wojnarowicz rejected the claim of heteronormative hegemony. In *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbian and Gay Men*, Gregory Herek defines the term



heterosexism as “an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community” (Herek 89). He posits that “like racism, sexism, and other ideologies of oppression, heterosexism is manifested both in societal customs and institutions, such as religion and the legal systems (referred to here as cultural heterosexism), and the individual attitudes and behaviors (referred to as psychological heterosexism...’ (Herek 89). For Herek, cultural heterosexism provides the backdrop for the kinds of antigay hate crimes that are often referenced in Wojnarowicz’s work. In *The Waterfront Journals*, themes of hate and abuse are rampant as Wojnarowicz gives voice to the voiceless. The experiences shared are chilling examples of the often hateful climate of the 1980s. Wojnarowicz’s visual art alludes to these injustices in a confrontational way that refuses to accept complacent victimhood. His writings worked to offer illuminating passages that revealed what lies between the lines of the existing matrix of heterosexual cultural typicality.

While Wojnarowicz addressed the invisible sociocultural web in most of his work, he also addresses the visible one. He explained in an 1988 interview that his use of collage medium allowed him to replicate the multilayered visual image that one has when walking down a city street (Rose 62). This medium is a good representation of the superimposed semiology which, he notes, is often paradoxical in nature; the homeless person that is trying to stay alive in the same view shed as a boutique selling \$1,000 handbags, which the city dweller witnesses daily without noting its absurdity. Wojnarowicz’s method was one that came directly from a stream of consciousness. His unstructured methods of collage allowed him to feel his way through imagery to respond to these social absurdities. His attempt to pull images and text in a more abstract, less logical way allowed him to unplug from the all-consuming narrative of social propriety. This gave his work a raw, organic and intuitively insightful edge.

Wojnarowicz was not a populist or activist for the gay and lesbian community, but rather an advocate of acknowledgment of existing paradigms that perpetuated suffering and limited the flourishing of individuals and groups on the fringe of society. While this explication often centered on injustices inflicted on sexual minorities (more so during the AIDS crisis), it was by no means restricted to them. The perpetual outsider, Wojnarowicz both shunned the high art establishment and eschewed middle class gay culture. His focus was on the situation, the plight, the hypocrisy. He was not interested in giving prominent status to any particular group. The artist felt a kinship with the socioeconomically disenfranchised. His history of homelessness gave him an understanding of the general set of characteristics that become part of the fabric of a person, also known as the Bourdieuan notion of *habitus*.<sup>1</sup> He explained in an interview with Matthew Rose in 1988 that the effects of long term homelessness are not something you can change:

...I had a certain amount of structure where I could kind of repair the damage and get off the streets, find work, live a regulated lifestyle for a couple of years. And it worked, because one thing I discovered living on the streets is that you can't change it. People yell "Get a job" but you can't get out of it; you carry a certain amount of energy that no matter how good your clothes are, you're surrounded by this energy and people pick up on it right away. They see it in your eyes (Rose 62).

Once someone has been homeless for an extended period of time, Wojnarowicz argues, homelessness becomes a semi-permanent part of one's being. One's location, speech, mannerisms, and gait are all affected in ways that others can see or sense. This insight would align Wojnarowicz with the homeless, which made an alignment with the gay and lesbian

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<sup>1</sup> *Habitus*: Bourdieu defines as 'durable, transposable system of definitions' acquired in early life as a result of the conscious and unconscious practices of environment (*Habitus*).

community problematic for Wojnarowicz. This was especially true for the “affluence-oriented commercial gay scene” (Gove 138). The lack of socioeconomic security in his youth informed his creation of diverse marginalized cultural experiences. In his book *The Waterfront Journals*, for example, Wojnarowicz depicts a large cross-section of persons and experiences, all of whom push the reader to question their own understanding of difference and the socio-moral structures that contrast difference.

Wojnarowicz’s understanding and consistent rejection of dominant sociocultural structures is a unifying thread that runs through his body of work from the late 1970s to his death in 1992. Even works that are often viewed as romantic address these preexisting paradigms in one way or another. The *Arthur Rimbaud Series* is one such example. Touted by some as glorifying the freedoms of New York City in the later 1970s and early 1980s, these haunting images express the language of the fringe, where Wojnarowicz felt very much at home. His photographs taken at various locations in Manhattan, often at the piers on the Hudson river, contain a depth that can only be truly understood by the inhabitants of the spaces photographed. Wojnarowicz disorients by adding mystery to what at first glance seems so obvious. In doing so he hands the cultural capital over to the disenfranchised, and flips the Bourdieuan field.

### *Rimbaud Series: Cultural Field Production and Interpretation of Art*

*My fear was based on understanding the social structure that beckoned to me and promised a life of security and support to me if I would just embrace its illusion and lies.*

Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives* 170

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Pierre Bourdieu examines the mechanisms that create and maintain cultural fields, the arenas in which various capital is exchanged. Wojnarowicz understands that various characteristics acquired in life restrict a person in his or her social mobility, and influence identity formation. Bourdieu posits that modes of domination are articulated and reproduced in most areas of cultural practice, such as art, personal taste, food, clothing, and language, to name a few (Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* 2). Art, especially in Western capitalist societies, is not only a practice but a field that is often used as a tool to separate—or to reinforce separation -- into sociocultural/socioeconomic hierarchies. Bourdieu explains that cultural codes must be immediately comprehended to understand art and/ or perceived artistic intent. Since less educated observers lack many of these cultural codes, they require realistic representation that includes meaningful images from everyday life (Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* 215-217). David Wojnarowicz's early work clearly displays an understanding of agency within a field, whether that field be sociopolitical, cultural, or economic. While agency, or the ability of individuals to act independently in their environment, is always constrained to some degree, Wojnarowicz shows that some agents are more constrained than others.

In the *Arthur Rimbaud Series*, one of his first major artistic ventures, Wojnarowicz created a series of 24 gelatin silver prints of a man (often himself) wearing a flat mask of the nineteenth century poet Arthur Rimbaud posing in various locations. This series not only created a visual autobiographical narrative, but gave voice to the fringe community in which Wojnarowicz lived. By creating works that offered a cryptic glimpse into the lives of the marginalized citizens of Manhattan, Wojnarowicz shifted his target audience from the bourgeois

art consumer to the deviants of a loathed subculture. Laden with subtle symbols of place, time, economy, and sex, the *Arthur Rimbaud Series* showed a world that could only truly be understood by the citizens within its boundaries. In this way, Wojnarowicz was able to flip the Bourdieuan cultural field, giving cultural capital to the deviant social fringe in the field of art whose golden key of domination is always held by the upper classes.

The series of photographs seems straightforward at first glance. The dominant figure in each is a slender male wearing the mask of the iconoclastic nineteenth century French poet. The works capture nuanced environments in various locations around the city; the landscapes that enveloped the masked individual suggest a story in and of themselves: we see Rimbaud on the subway, in front of an arcade, standing next to graffiti. But when we see the photo of the masked figure masturbating, or the masked figure with a syringe dangling from his arm, or the masked figure lying naked under another man, we get the sense that the figure is no visitor. The masked figure is showing us his home. Although he is proud of his home, and by nature defiant, he is at the same time seeking rescue. Wojnarowicz shares these private experiences, whose meaning can only truly be understood by those who have navigated these spaces. The specific address is not important; we see, for example, an abandoned warehouse known for anonymous gay sex in most urban areas. Members of the group to whom he sought to give voice would understand the purpose of such a location, understanding what lies beyond the edges of the picture.

In one photo (*Figure 1*), the mask of Rimbaud peers out at the camera in front of an arcade in New York City's Times Square.



(Figure 1) *Arthur Rimbaud in N.Y. 1978-1979*

People pass by, ignoring the sight, but the advertisement for a 25cent peep show sign that shares space with a sign for magazines give the viewer the impression that this Rimbaud will perhaps be partaking in the adult themed entertainment that lies beyond the door. In reality, this Rimbaud, like Wojnarowicz, is one of the many hustlers waiting for his next trick. Male prostitution is a common theme in much of Wojnarowicz's work. These video arcades are not only a place of secret sexual indulgences but also secret sexual rejections. Arcades offer private viewing booths, a place for a quick liaison if the manager is not constantly vigilant. They offer a semi-safe space for a hustler's wares; but they also offer the rejected and dejected the chance for some physical comfort. People within this fringe group would understand the meaning of the arcade. They would know of the regular clientele and the going rate for service; but they would also see this as a safe space. The photo is not a glorification of sex. While Wojnarowicz

advocated for promiscuity as a form of personal freedom, his work showed a clear understanding of the complex nature of sex as a commodity. Writing in *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, Wojnarowicz explains:

There were times in my teens when I was living on the streets and selling my body to anyone interested. I hung around a neighborhood that was so crowded with homeless people that I can't even remember what the architecture of the blocks looked like. Whereas I could at least spread my legs and gain a roof over my head, all those people down in those streets had reached a point where the commodity of their bodies and souls meant nothing more to anyone but themselves (32).

The use of Rimbaud as the primary image of the pieces says much about Wojnarowicz's view of societal norms. Rimbaud was a gay poet in nineteenth-century France who broke convention and presented a vision of iconoclasm for artists of any medium. He was fearless. He was reckless. But most importantly, he led the life of freedom that was unachievable by most of his time. One can only truly live by standing on the precipice, risking the plunge in order to truly see; one can only truly rise by hitting the ultimate bottom. Rimbaud was recognized as a poetic genius as a teenager, but by the age of 19, he laid down the pen and swore to never write again (Robb 3-14). Like Wojnarowicz, he limited participation with the art establishment as much as possible. While Wojnarowicz recognized the structural realities surrounding him, Rimbaud automatically rejected them. The preinvented socio-cultural constraints seemed of no concern to Rimbaud. His relationship with legendary poet Verlaine was well known even though the consequences of such a relationship were dire (Robb). Verlaine's marriage status and small



children seemed of little concern. The young artist was determined to live his life without moral constraints or visible fear. In Nietzschean terms, he truly lived. But in the end, the Rimbaud was lost. Seeking freedom and independence, Rimbaud, like Wojnarowicz, died of infection at the age of 37 (Robb 439). But his work, as well as his life, offered a rare glimpse into a reality that most knew nothing about, a glimpse that would serve as inspiration for those who followed.

The *Arthur Rimbaud Series* exudes a sense of loneliness and isolation. Sitting on a subway train, eating in a small diner, or shooting heroin, the nineteenth century face in a twentieth century context creates an intersection of abandon and abandonment. The revolutionary poet who inspired the likes of Bob Dylan and Allen Ginsberg (Robb *xiv*) led a life that defiantly rejected social norms; his life served as inspiration for Wojnarowicz almost a century later. The parallels between Rimbaud and Wojnarowicz were many: homosexuality, an endless supply of courage, a dismissal of the existing moral paradigm of his time, a rejection of the art establishment, and premature death from painful disease almost exactly a century later. But while Rimbaud abandoned art early in life (Howard) Wojnarowicz created almost until his last breath. He not only worked through his adult life, but used his impending death to investigate the culture's lack of consciousness in matters of mortality. As his friends and lovers died around him, Wojnarowicz had a window into his own future and created works that expressed his rage as well as his fear. Wojnarowicz is the Rimbaud of the late twentieth century, but a Rimbaud who is a bit more sensitive and a bit more connected. While Wojnarowicz lived a life on the fringe, he surrounded himself with people who gave him love and support, while Rimbaud cut himself off from the world. But in the end, the overarching theme that binds these two artists together is their response to social constraints. The work of Rimbaud and Wojnarowicz not only explores the social landscape, but the identities that are created by them as



well. Their art is a visual representation of their personal relationship with the world. For each artist, the restrictions on the expression of sex and love illuminated both the structure of their individual realms and the exercise of agency within those constructs. Part of that illumination included an understanding of the role institutions and systems played in contributing to the various structural constraint the artists challenged.

David Wojnarowicz intentionally stayed out of the New York art world to keep his work uncorrupted by its influence (Rose 64). He did not consider many of the pieces generated by the art machine as art, as they were (and still are) informed by economics. For Wojnarowicz, success was tabulated not by money, but by the effectiveness of the communication generated by the works. Art gave Wojnarowicz his voice, a wordless voice when homelessness and abuse had stunted his ability to speak. Because words had failed him in the past, he relegated them to secondary status in his communications with the world. He found that dialogue gave no entry point, that trying to communicate verbally with others left him wanting, as if he barely scratched the surface conveying the true reality of his experiences (Rose 65). He sought to channel information into a visual field to better convey the essence of an experience or idea. But who was his audience? How could this visual field be translated by the bourgeoisie of New York City if they were indeed a target of his critique? If Wojnarowicz was re-appropriating capital within the art field, what was the interpretive response of the art machine?

Art critic Donald Kuspit exemplifies the bourgeois strata of society that lacked the subtle cultural capital to consume Wojnarowicz's work. In "David Wojnarowicz: The Last Rimbaud" Kuspit details the similarities of Wojnarowicz and his nineteenth century muse Arthur Rimbaud. Wojnarowicz born in 1954, Rimbaud 1854. Wojnarowicz died in 1992, Rimbaud in 1891. Both came from broken homes; both were runaways; both were gay. Both sought some sort of father

figure to guide them: Wojnarowicz had artist Peter Hujar while Rimbaud had poet Paul Verlaine. But Kuspit posits that David Wojnarowicz's work falls short of Rimbaud's, mostly due to his populist leaning and the emotional one note-ness of his work: rage. Kuspit suggests that the lifestyle Wojnarowicz lived, specifically that of a child prostitute, was something that gave the artist pleasure. The critic argues that Wojnarowicz's artwork was a means of idealizing his desperate childhood. He writes that Wojnarowicz and Rimbaud thought social rules could be broken without consequence, stating that "They felt they could get away with being exceptions to the rules everyone else must follow and they paid a human price for it" (Kuspit).

Wojnarowicz had a sense of pride for surviving the ordeals of this early life, and it is not unreasonable for a child, young adult, or any person for that matter who sells their body for money to occasionally find comfort in the arms of a client. But Kuspit labels Wojnarowicz as a populist artist who exploits his own sordid childhood to give his political activism some weight. Whereas Rimbaud was esoteric, subtle, and sophisticated, suggests Kuspit, Wojnarowicz oversimplified, allowing his populist ideas to put an end to the legacy of the artist as avant-garde experimenter.

Wojnarowicz's art seems to lean heavily on the political; but in the 1970s and 1980s, the era of Pat Roberts, Jesse Helms, and the American Family, cultural institutions (especially religious ones) and political institutions are one and the same. In *Cruising Culture: Promiscuity, Desire and American Gay Literature*, Ben Gove states:

Wojnarowicz hated 'the apolitical or socially myopic aspects of gay culture, and culture at large; his life and work were driven by a desire for justice more than by many other particular political agenda: he insisted upon challenging and dismantling what he termed a 'preinvented existence,' which discriminates and

imposes hierarchies ‘ on the basis of sexual preference, race, ethnicity...gender and class”(Gove 133 from *Aperture :Brushfires in a Social Landscape* 1994).

Wojnarowicz is by no means grouping all common people under the umbrella of an oppressive state. But Kuspit cites the use of common imagery such as supermarket signs used with the enlargement of his personal narrative, which is then ,he claims, oversimplified for mass consumption.<sup>2</sup> But Kuspit misunderstands the artist’s use of sociocultural critique and homosexual explicitness as purely political. Coupled with the suggestion that Wojnarowicz’s work is an idolization of this invisible, voiceless life only elevates Wojnarowicz’s work, offering a good example of the artist’s ability to flip the cultural field.

David Wojnarowicz recognized that “each public disclosure of a private reality is a dismantling too of the notion of a one tribe nation” (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 121). Pierre Bourdieu posits that mechanisms of sociocultural domination are those of habitus and doxic practice, or axiomatic practices that are rarely questioned. This mode of analysis and interpretation of the everyday taken-for-granted contrasts with theories of rational (conscious) choice, since here individuals are understood to operate on a semi-unconscious level (Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* 164-171). David Wojnarowicz’s dismantling of the idea of a one-tribe nation through the public display of private acts is a material exercise of this theory. Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic violence explains the structures that elicit such indignation in Wojnarowicz’s work. The legitimacy of existing social structures are enforced and maintained through this form of violence.

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<sup>2</sup> Kuspit states “This is partly because of his populism—evident in his use of collective imagery, comic-strip style, and such social materials as supermarket posters as points of departure—and partly because he wants to make a political point, to put his firsthand experience to social use, which requires that one write one’s ideas large and simplify them. Mass consumption always involves reduction to a common denominator, and Wojnarowicz was torn between the wish to make high art and to influence the indifferent masses.”

Bourdieu uses Heidegger's metaphor of eye glasses, "those which sit so close to the eye that it goes unnoticed by the wearer" (*The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* 217). Bourdieu argues that like the lenses of the vision altering spectacles, the lenses of cultural codification usually go undetected by the viewer. Furthermore, Bourdieu explains that the viewer does not know how his or her perception would be different if they took the lenses off (*The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* 214-221). David Wojnarowicz's work contains a tension that stems from the lack of cultural access by certain audiences. He pushes the viewer to become aware of the metaphorical glasses he or she is wearing. He flips the field by creating work that is only truly understood by the outside fringe groups of which he was once was a part. To the average viewer, much of his work is oversimplified, distasteful, pornographic; but the power of the work is that there is an underlying tension that many viewers feel but do not quite understand. The fourteen year old hustler in Times Square would immediately grasp the layers of meaning represented in the *Arthur Rimbaud Series*. Even though he may not grasp the significance of the poet, he would understand the meaning of the arcade, as well as the placement of the masked boy standing in front of it. He would know that the video arcade offered quick opportunities for those seeking more than cinematic titillation in the private viewing booths. He would instantly grasp the paradoxical nature of the event: increased financial opportunity coupled with increased shame in a crowded space. The subject is witnessed, and at the same time totally invisible.

The understanding of a preinvented world, one structured by norms with specific genealogies, would be a touchstone for much of Wojnarowicz's work. He writes: "There is something in all that emptiness - it's the shape of a particular death that got erected by tiny humans on the spare face of an enormous planet long before I ever arrived, and the continuance

of it probably long after I have gone” (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives* 42). The understanding of norms as human constructs gave the artist insight into the instability of these axiomatic rules of society that are usually deemed natural. Wojnarowicz’s awareness of the taken-for-granted could be attributed to his childhood trauma. The constant geographical displacement, which as an adult he would work to recreate, would have given him a liminal glimpse of other realities. The contrast between the two living situations (father and mother) gave him an early understanding of the Bourdieuan notion of doxa. Wojnarowicz was able to see that by not knowing anything else, he accepted his paternal living situation as natural. This led him to wonder what other experiences he was taking for granted as universally true. In adulthood, he created transitory experiences that provided him access to these moments of liminality. In *Cruising Culture: Promiscuity, Desire and American Gay Literature*, Ben Gove writes: “Wojnarowicz’s use of the transitory was not only a tool of elucidation, but also form of resistance to the dominant construct of ‘permanence,’ which is often the cornerstone of the normalizing project” (Gove 139). Gove notes that this form of transience, commonly embraced by LGBT individuals, “often stems from a first-hand experience- enforced by homophobic/hetero-centric culture – of the dispersed, unstable nature of ‘home’, and of any sense of sexual and emotional belonging” (139).

Wojnarowicz describes being trapped in certain social positions, such as homelessness, that are impossible to escape. Even if a homeless person were to find a place to live, the artist recognizes that that person still carries a certain energy that keeps him or her in the same social position. This energy is articulated in mannerisms, internal articulations of truth, as well as responses to the sociocultural environment. This is habitus. Wojnarowicz recognized the

problems inherent in an internal construct that can affect the agency of the individual in various ways. In *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, Wojnarowicz proclaims

There are other tribes that experience the X ray of Civilization every time they leave the house or turn on the tv or radio or pick up a newspaper or when they suddenly halt before a changing traffic light. A civil war and a national trial for the ‘leaders’ of this country, as well as certain individuals in organized religions, is the soundtrack that plays and replays in the head of the members of that tribe (38).

Wojnarowicz understands that identity and “truth” are socially constructed. More importantly, he understands that there are pre-existing sociocultural frameworks that constrain and mediate these realities. In *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbian and Gay Men*, author Gregory M. Herek writes:

Whereas biological sex is about physiology, gender is about behavior. The ideology of gender is a set of shared beliefs, values, and customs concerning ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity.’ Children internalize the rules for behavior prescribed by this cultural ideology in the course of defining their gender identity, that is, their core sense of self as male or female (Money 1987; Money & Ehrhardt 1972; Herek 97).

Gender roles indoctrinated in children are established and understood as natural and in line with socio-cultural norms. But these categories are social constructs to a large degree, and those who do not participate in the normative behavior often find themselves marginalized.

Wojnarowicz understood the predetermined moral framework imposed on his reality. He also recognized that others are able to see it as well, and that they make up a field of their own. Members of this field are a powder keg waiting to explode. Having an understanding of

the dominant forces constituting a field (or tribe), Wojnarowicz produces work that explores the mechanisms in which “this particular tribe (government) extols these foul emissions as if they were virtues made of glorious sensitivities” (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 37).

## Michel Foucault’s Biopower

*Describing the once indescribable can dismantle the power of taboo.  
Speaking about the once unspeakable can make the invisible familiar  
if repeated often enough in loud and clear tones and picture.*

Wojnarowicz, *Sex Series* 27

Much of Wojnarowicz’s work confronted oppressive sociocultural norms perpetuated by larger institutions of power. Using sexually explicit text and imagery, the artist directly challenged the institutions of state and church by offering unapologetic resistance to bodily juridical confines. Michel Foucault’s theory of biopower articulates brilliantly the issue of regulation of the body by an overarching state. Because state and church were inextricably linked in the Reagan era, this theory helps us deconstruct the meaning and motive of such regulation, which allows us to gain a deeper understanding of the impact of Wojnarowicz’s work.

Michel Foucault posits that beginning with the overthrow of the European monarchies in the seventeenth century, civic institutions began regarding humans as a species or collection of individual bodies, and altered regulations of control to suit this more scientific model. The



regulatory control of the body allowed the state to maintain its sovereignty through the promise of life, versus the fear of death. This regulatory control is what Foucault calls *biopower* (139). In order to maintain the government body, the individual body of the citizen must be regulated in such a way that will guarantee the success and stability of the body politic. Public health, for example, becomes wrapped in the blanket of morality. Social hygiene becomes a focus now backed by a scientific tool kit as well as religious dogma, justifying legal control and reinforcing citizen complicity. In an age when modern citizens are supposedly guided by reason, society looks for more nuanced justifications for stripping away human rights. Larger social institutions begin to constrain disenfranchised groups for the betterment of the larger society. While scapegoating is nothing new, utilizing the scapegoat to justify or reinforce sovereignty through the promise of life is a phenomenon that Foucault posits as the beginning of modernity (Foucault 139-145). Having an understanding of the “preinvented” structures of social regulation, Wojnarowicz was able to access the correlation between regulation of sexuality and the regulation of the body for sociopolitical purposes. Continuing to create elucidative works, he advocated for promiscuity as a viable option to heighten fantasy and imagination as a means to resist social regulation of the body (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 120). Even when he knew that his HIV status would limit his time on Earth, he fought against the prevailing view that sexuality and sexual practice should be reduced to monogamous relationships. Sexual practice requires alteration in the age of HIV, not elimination. Proper education was required to minimize risk; giving in to the calls for abstinence was only giving in to the Foucaultian bio-political matrix of domination through the promise of life. Wojnarowicz writes “One doesn’t have to adopt the stupid line invented by those bozos in the government or media or churches – the JUST SAY NO TO SEXUALITY CAMPAIGN- you



can fuck in a healthy and safe way with the right information” (Scholder 123). Foucault insists that setting up new moral codes (mechanisms of control) to replace the old is not a viable course of action. He recommends instead an aesthetic of existence, that leads to the understanding that selves are responsible for themselves and others (Brown 79). To Foucault, confronting this biopower paradigm was a form of self-care, which required specific actions to achieve success. In *On Foucault: A Critical Introduction*, Alison Leigh Brown organizes Foucault’s theory on care of the self into categories which include: recognition of external constitution, sexuality, and will to knowledge (77). Wojnarowicz’s work can be examined within these modes of care to clearly see their intersection within the matrix of resistance and power, and the hegemonic relationship between these forces.

#### RECOGNITION OF EXTERNAL CONSTITUTION

The awareness of external constitutions is a theme that runs through the majority of Wojnarowicz’s work. As we have seen, Wojnarowicz’s understanding of the influence structure has on individual agents started at the beginning of his career. He was able to identify agency as well as the influence social norms had on the agent’s sense of self. In an article on *Sex Series* published in 1990, Wojnarowicz wrote “To keep silent even when our individual existence contradicts the illusion of the One Tribe Nation is to lose our identities and possibly our lives” (27). Wojnarowicz’s understanding of the importance of placing oneself within a cultural construct and seeing the influence that construct has on individual identity formation is a possible reason why the artist was able to remain active on the edge of a precipice of self-destruction. Art critic Jerry Salt says that “David Wojnarowicz was angry enough to become a murderer, but instead he became an artist” (Saltz 388) From an early age Wojnarowicz understood that perspectives were constantly shifting to accommodate or alleviate various

external social pressures. The most obvious focus of his work tended to be on the imposition of shame. As a normalizing tool, social shaming is often used to mitigate any deviant behavior.

By the mid-1980s, we see an increase in text in Wojnarowicz's work. The art critic Carlo McCormic claims that these texts' "immediacy and directness...induces -- even demands -- a rare degree of personal introspection" (Gove 136). Wojnarowicz created tension by juxtaposing this personal introspection with the external constructions alluded to in the piece. The viewer's relative standpoint is forced into focus even when Wojnarowicz uses constructions autobiographical in nature. McCormic continues: "These writings therefore actively demand a materialist response that takes account of the writers' (and, by implicating the readers') own subjectivity and cultural location as well as the broader sociopolitical questions being raised" (Gove 136 from Aperture 36-37 Hess). Once again, Wojnarowicz was able to capitalize on his understanding (although not theoretically articulated in an anthropological academic sense) of the interplay between agency and structure. Having an understanding of an agent's external constitution can only be achieved by understanding what larger sociocultural structures create the field in which these agents create meaning. Agent identities are formed (internally and externally) through the ongoing interpretation and reinterpretation of semiotic stimuli, most often directed from the top down. Larger sociocultural structures directly inform the identity formation of individuals not only by disseminating highly influential information that directly affect the agent, but also by influencing the surrounding agents who shape the interpersonal dynamics of family, community, workplace, and local politico-religious relationships as well.

In works like *The Waterfront Journals*, Wojnarowicz uses his gift for prose to offer a small sampling of the lives that are placed outside the acceptable social structures of society. Each essay increases the tension of the reader, evoking disgust, anger, disbelief, and empathy in

varying measure. These stories offer an unapologetic face of the hookers, thieves, and sluts that share our common social space; they offer no excuses, only experiences. The prose pushes and pulls the reader's sociocultural loci in relation to the subject telling their story. Some individuals command sympathy, while others only rebuke; the assumed age of the subject is often the litmus test that determines where the scale of sympathy will be tipped.

## SEXUALITY

The concept of sexuality as a tool for self-care is by far the most direct link to biopower in its purest form. As biopower is a form of regulation focused on the body, constraints on reproduction, sexual identity, and biological impulse are steadfast mechanisms to manipulate populations. Controlling sexuality through the propagation of religious dogma, for example, not only affects individual agency, as related to desire, but reproduction as well. Regulating sexuality has a long genealogy, seen most obviously in the political and cultural regulation of marriage. As recently as 1967<sup>3</sup> laws in the United States forbid interracial marriage (Moran 6). Juridical controls such as sodomy laws, age of consent, indecency laws, and regulation of marriage can be seen as biopower mechanisms of normalization that reinforces the legitimacy of the state. While these are justified on the grounds that they offer protection to individuals, institutions and society, one only has to look at the shifting severity and focus (from women, to African Americans, to gays and lesbians) over time to understand that they are socio-political constructs and are reinforced through politico-religious means.

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<sup>3</sup> Loving v. Virginia US Supreme Court ruled antimiscegenation laws unconstitutional (Moran 6)

Wojnarowicz created art that demanded the deregulation of sexuality. In a society constantly being pushed to homogeneity, taboo becomes a weapon of shame used to beat suspected deviants into submission. Wojnarowicz transformed the forbidden into the commonplace. As he himself says in his memoir:

Describing the once indescribable can dismantle the power of taboo. To speak about the once unspeakable can make the **INVISIBLE** (*his emphasis*) familiar if repeated often enough in clear and loud tones. To speak of ourselves – while living in a country that considers us or our thoughts taboo – is to shake the boundaries of illusion of the **ONE-TRIBE NATION** (his emphasis) (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 153).

Continuing his theme of making private movements public to dispel the myth of the one tribe nation, Wojnarowicz uses sex and the body not only to confront existing moral norms, but to resist the regulation of the body. For Wojnarowicz, the body was a mechanism for fantasy, one of the last places to free the mind from preexisting frameworks of reality. In *Cruising Cultures*, Ben Gove notes that Wojnarowicz “can be seen to produce a more sustained depathologising exploration of psychical mobility and ambivalence in relation to gay male promiscuity -- and specifically, gay sex during the AIDS crisis” (134). Unrestricted fantasy is, for Wojnarowicz, identical to unrestricted imagination; unrestricted imagination is the only possible way to escape the “gravitational pull of the Earth,” which Wojnarowicz employs as a metaphor for the doxic paradigm to which we are subjected. He notes, “I’m beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for radical gesture is the imagination” (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 120). Wojnarowicz used his art as a liberating force for fantasy and sexuality; he demanded that sexual practice was emancipatory, and not merely a conduit for disease.

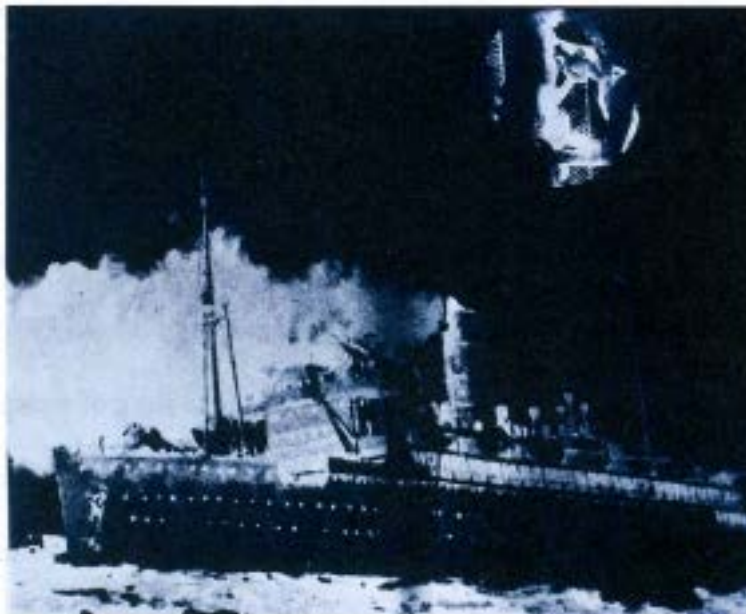
Foucault advances that contemporary Western culture is rooted, to a certain degree, in a notion predicated on sex and sexual identity. This identity is not simply a form of control, but is falsely posited as that which is most true about ourselves (Brown 11). A limited definition of gender, as well as a myopic notion of permissible sexual orientation and sexual practices are reproduced as social norms, which define and regulate what is “normal.” Foucault theorizes that power’s growing involvement in the lives of the individual has directly led to the focus on regulating sexual behavior. Although power seeks to normalize the behavior of its citizens, it is not responsible for their care (Brown 45). Foucault notes that “outside the Western world, famine exists, on a greater scale than ever; and the biological risks confronting the species are perhaps greater, and more serious than before the birth of microbiology” (Foucault 143). If the state is no longer responsible for the lives of its people, what is its primary function? According to Foucault, the state’s remaining responsibility is to categorize; the need to classify, define, quantify, and label becomes the new necessity of the state (Brown 45). This project has the ultimate effect of normalization. As Foucault claims in *A History of Sexuality*, the natural outcome of biopower, or the modern technology centered on life and body, is a society that is in constant state of normalization (144). These modes of normalization are the intended target of Wojnarowicz’s work. He recognizes the imposition of these categories as well as the benefits of the larger organizations that assist in their perpetuation.

While the artist’s paradoxical use of love and anger seems most salient in the examination of power in his work, the use of distance cannot be ignored. The sexually explicit nature of much of Wojnarowicz’s work makes the text even more relevant. The viewer must get extremely close to the work to read the minute texts imbedded into the visual piece. Wojnarowicz creates tension as he forces the viewer to change his or her locality. The viewing

of sexual acts in public is a taboo that often provokes shame and embarrassment. Wojnarowicz is on one hand staking a claim to the resistance of the restrictive norms based on sexuality and on the other hand compelling the viewer to be present in his or her discomfort. Some viewers are relieved that there is an excuse to look closer. This relief is an example of the subtle ways in which Wojnarowicz's work elucidates preexisting structures of reality and the subjective nature of social norms to the unsuspecting viewer.

Wojnarowicz maintains that the homosexual knowledge of possibility and change is often attained in large part through promiscuous sexual experience (Gove 139). *Sex Series*, produced from 1984-1987 was Wojnarowicz's way of creating a form of resistance through explication and provocation. In an almost enigmatic way, these works revealed an underground world of private desire, that also confirmed preconceived notions of homosexual males as depraved and predatory. The photos are in the negative, which gives the viewer the feeling of wearing night goggles or possessing x-ray vision. Often they show an exterior location, with small insets of what is going on underneath the skin of said location. In one photo (*Figure 2*) the majority of the visual field is taken up by a navy ship, surrounded by small insets of the sexual activity that is occurring down below. Service members are giving or receiving oral sex, or locked in a heated embrace. In another photo in the series, the setting is a military barracks, where similar private moments are made public. Wojnarowicz's use of military iconography not only challenges the federal exclusion of homosexual in the military, but wraps a private moment in a dominant institution of control, linking the two together. Citing this relationship between institution and individual once again gives an example of the art of illumination, or liberation, that Wojnarowicz was creating. The exposition of truth through the darkness of the negative photograph further pushes paradox of enlightenment through darkness. The darkness here not

only refers to the covert landscape of the private and hidden, but also the supposed moral darkness of the activity. Wojnarowicz uses darkness as a mechanism for gleaning a deeper understanding of reality in the same way that so many artists before have used light.



(Figure 2) *Sex Series* 1988 Wojnarowicz, David

While *Sex Series* seemingly played into the hands of religious leaders and various politicians by validating their claims of homosexual debauchery, it was also a refusal to deny the existence of such practices, which thwarted the policies barring homosexuals in the military. These policies were in place to prevent such behavior. Wojnarowicz was showing that desire could not be regulated. The government's efforts to regulate the body through sexual restriction for the supposed sake of social wellbeing (troop cohesion free of sexual harassment) is not possible. Gove informs us that "this eroticization both of 'masculine' power and its momentary disruption exemplifies Pat Califia's observation that one important --though not always conscious 'strategy for dealing with oppression is to eroticize certain signs which symbolize it and transform them into signs imbued with meaning supplied by the [marginalized individual or



group]’” (Gove 137 from Califia’s *Public Sex*). Wojnarowicz shows that the violence and dehumanization of fringe communities will not stop them from persevering.

### THE WILL TO KNOWLEDGE

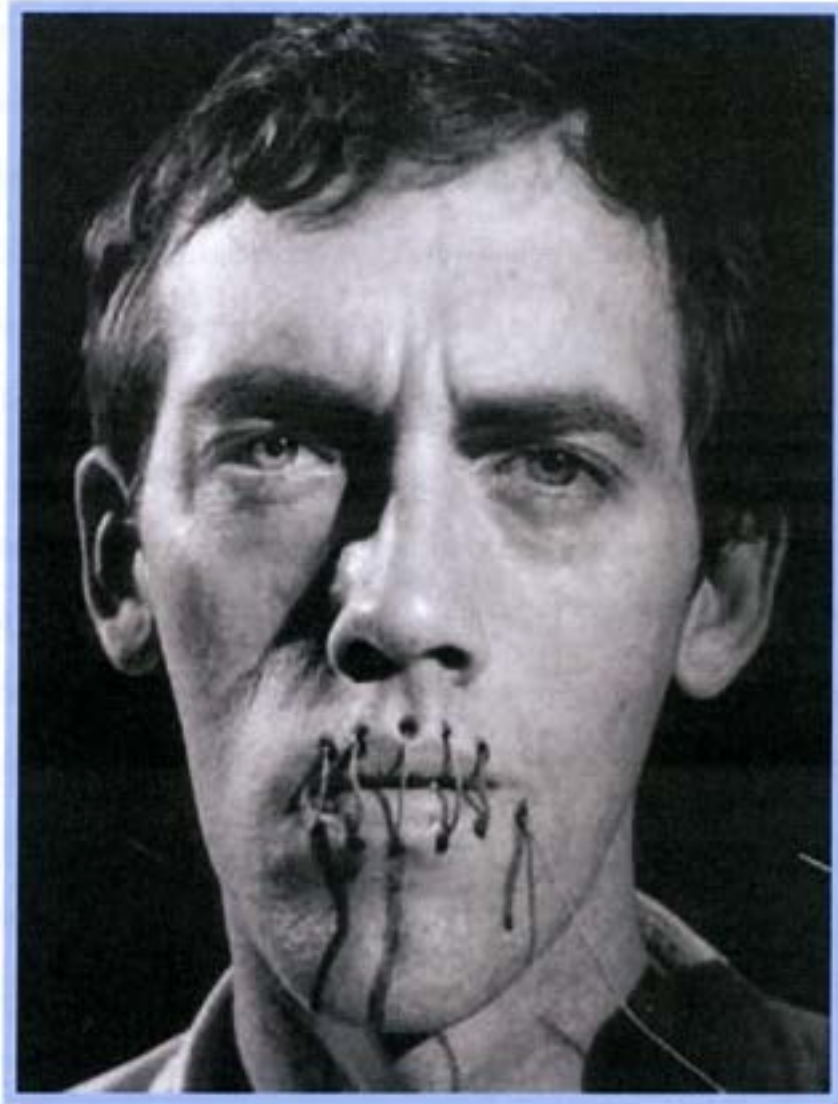
As the AIDS crisis continued to escalate, this push back against shaming and bodily restriction through legal and socially normative means would be of even greater importance. As the fringe communities addressed in Wojnarowicz’s work continued to perish, and the ‘social disease’ turned to deadly epidemic, Wojnarowicz’s work was the face of a movement that culminated into a collective outcry of rage, as gay men and other urban marginalized minorities linger on the edge of the state of exception. Through his writings and visual art, Wojnarowicz addressed the hypocrisy of senators, bishops, mayors, literary critics, and various media outlets. He claimed “Denying all people information that could protect them in an epidemic is nothing more than wholesale murder regardless of the ‘moral’ content of those actions” (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 133)

Wojnarowicz understood that ideology had a genealogy, and that structures predicated on these ideologies were the root of the pre-existing constructs into which he was born. These various modalities of power were formed by social relationships at the top and perpetually recreated by social relationships at the bottom. Michel Foucault considered an understanding of social relations essential for the care of the self and others. For Foucault, these relations could only be interpreted through a look at their historical formations (Brown 77). Gaining an understanding of social relations is, by extension, an intensification of social relations. As Foucault explains, “In addition to examining the playing out of this intensification of social



relations the person striving to care for himself or herself will have to remember that the journey involves an analysis of truth” (Brown 78). It is helpful to use this concept of will to knowledge to understand Wojnarowicz’s resistance to withholding information of safe sex practices. Here we see the concept unfolding in two ways: the fight for information, and the elucidation of motive and genealogy of the forces responsible for blocking the dissemination of information. Wojnarowicz described organized religion as a “powerful force that engages in activities designed to distract us from our own bodies” (*David Wojnarowicz's Sex Series* 28). He viewed these “cult organizations” as being vicious and murderous as they rallied around symbols of sacredness. He lambasts the Archdiocese of New York as disseminating the Vatican’s position “that it is a more terrible thing to use a condom than it is to contract AIDS” (*David Wojnarowicz's Sex Series* 28). While this claim may seem extreme, one only need look to Vatican policy on condom use in Africa today to see that it is still the protocol of the church (Butt). Wojnarowicz’s rhetoric that pushed against church dogma made its way into the gay community, increasing the force of the movement calling for justice in the ever growing AIDS community.

## Giorgio Agamben Homo Sacer & State of Exception



*(Figure 3)* Still from Silence=Death, 1990 (von Praunheim)

As the AIDS crisis escalated beyond tragic proportions, David Wojnarowicz continued to create works that responded with a substantive force. Along with his visual works, interviews, and installations, Wojnarowicz provided autobiographical text as a way to process his righteous indignation and rage at the suffering and injustices all around him. His work became more political, as he incorporated a more direct critique of specific religious leaders and politicians

that actively participated in the continued anguish of so many, either through complacency or outright suppression of life saving information into his work. Through this unpacking of specific abuses, the artist created a powerful counter-narrative that included specific speech of the offending person in power. In “This Killing Machine Called America: Narrative of the Body in David Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives*,” Eric Waggoner notes that as Wojnarowicz explicates the responsibility of religious and political discourse of producing and reproducing homophobia and anti-gay legislation, that his “text moves handily from personal narrative to a public document of protest. *Close to the Knives* narrates not only the life of a gay body, but the life of gay *bodies* in a society that threatens them with invisibility, demonization, and death” (186). Wojnarowicz journals chronicling his experience provide a rich, textured narrative that seems to collect a marginalized population under his umbrella of understanding. In his journal, he shares his experience by folding in the experience of others, creating a diary that is more investigative than autobiographical. As the AIDs crisis continued to grow, so did Wojnarowicz’s rage, which was reflected in his writings. Wojnarowicz wrote in his diary “...I wake up from daydreams of tipping Amazonian blowdarts in ‘infected blood’ and spitting them at the exposed necklines of certain politicians or nazi-preachers or government health-care officials or the rabid strangers parading against AIDS clinics in the night news suburbs” (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 104).

In *Subspecies Helms Senatorius*, 1990 (*Figure 4*) a large bulbous spider with yellow and red legs with a swastika painted on his back bears the face of Senator Jesse Helms.



(Figure 4) *Subspecies Helms Senatorius* 1990 Wojnarowicz, David

The color of the work is extremely vivid, almost cheerfully so. The use of the black and white head of Helms is juxtaposed to the bright color of the spider body, which blends into the background. The suggestion here is that the true nature of Helms, while incredible dangerous, almost goes unnoticed. Through his autobiographical writings in *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz describes the political climate that he considers a political and religious campaign of murder. The crisis that progressed so rapidly in large part due to religious intervention and refusal of government to intervene, moved an already marginalized group into the *state of exception*. A term popularized by Giorgio Agamben, the state of exception describes a suspension of rights for political reasons, often presented as a necessity to maintain order or protect the health and wellbeing of the whole. Agamben reinterprets Michel Foucault's concept of biopower, defining the modern political mechanism for legitimizing sovereignty as "one of legal abandonment and nihilism" (Mills 59). Agamben's reinterpretation includes conceptual shifts that will give us a deeper insight into Wojnarowicz's work. Catherine Mills states:

The starting point for Agamben's discussion of biopolitics in *Homo Sacer* is the apparent paradox of sovereignty, wherein the sovereign is simultaneously inside and outside the juridical order, a situation encapsulated in notion of the 'sovereign exception.' Taking up Carl Schmitt's decisionistic thesis that the 'sovereign is he who decides on the exception,' Agamben argues that what is at stake in the state of exception is the very possibility of juridical rule and the meaning of state authority" ( 61).

Agamben's theory of the state of exception stresses that there is no special legislation needed for the suspension of civil rights; it is actually a suspension or hindrance of the juridical process (Agamben 32). As illustrated in *Hate Crimes: Confronting Violence Against Lesbian and Gay Men* :

Like victims of rape, the victims of anti-gay hate crimes often are blamed for the incident by police, prosecutors, judges, and jurors. Dallas Judge Jack Hampton, for example, justified his lenient sentence for a man convicted of murdering two gay men by stating, 'I put prostitutes and queers at the same level...And I'd be hard put to give somebody life for killing a prostitute.' In another 1988 case involving the beating death of an Asian American gay man, a Broward County (Florida) Circuit Judge jokingly asked the prosecuting attorney, 'That's a crime now, to beat up a homosexual?' The prosecutor answered, 'Yes, sir. And it's also a crime to kill them.' To this the judge replied, 'Times have really changed' (Herek 294).

Legitimacy of the state is predicated on its ability to deny rights to certain populations. The state of exception finds its analogue in civil war, since the conflict of citizen against citizen does not involve outside agents, but occurs within the borders of the state. Agamben states: "Because

civil war is the opposite of normal conditions, it lies in a zone of undecidability with respect to the state of exception, which is state power's immediate response to the most extreme internal conflict" (Agamben 2). Can we classify a culture war as a kind of civil war? Undoubtedly the culture war of the 1980s, fueled by the AIDS epidemic and the placement of sexual practice on the national agenda, had many casualties but only on one side. Listening to the protest chants of ACT UP, one can hear the calls of "Civil Rights, Civil War!" (Queer Resources Directory). If we define civil war by the use of military action, confinement to national boundaries, participation of national government, at least two opposing forces, and a massive death toll, then this would qualify as a kind of civil war.

The state use of the military as a mechanism for exception is twofold. Seen as a vital institution responsible for the sovereignty and safety of the nation, it is also held up as a vital institution that is at risk of ruin by homosexuals. In Bourdieu's terms, it is a means of symbolic violence, its images combined with a homosexual context automatically provoking fear and anger. The government actively excludes gays and lesbians by demanding, in writing, that they confirm they are not homosexual. Those who lie and gain entrance risk getting caught, court marshaled, and dishonorably discharged. The risk of physical violence to gays and lesbians who gained admittance under the guise of heterosexuality is also great, as hate crimes would rarely be reported for fear of being outed as homosexual. The armed forces also were actively engaged in detaining, testing, and returning refugees to their home countries because of their HIV status. *In Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor*, Paul Farmer details the Haitian refugee detainment and forced HIV testing at Guantanamo after risking their lives to escape political persecution (Farmer). Wojnarowicz's use of military imagery in his art confronted the use of U.S. armed forces as an agent of symbolic violence. Works such as



(Figure 5) *Untitled (Control)*, from the “Ant Series”(1989) depicts a toy soldier half buried in the sand covered in ants. Ants being used as a metaphor for society, the image refers to the social construct of not only the military institution, but the military mindset as well. In “Sex Series” 1988-1989 references to the armed forces are accompanied by insets of homosexual sex acts. “Dust Track II” (1990) (image not available) includes military imagery that is a part of a collage of text. The text comes from news articles, most notably one whose headline reads “Navy Rape Problem.”



(Figure 5) *Untitled (Control)* from “Ant Series” 1988-89 Wojnarowicz, David

While AIDS was not confined to state boundaries, access to medication, services, and social protections were predicated on cooperation from state and federal governments. Although Wojnarowicz included global maps in much of his work, and traveled abroad, his struggle against injustice was fought in the United States and against the individuals and groups who committed atrocities on its behalf. “We’re supposed to quietly and politely make house in this killing machine called America and pay taxes to support our own slow murder and I am amazed

that we're not running amok in the streets" (Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 108).

The participation of the national government can be seen in its lack of participation. Even though the first cases of HIV and AIDS were discovered in 1981, by the time Ronald Reagan would utter his first public remarks on May 31, 1987, 36,058 Americans had been diagnosed, and 20,849 had died of AIDS (White). Choosing to align himself with the religious right and Reverend Jerry Falwell's political action group "Moral Majority" (White), AIDS was used as a weapon of the cultural right to push homosexuals further into the state of exception. In his article, "Reagan's AIDS Legacy: Silence equals death," Allen White cites Falwell as saying that "AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals," and Pat Buchanan, Reagan's communications director, argued that AIDS was "nature's revenge on gay men" (SFGate.com). Less than six months after Reagan's broken silence, Wojnarowicz's lover Peter Hujar died of AIDS. Shortly thereafter, Wojnarowicz himself would test positive for the virus (Milizia). The work below (*Figure 6*) was created from a photograph Wojnarowicz took moments after his lover's death. The piece uses as a border American dollar bills; the text overlay begins with " 'If I had a dollar to spend for healthcare I'd rather spend it on a baby or innocent person with some defect or illness not of their own responsibility not some person with Aids...' says the healthcare official on national television." The images in the center are photographs of Hujar after he died.





(Figure 6) *Untitled, 1988-9*

Wojnarowicz's work created for ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) became powerful icons of resistance for future generations.. The artist known for his introverted personality became an active member of the social movement for anti-discrimination and bigotry. Part of the power of this movement, as Judith Halberstam points out in "Imagined

Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance,” is the effect of confronting “the Jesse Helms of America with the possibility of violent retaliation; it threatens precisely in its potentiality” (195). Wojnarowicz created powerful works that engaged the activist and offered visual representations for the resistance movement demanding change. The Silence=Death campaign became a rallying point for liberation, its demands for justice speaking for a marginalized community who for too long been invisible. Through these political struggles, the gay community began to make the private world of homosexuality a focus for public discourse, dismantling taboo one person at a time.

### Wojnarowicz’s Other World Unseen: The Culture War Rages On



(Figure 7) *Untitled*, 1993 (Wojnarowicz, *Untitled*)

*First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. The Other World is where I sometimes lose my footing. In its calendar turnings, in its preinvented existence.*

Wojnarowicz *Close to the Knives* 87

The state of exception did not end in the early 1990s. It exists globally on a horrific scale, and still lingers in the West in less blatant ways. While advances in human rights in the United States have progressed in ways thought unimaginable 20 years ago, there is work still to be done. The atrocities committed under the cloak of religious/cultural freedom continue to rage in the United States and across the globe. For example, on March 2, 2011, the Supreme Court of the United States sided, in an 8-1 decision, with the Westboro Baptist Church in a lawsuit brought by Albert Snyder. The anti-gay church protested Snyder's son, Marine Lance Corporal Matthew Snyder, who was killed in Iraq during active duty (*Snyder v Phelps, Sr., et al*, 562 U.S. [2011]). The agenda of the church is to bring attention to the tolerance of homosexuality by the United States, which is leading to the country's destruction by the wrath of God. In the words of the church leader Reverend Fred Phelps "when the whole country is given over to sodomy and sodomite enablers...the country needs this preaching" (Chappell). The preaching included signs and chants including "God Hates Fags" and "God Hates Fag Enablers," often carried by children at the protests. Speaking for the majority, Chief Justice John Roberts cited the church's right under the first amendment to protest, and noted that they protested on public property in a peaceful manner (*Snyder v Phelps, Sr., et al*, 562 U.S. [2011]). This case was won based on the right to free speech, but it can be persuasively argued that the real right protected here is the right to freedom of religious expression. It must be noted that obscenity and



defamation are not protected speech under the constitution; but if “God Hates Fags” is considered peaceful, how could it be considered obscene or defaming?



*(Figure 8) Why the Church Can't/Won't be Separated from the State, or, a Formal Portrait of Culture, 1991*

In *Why the Church Can't/Won't be Separated from the State, or, a Formal Portrait of Culture* (Figure 8) Wojnarowicz has reified culture, utilizing maps, paint, photography, and text to show culture as body. Red blood cells are pumped through the artery of culture, while blue are being shed and disposed of as waste. The size of the blue pool labeled waste seems to be growing larger, and lingers on a precipice, threatening to overtaking the artery. The red yarn that stifles voice is used here to bind images to the plain. The largest image pasted onto the plain is

that of a crazed ravenous monster with dangling tongue, sharp teeth, and long Pinocchio-esque tube nose with the word 'CULTURE' written on it. The papier-mâché image of culture is frightening, but seems to be a bit of a joke, the lies it promulgates soon to be discovered. Wojnarowicz reminds us that navigating the traditions of culture (not just politics) can be a challenging endeavor. The body of culture can often be comprised of norms that contribute to the marginalization, insecurities, and death of individuals. Culture is not only the web of meaning that we have spun and in which we are suspended, as Clifford Geertz describes, but it can be a web that we are born into and cannot escape: "Culture is a primary force in the socialization of individuals and a major determinant of the consciousness and experience of the community. The impact of culture on human behavior is often underestimated precisely because it is so powerful and deeply embedded in our self-identity and consciousness" (An-Na'im 71). The impact of culture is a powerful lens through which the world is viewed, influencing interpretation and response to all information presented. And while it is understood that all cultural forms are continuously contested, these norms are often so entrenched in a population, that they are taken for granted by many or most. These norms can be maintained by systems that are difficult, if not deadly, to challenge. Sally Engle Merry, whose work on women's rights can be helpful at looking at sexual rights, notes in *Human Rights and Gender Violence* that the difficulties occur when traversing the intersection of women's rights and culture (Merry 25). Major institutions and legal systems dealing with marriage, divorce, and child custody, as well as cultural understanding of gender and sexuality, are the foundations on which gender-based violence is built: "Cultural beliefs and institutions often permit and encourage violence against women, and protecting women requires substantial shifts in beliefs about gender as well as changes in the institutions that govern women's lives such as marriage, divorce, education, and

work opportunities” (Merry 25). Merry also notes that the argument for the preservation of culture can be a useful tool in maintaining male control over women (25). These structures are the very same that Wojnarowicz railed against over 20 years ago. His many works address these concerns, attempting to shock individuals into seeing the prescribed dogmas they were swallowing and regurgitating over the rights of those deemed rightless.

In the Commission on Human Rights draft construction process, Merry posits the recognition of cultural tradition and religion as an impediment to protection against certain kinds of violence and abuse. She notes a demand that governments not “invoke custom, tradition or practices in the name of religion to avoid their obligations to eliminate such violence” (60). Cultural structures, as well as political and social, are slowly beginning to be the focus of critique in regard to impediments to human rights. This need was recognized by Wojnarowicz, and his efforts in bringing these structures to light cannot be forgotten. Recognition of these ‘preexisting’ worlds is an important step in formulating a human rights discourse that affords vital protections for marginalized peoples. But this acknowledgement is only a first step. As Wojnarowicz found, circumventing powerful agendas can be difficult. Regardless of human rights documents produced, cultural relativism continues to circumvent the protection of rights. It seems too often human rights policy is created by a least common denominator approach. While it is important to get as many people to the table, it is also important to recognize these limiting structures and articulate strategies to create incentives for change.

In practice, the human rights regime is ultimately a framework of scripted persuasion. Because there are no permanent mechanisms for consistent enforcement, human rights discourse holds its power by the demanding voices of activism. The privileged nature of civil and political

liberties over social and economic ones has often been contested, but other means of hierarchal judgments have been left unchecked.

## Hide & Seek



(Figure 9) *Untitled (One Day This Kid)* 1990

In closing, we continue with the intersection of contemporary issues and Wojnarowicz's work, seeking to position him in the art historical/ political canon. *Hide/ Seek: Difference and*



*Desire in American Portraiture*, exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum of Art through February of 2012 offered an interesting context for Wojnarowicz's work. Among the pieces exhibited was *Fire in My Belly*, which was removed from the same exhibit held at the Smithsonian Institute's National Portrait Gallery. Almost 20 years after his death, Wojnarowicz's work still acts as an illuminating force, ever pointing the finger (often the middle one) at the hypocrisy of oppressive cultural regimes. His four minute video installation proved to be a lightning rod of protest: on one side, the Catholic League took offense to his crucifix covered with ants; on the other side the banner waiving protestors took offense to the blatant censorship. At the behest of the Catholic League, House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) threatened to revoke funding to the Smithsonian if the video was included (Green, "Battle Lines: The Coming Fight Over the Smithsonian's Funding" 27), the argument being that the government should not fund works that are purposefully offensive to religious groups. The Brooklyn Museum undoubtedly had a much larger draw, as the Smithsonian's decision to remove Wojnarowicz's work created quite a stir in the art world; this manifested not only as protests but even prompted living artists who had works in the exhibition to demand that their pieces be returned. For example, artist AA Bronson, the creator of *Felix, June 5, 1994*, which was used as a capstone of sorts for the exhibit, demanded that his work be removed (Green, *Modern Art Notes*). It seems, however, that *Fire in My Belly* is the only piece in the *Hide/Seek* exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum that offered any sort of resistance, a piece that shows not only fear, but anger and rejection of the oppression and hostile atmosphere of the 1980s.

The exhibit was organized in three groups, each section representing a span of time in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Starting with the first section, the viewer was offered numerous pieces from early 20<sup>th</sup> century that allude to same sex love (the only real "difference" offered, making the title



cowardly cryptic). Most of the pieces display a secret semiotic world, where something as simple as a lily or a red handkerchief would suggest the possibility of kinship-- a sort of sexual underground railroad. Many of the pieces were merely gay/lesbian adjacent, such as Florine Stettheimer's (American, 1871–1944) *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*, circa 1925. Many merely explored men in a fashionable way, offering no provocation to a mainstream audience. Over all, this section showed the viewer that gays were around, but gave no impression of cultural ties or sense of community. Through the omission of community, it suggests there was none. It offers a world of secrets and restraint, a world full of partial admissions and coded communications.

The second section brings the viewer into the 1950s and 60s, offering pieces that, again, did not offer a glimpse into gay and lesbian life, but were included because the artist was non-heterosexual. Works by Jasper John, Rauschenberg, and Warhol were not of a provocative nature, but were most likely included to remind the audience of the influence 'differently desired' people have had on the arts. While Warhol is always a treat, the inclusion of his works almost seemed trite. Who needs to be reminded that he was differently desired? The weakness of the connecting threads of works chosen proved to be problematic.

The third section was the most troubling of all. While Andrew Wyeth's painting (*Figure 10*) of his nude farmer neighbor was borderline Harlequin romance cover, its quality and boldness left an impression, and actually held up to the insinuated offerings of the exhibit title.



(Figure 10) Andrew Wyeth, *The Clearing*, 1979

Spanning the 1970s to the late 1980s, the works of Mapplethorpe offered were tame, void of nudity or suggestion of desire at all. The four *Arthur Rimbaud* prints by Wojnarowicz displayed were the tamest of the grouping, again omitting any sense of desire. The entire section, actually the entire exhibition on the whole, was dominated by AA Bronson's work *Felix, June 5, 1994*, (1994/1999). A textured enamel painting (not ultimately removed), the scale is so overwhelming, that it makes the subject matter almost unbearable in its paradoxical beauty. *Felix*, the dying lover of the artist, is the iconic AIDS patient, wasted away to a skeletal framework covered with a bit of skin.

What meaning or tone does the organization of this exhibition convey? The beginning of American gay life, which started in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, was cryptic and underground. As time progressed, some came out of the shadows, becoming producers of works for larger audiences, but becoming more and more decadent. Then they got AIDS and died. The layout and limited chronology of the exhibition almost gives the impression that sometimes secrecy and limitation are better.

But what of Wojnarowicz's *Fire in My Belly*? The omitted piece from the Smithsonian exhibit was a welcomed inclusion at the Brooklyn Museum. It was shown on multiple screens in a room off of the dominant storyline of the exhibition. Walking through a small doorway off to the side of the third section, around the sign that partially blocked the entrance, the viewer saw a film looped in continuous play. While it may seem that the installation was handled with care, given a place of prominence within its special black walled and ceilinged room, what this actually did was remove it from the exhibition by setting it to the side of a clearly linear narrative. The placement, or blatant omission by the Smithsonian, is even more relevant when we see that *Fire in My Belly* is the only piece in the group that not only offers resistance, but does so brazenly. It is not asking for a seat at the table, it wants the table burned.

In *Fire in My Belly* we have a video with multiple versions, the most prominent one using the audio of Diamanda Galas chanting the song "The Law of the Plaque," a hypnotic sermonic tune continuously referencing the "unclean." The Brooklyn Museum version(s) (3 versions were shown, 2 were silent) used audio of an ACT UP demonstration that is thought to include Wojnarowicz voice (*A Fire in My Belly*). The opening scene is of a plastic crucifix in the dirt with ants crawling all over it, the daily bread that has been cut in half is being sewn back together. Then it is the mouth of a man being sewn with the same thick crimson thread. The

image of a weeping Jesus suggests his disapproval of the abuses Wojnarowicz is resisting in the video. A marionette doll dances, his shadow having more life than he does. In a dark room, we see Wojnarowicz start to undress, first removing his tee shirt with the letters XXXL on it. His disrobing is segmented by bloody hands being washed.



(Figure 11) Still from *Fire in My Belly*, Wojnarowicz (Wojnarowicz, Still From Fire in My Belly)

The still above (Figure 11) is the image that created all of the controversy. It is important to understand that the use of ants in Wojnarowicz's work should not be seen as a representation of decay. Ants are often used in his work and generally symbolize society of the pre-invented world (Heartney); the image is of ants ever building, tearing down, and building again. So the meaning behind the crucifix in the dirt with ants crawling on it, in the light of this paper's investigation of Wojnarowicz's attention to structure and agency, can be seen as drawing

parallels between religion and man-made cultural constructs. This interpretation, while valid, should by no means be seen as an apology for defaming religious iconography. Regardless of Wojnarowicz's intent, the omission from the Smithsonian was inexcusable. Sometimes audiences have a tendency to react, instead of respond. Deeper investigations of meaning need to be teased out and every last morsel of possible illumination presented. The phenomena of politico-religious forces silencing the voices of resistance is obviously not a new one.

Wojnarowicz wrote on the topic:

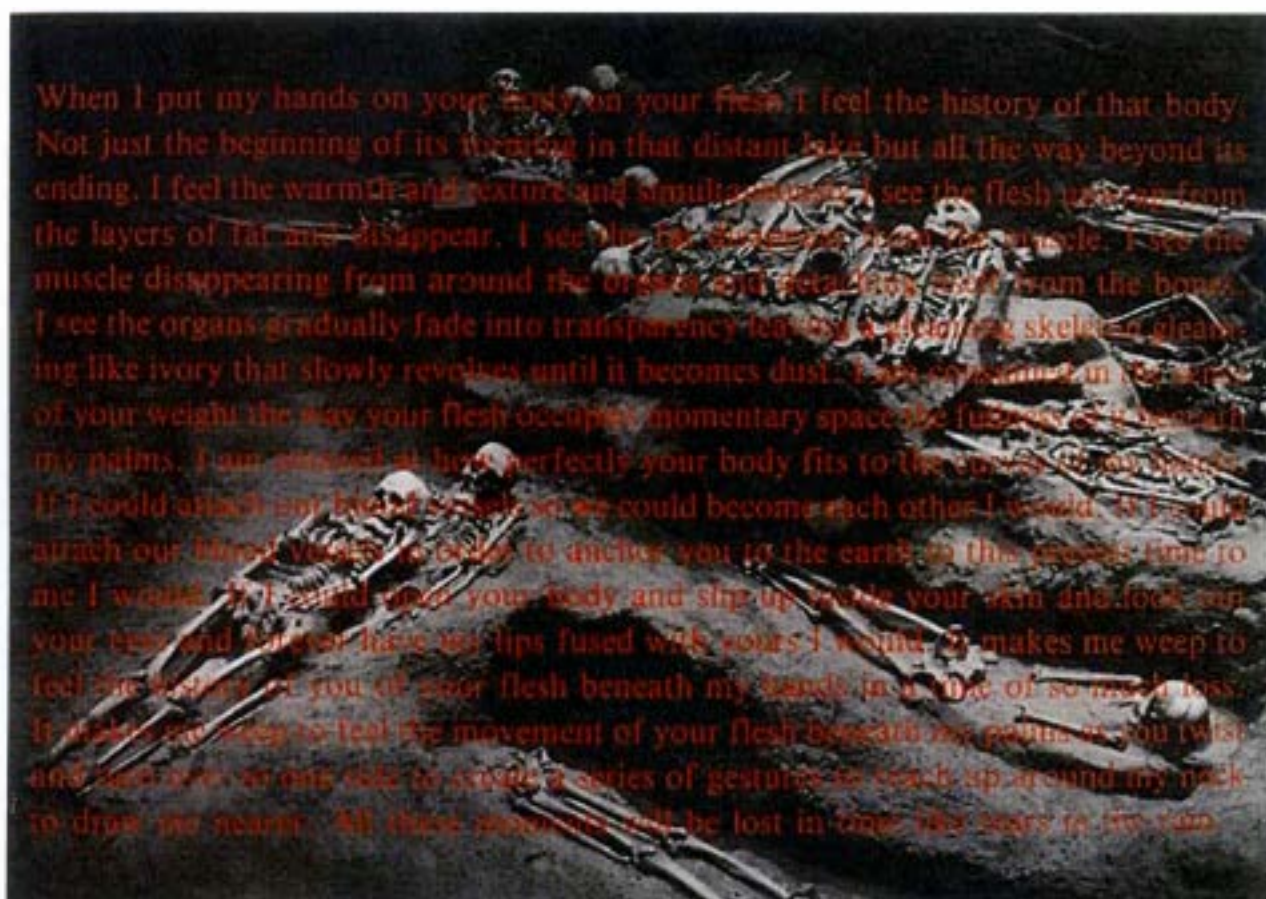
I scratch my head at the hysteria surrounding the actions of the repulsive senator from zombieland who has been trying to dismantle the NEA for supporting the work of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe. Although the anger sparked within the art community is certainly justified and will hopefully grow stronger, the actions of Helms and D'Amato only follow standards that have been formed and implemented by the "arts" community itself. The major museums in New York, not to mention museums around the country, are just as guilty of this kind of selective cultural support and denial. It is a standard practice to make invisible any kind of sexual imaging other than white straight male erotic fantasies (*Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* 119).

Wojnarowicz's insight and deeper understanding of the sociocultural matrices which guide our lives continue to educate and inspire today.

The death of David Wojnarowicz on July 22, 1992 (Kimmelman) at 37 was a loss not only to the art community and LGBT community, but the entire citizenry of the United States. While much has been achieved since his death, there is still a monumental need for human rights access for gays and lesbians in the United States, and on the global stage. An understanding of existing social, political, economic, and cultural structures must be at the forefront of this battle, and ideological strongholds must be penetrated and deconstructed to prevent further degradation



to marginalized individuals and groups. The art of David Wojnarowicz is still a relevant tool to elucidate, understand and provoke resistance to the so-called universal truths of imposed normality.



(Figure 12) *When I Put my Hands on Your Body* 1990

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