

## The David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base

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Artist David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) worked beyond conventional constraints of media, location, and temporality. He made biographical and political works amid a community of artists in lower Manhattan in the 1970s and 1980s who collaborated and showed work together in traditional and non-traditional spaces. The David Wojnarowicz Papers (ca. 1954-1992) at New York University's Fales Library & Special

Collections present common challenges of artists' archives, but also many complexities unique to Wojnarowicz. These issues relate to his working methods, materials, and the importance of his personal and professional relationships. The collection includes extensive manuscript material such as journals, notes, and performative texts, as well as images, objects, and multimedia recordings.

The archive represents a large and varied set of recurring motifs, objects, materials, and recordings Wojnarowicz used in both iterative and discrete works. The issue of reuse, by Wojnarowicz and others, even after his death, makes it difficult to identify elements in the archive as belonging to a particular place, time, or project. Traditional principles of archives and art collection management are a challenge to apply. Additionally, intersections of people, geographical locations, and art venues (both formal and improvised) are key to understanding his oeuvre. Evidence of these intersections appears throughout the archive.

The David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base is a creative and functional approach to opening up and linking together the many points of inquiry housed in the archive. The site is part of NYU's

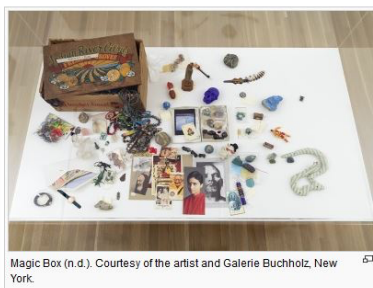
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Artist Archive Initiative, which aims to “promote research and disseminate knowledge about the display and care of contemporary art” to art world professionals, researchers, and artists. Variability, authenticity, and re-activation of artwork are areas of focus.

The Knowledge Base site is not lovely, but straightforward and rich with content. Built with MediaWiki wiki software, it has a familiar interface and non-linear structure. Like the Initiative, the stated audience for the Knowledge Base is curators, conservators, and others researching Wojnarowicz. Proclaiming the Knowledge Base a “community effort,” the site will reflect not only new findings by the archive team but also appeals for contributions from researchers on requested areas of interest. However, unlike Wikipedia, contributions are to be emailed to the knowledge base manager and not entered by the public on the fly.

### Magic Box

The Magic Box is a unique collection of items that confounds traditional archival or art historical description. It consists of a small box holding 58 unique found items that Wojnarowicz kept under his bed at the time of his death, with a masking taped title affixed to the lid: “Magic Box.” The items include dried flowers, a group of tweezers and nail clippers, a bag of seeds, a single feather in tissue, a Buddha sculpture, a prayer card, a toy grasshopper, and other disparate objects. According to Cynthia Carr, who exhaustively researched Wojnarowicz and interviewed his extended network of friends, family, and lovers, Wojnarowicz never mentioned the Magic Box to friends or write about its significance. She found only one mention of its existence, in a 1988 journal entry that reads “Put Magic Box in installation.” [1] He never did exhibit the items in the box. When the Fales Library & Special Collections acquired the Wojnarowicz Papers, the decision was made to keep the items together, catalogued simply under the series “magic box”, with item level descriptions. This series was a priority to document digitally in order to minimize access and photographs can be found on the [Fales finding aid](#).



Magic Box (n.d.). Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Buchholz, New York.

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- 1 Conservation and Display
- 2 Images from The David Wojnarowicz Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections
- 3 Pages on Knowledge Base that link to this page
- 4 References

The site’s excellent content draws primarily from the archive at the Fales Library, but also includes wider research such as annotated bibliographies and links to unpublished papers and reports. Interviews with people connected to Wojnarowicz and his work were conducted for the Knowledge Base and are presented with synopsis text (including useful timestamps) and full audio. Eleven

interviews are available on the site at this time, ranging in length from approximately forty to nearly 120 minutes. Case studies provide a deep dive into specific works and it is evident how essential these could become with the addition of further links and archival content.

The MediaWiki wiki software democratizes navigation, as opposed to a design that would weight or emphasize scholarly content over administrative. This places as much importance on organizational decisions as on the content itself and allows exploration to be dictated by inquiry. Other publishing tools for non-linear content exploration, such as Scalar, could present the same sort of inquiry-driven path into the content but are not built for continuous development and contribution. MediaWiki lets the Knowledge Base adapt flexibly to discovery within the Wojnarowicz collection and by the community around his work.

In May 2019, the Artist Archive Initiative will launch its second Knowledge Base site dedicated to the work of artist Joan Jonas.

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