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Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz

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Organized by Dan Cameron

The death of David Wojnarowicz from AIDS in 1992, at the age of thirty-seven, was immediately recognized as a major artistic loss. But it has taken a number of years to come to grips with Wojnarowicz's sprawling body of work and to organize this exhibition, the first systematic assessment of his extraordinary legacy. In part, this inattention is due to the fact that Wojnarowicz, in a restless spirit of experimentation, worked in an extraordinarily broad range of media: painting, writing, photography, sculpture, film, video, performance art, graphics and music. Critical recognition of his achievement in at least two of these areas, writing and photography, has come only posthumously.

In addition, Wojnarowicz was an inveterate collaborator, working with Kiki Smith, Nan Goldin, Greer Lankton, Mike Bidlo, Karen Finley, Richard Kern, Luis Frangella, Allen Frame, Tommy Turner, Ben Neill, Rosa von Praunheim, Paul Marcus, Steve Doughton, James Romberger, Marguerite van Cook, and many others. Last but far from least, Wojnarowicz was one of the art community's most passionate and articulate voices at the height of the AIDS crisis in the late 1980s and early 1990s. His diatribes against the homophobic positions of such public figures as John Cardinal O'Connor, Sen. Jesse Helms, and the Rev. Donald

Wildmon drew the wrath of the political Right, and his catalogue text for a 1989 AIDS-related exhibition organized by Nan Goldin at Artists Space in New York sparked a crisis from which the National Endowment for the Arts has yet to recover.

Not surprisingly, given the facts of Wojnarowicz's life, his personal history has been the subject of nearly as much attention as his work. A victim of child abuse growing up in Red Bank, New Jersey, in adolescence he turned to hustling in Times Square and was living on the street full time by the age of sixteen. After hitchhiking many times across the U.S. and living for several months in San Francisco and Paris, he settled in New York's East Village in 1978, and produced his first body of work, a series of photos of a friend in dozens of typical New York locales, wearing a handmade mask depicting the French symbolist poet Arthur Rimbaud.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Wojnarowicz started performing with the postpunk group 3 Teens Kill 4 – No Motive; his first stencil works were street advertisements for the band's club gigs. Around the same time, he began painting on garbage can lids and other found objects, then turned to creating large murals on the dilapidated West Side piers that served as sexual meeting places for gay men. Soon Wojnarowicz met Peter Hujar, an East Village photographer, who became Wojnarowicz's close friend and was instrumental in convincing the younger man to begin taking his art and writing seriously. The subsequent prodigious output on Wojnarowicz's part is reflected in the fact that in the decade between

his first solo exhibition and his death, he had nineteen individual exhibitions and participated in close to two hundred group shows.

The accelerated creative energy that marks Wojnarowicz's art from 1983 to 1986 was partly inspired by the East Village art scene, several dozen small storefront galleries, clubs, and magazines that flourished at the height of the mid-1980s art market. Wojnarowicz's macabre paintings on supermarket posters, elaborately decorated wooden totems, furtive depictions of sexual scenes, bandaged plaster heads, animal forms and skulls wrapped in maps or money, apocalyptic mixed-media installations, and exaggeratedly violent film performances were all emblematic of the highly charged atmosphere of the time.

By 1986, Wojnarowicz was producing increasingly complex paintings and sculpture that dealt with issues of language, technological progress, and the destruction of the natural environment. The painting *Crash: The Invention of Language, the Birth of Lies* (1987) is characteristic of the artist's drive to cram as much meaning as possible into a single work and to push his technique to the extreme. His most ambitious undertaking as a painter was in this period-- the four large canvases titled *Earth, Wind, Fire, and Water*. Each shows remarkable visual invention and a capacity for fusing seemingly disparate subjects within a unified pictorial space.

Wojnarowicz's interest in creating art from the visual residue of what he called the "pre-invented world" was the main impetus for his turning to photography, writing, and object-making in the

last years of his life. In particular, photography enabled him to work more from found imagery, to combine several different images or media within a single work, and to link works in sequence. For example, in the so-called "Ant Series" (1988-89), toy plastic ants transform conventional photographs into disturbing portents of mortality and decay. In the "Sex Series" (1988-89), explicit sexual scenes and newspaper articles on AIDS are positioned within negative prints of large public spaces and methods of transport.

Following Hujar's death from AIDS in 1988 and Wojnarowicz' discovery of his own HIV positive status, his work underwent a change in substance. He embarked on a fierce critique of American politics and way of life in such works as *The Redesign of the Dollar Bill* (1988-89) and in his writings. In spite of the passionate convictions that drive his message home, Wojnarowicz's expression of profound discomfort with American culture transcended the limits of the so-called political art of the period and powerfully fused artistic issues with the social and personal crises that increasingly consumed his time and energy.

Many of Wojnarowicz's last works, dealing with his impending death and ongoing battle with AIDS, directly incorporate his texts into his painted and photographic imagery. In *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* (1988-89) a verbal message of rage (later spoken by the artist in the multimedia work *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*) fills the picture plane, while in *What is this Little Guy's Job in the World* (1990), words provide a caption

for a photograph of a baby frog nestled in the palm of the artist's hand. Like all his writings, these texts were often based on Wojnarowicz's personal struggles with collective homophobia, especially as expressed in government and media attitudes concerning AIDS.

The need to work out his deepest passions through the process of making art results in a continual blurring of boundaries between Wojnarowicz's life story and his artistic production. The collaborative comic book *7 Miles a Second*, made with James Romberger and Marguerite van Cook in 1992-1995, was based directly on the artist's recollections from his early life through the health and legal crises at the end. As in Wojnarowicz's best writing and video and performance works, the persona that emerged in this survival tale became as indelible as the most memorable characters created by writers of fiction. Wojnarowicz's most lasting achievement may have been to show by concrete example that the artist's unshakeable responsibility is to his own version of the truth, even when it takes on forms and meanings that are extremely difficult to witness.

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The need to work through the trauma of his early life through the making of second and third hand objects is a central theme in Wojnarowicz's life story and his artistic production. The collaborative comic book *Miller's Second*, made with James Romberger and Marguerite van Cook in 1992-1995, was based directly on the artist's recollections from his early life through the health and legal crises at the end. As in Wojnarowicz's best writing and video and performance works, the persona that emerged in this survival tale became as indelible as the most memorable characters created by writers of fiction. Wojnarowicz's most lasting achievement may have been to show by example that the artist's unshakable responsibility is to his own version of the truth, even when it takes on forms and meanings that are extremely difficult to witness.

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