

David Wojnarowicz's In the Shadow of Forward Motion

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Megan N. Liberty

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**DAVID WOJNAROWICZ**



**IN THE SHADOW OF  
FORWARD MOTION**

**NOTES BY FELIX GUATTARI**

*In the Shadow of Forward Motion*

David Wojnarowicz with notes by Felix Guattari (Primary Information, 2020 / P.P.O.W. Gallery, 1989)

*In the Shadow of Forward Motion*

David Wojnarowicz's work is a web of symbols and references—locomotives, ants, currency, monkeys, and clocks, to name just a few of his recurring motifs—that make viewing even his text-less works a kind of decoding experience. The artist produced sculpture, painting, collage, music, and film, and was also a prolific writer who kept journals and wrote extensively about his work, his friends and fellow artists, and the toll of his illness, AIDS, which would take his life in 1992 at the young age of 37. In 1989, to accompany an exhibition at P.P.O.W. gallery in New York, Wojnarowicz published a photocopied zine (in an edition of 50) that included sketches and mockups for his paintings alongside typed notes describing the symbolism and circumstances surrounding the works, along with an introduction by Felix Guattari. Recently republished in facsimile by Primary Information, reveals his uniquely vulnerable and cryptic writing style alongside his visual work.

The zine is slim, a floppy softcover letter-size book of 54 pages, fully black-and-white with typewriter text opposite sketchy notes and visuals for 31 artworks. In the opening, Wojnarowicz explains:

THE NOTES CONTAINED IN THIS BOOK ARE NOT MEANT AS LITERAL EXPLANATIONS OF THE PAINTINGS PHOTOGRAPHS AND SCULPTURES IN THE SHOW; THEY ARE ROUGH NOTES, LATE NIGHT TAPE-RECORDINGS, THINGS SPOKEN IN SLEEP AND FRAGMENTED IDEAS WHICH AT TIMES CONTRADICT EACH OTHER.

This caveat recalls Whitman's famous line from "The Song of Myself," "Do I contradict myself? / Very well then I contradict myself, / (I am large, I contain multitudes.)" Reading Wojnarowicz's words alongside his visual notes emphasizes the work of an artist whose "multitudes" are vast, and whose willingness to bare them publicly is one of the strengths of his art. He offers up a rawness that matches the roughness of the zine, which shifts from urgent whispers ("Something about mortality and a desire to go to a foreign place") to angry pleas ("I am in the throes of facing my own mortality and I'm attempting to communicate what I'm experiencing or learning in order to try to help others I am effectively silenced. I am angry.").

The zine illustrates the range of his quotations and interests. Sometimes he deconstructs his symbols, as in his notes for, "WHERE I'LL GO IF AFTER I'M GONE" in which he writes, "the gears are the residue of the manufactured world I was born into. The train is the acceleration of time; the tornado the force of displacement in death; the indian chief a cheap WWII doll that for me translates culture into something can be owned." But most are more abstract, a weaving together of symbols and stories from his life. In his notes for "THE WEIGHT OF THE EARTH PART I AND II" he lists, "The weight of gravity" and "the human irritation at the sight of uncontrolled 'nature'" with a detailed mockup demarcating the size of various squares, what would be in them ("drawing dog with cast injury + repair" and "water color earth in space"), as well as various ideas circled across the page: "ANIMALS" "SMILING DOG ROAD IN HANDS."

In the description of the first work, "FEAR OF EVOLUTION," Wojnarowicz writes at length about his childhood interest in natural disasters and weather:

Somewhere since childhood I have found comfort and hope in various forces of nature that were either unexplainable or uncontrollable; spontaneous self-combustion or tornadoes, floods or earthquakes and volcanoes - when the future of civilization and all its leanings could suddenly be altered or whisked from human hands by natural occurrences or 'unnatural' phenomenon such as flying saucers or the reviving from glacial sleep of an old bewildered dinosaur as in black and white japanese movies; all this gave me faith in the nature and possibilities of change.

Other times, he hones in on a particular animal or insect, such as ants, referenced throughout this zine and represented in a number of his works. "Ants are the only insects to keep pets, use tools, make war and capture slaves," he writes in the description of "UNTITLED - SIX PHOTOGRAPHS (Ant Series)." The series itself is a group of six black-and-white silver gelatin prints depicting closely cropped items—coins, a crucifix, a gun, and one nude male body—with ants crawling on them. The image accompanying the text in the zine is a sheet of stamps commemorating the 1986 "Mexico Campeonato Mundial de Futbol" superimposed over a map of Mexico City, where these photographs were taken in 1988. Sometimes the text and images are loosely related, but they share a thread of connection, giving insight into Wojnarowicz's own way of making connections in his work.

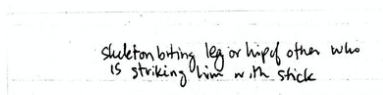
In addition to his unpacking of symbols and references, his writings in the zine are deeply personal and political. "Recently I was diagnosed with the secondary states of Aids and now looking through journals from the past couple of years I see the threads of the unconscious revealing to me that this virus was making its way through my body before I became symptomatic," he writes accompanying "SOMETHING FROM SLEEP (Dream) For Tom Rauffenbart." He reflects on the death of his friend and former lover, Peter Hujar, and his struggle to take over his apartment. Same-sex couples are "unable by law to marry if they so desire," and as a consequence, don't have the same rights, "such as the simple right to continue living in a home when one or the other partner dies." In order to remain living there, Wojnarowicz explains, "They also had me sign a slip of paper guaranteeing that I would not turn the apartment over to another person with Aids before I die."

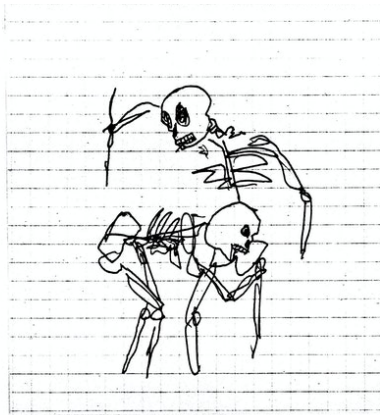
recent issue of the Rail

The artist's battle with AIDS haunts this collection, though it shouldn't be read solely through the lens of death and disease. As David Breslin writes in his essay about Wojnarowicz for the artist's 2018 survey show at the Whitney Museum, there is a fine line that must be tread between illness and life, particularly with AIDS which was so often illustrated with the bedridden, the sickly, the dead. As he writes, "Not only does this forget those AIDS activists who created language that rhetorically unhinged AIDS from death and those activists and scientists who fought for and created the drug treatments that have prolonged the lives of many, it also telescopes the complexity and heterogeneity of a life and body of work to a single—albeit radically central—dimension." As Dan Cameron wrote of Wojnarowicz in a , "His cold fury wasn't directed toward death itself, but was put to the task of exposing those dark forces of societal homophobia that discounted the premature, agonizing deaths of countless victims of HIV/AIDS, and perpetuated the cruel forms of discrimination faced by those afflicted." Wojnarowicz demonstrates this fight for more accurate, more humane representation in his work and writings, even as he so openly faces his own too-soon death. "It's about sexuality in this age of AIDS and the attempted suppression of sexuality," he reveals about his "SEX SERIES (for Marion Soemama)." "Are you comfortable looking at these images of obvious sexual acts in a crowded room. Do you fear judgement if you pause for a long time before an image of sexual expression. Can you sense absurdity or embrace in the viewing of images." Again and again his writings and sketches complicate how we view images, making the mundane mystical, and the seemingly absurd mundane.

## 9. SOMETHING FROM SLEEP IV (Dream)

I took this image from a dream that for months I felt was an anxiety dream. To dream of oneself as a dinosaur or a fossil; something ancient and alien - I figured it had something to do with examining my position in the world; I'd always felt an alienation from the 'art' world as well as the alienation from the forward thrust of civilization. Talking to a stranger recently we agreed that peoples biggest fear is to break through the wall of illusion surrounding society and acknowledge its structures. (that moment of the x-ray of civilization) Realizing that the 'intent' in my work doesn't reverberate within the mass of population the same way that cave wall scratchings reverberated in the midst of the tribe. Telecommunications mass media are the images that reverberate only it's not with a moral intent; it's with the intent to sell something and that intent is accomplished. We've been sold a corrupted and false history as well as a corrupted and false future - witness the elections or the nightly news.





Courtesy of Primary Information, the Estate of David Wojnarowicz, and P.P.O.W.

One of the final entries in the zine is a lengthy essay on the state of living with AIDS in America: "For most people with Aids in this country," he writes, "their only alternative to the highly toxic AZT is the possibility of getting into a government/drug company sponsored drug trial." He follows this with a long list of those who are excluded from these trials including: women, particularly lesbians, people of color, the poor and people on welfare, the homeless, and of course, homosexuals ("They also say that the homosexual community is so well informed that there need be no ad campaigns aimed at homosexuality and safe sex—once again this is nonsense"). The urgency in Wojnarowicz's writing is palpable, and his request—to be recognized for his humanity, not his sexuality or diagnosis—rings painfully true today.

*New York Times*<sup>1</sup>

Many of the inequalities he cites in the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s are strikingly familiar cries being made today as COVID-19 continues to spread across the globe, evidenced by the 's recent article, "For H.I.V. Survivors, a Feeling of Weary Déjà Vu." This is not to draw a false equivalency between the two diseases. But, as the notes, both disproportionately impact lower-income and minority communities with lesser resources. New information shows that in America, more African Americans are dying from the virus. The current pandemic gives new weight to Wojnarowicz's words as we are reminded of how unequal the world remains, particularly when it comes to access to healthcare. "To dream of oneself as a dinosaur or a fossil; something ancient and alien—I figured it had something to do with examining my position in the world; I'd always felt an alienation from the 'art' world as well as the alienation from the forward thrust of civilization," he muses next to a drawing of a dinosaur on sheet music. As we remain inside and do what we can to stop the spread of the virus, for which there is still no vaccine, I imagine we are all feeling "the alienation from the forward thrust of civilization," as we are forced to face its screeching halt.

- Kenya Evelyn, "It's a racial justice issue: Black Americans are dying in greater numbers from Covid-19." The Guardian, April 8, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/08/its-a-racial-justice-issue-black-americans-are-dying-in-greater-numbers-from-covid-19>; David Remnick with Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, "The Injustice of COVID-19." New Yorker Radio Hour Podcast, April 13, 2020. <https://www.newyorker.com/podcast/political-scene/the-injustice-of-covid-19>