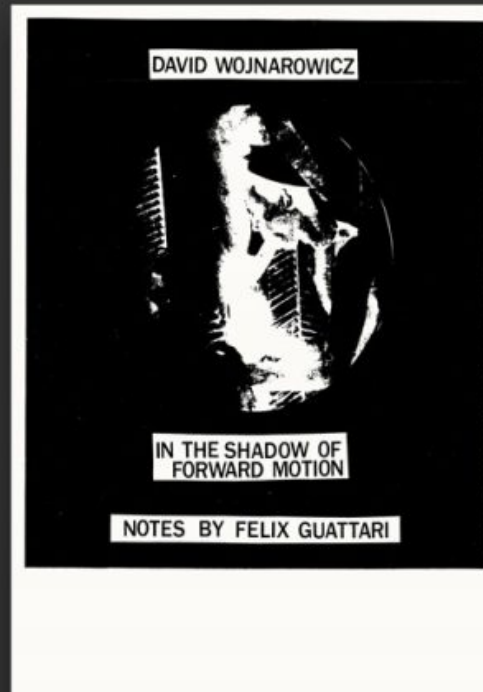


Of Grief and Anger: David Wojnarowicz's *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* Reviewed by Conor Williams

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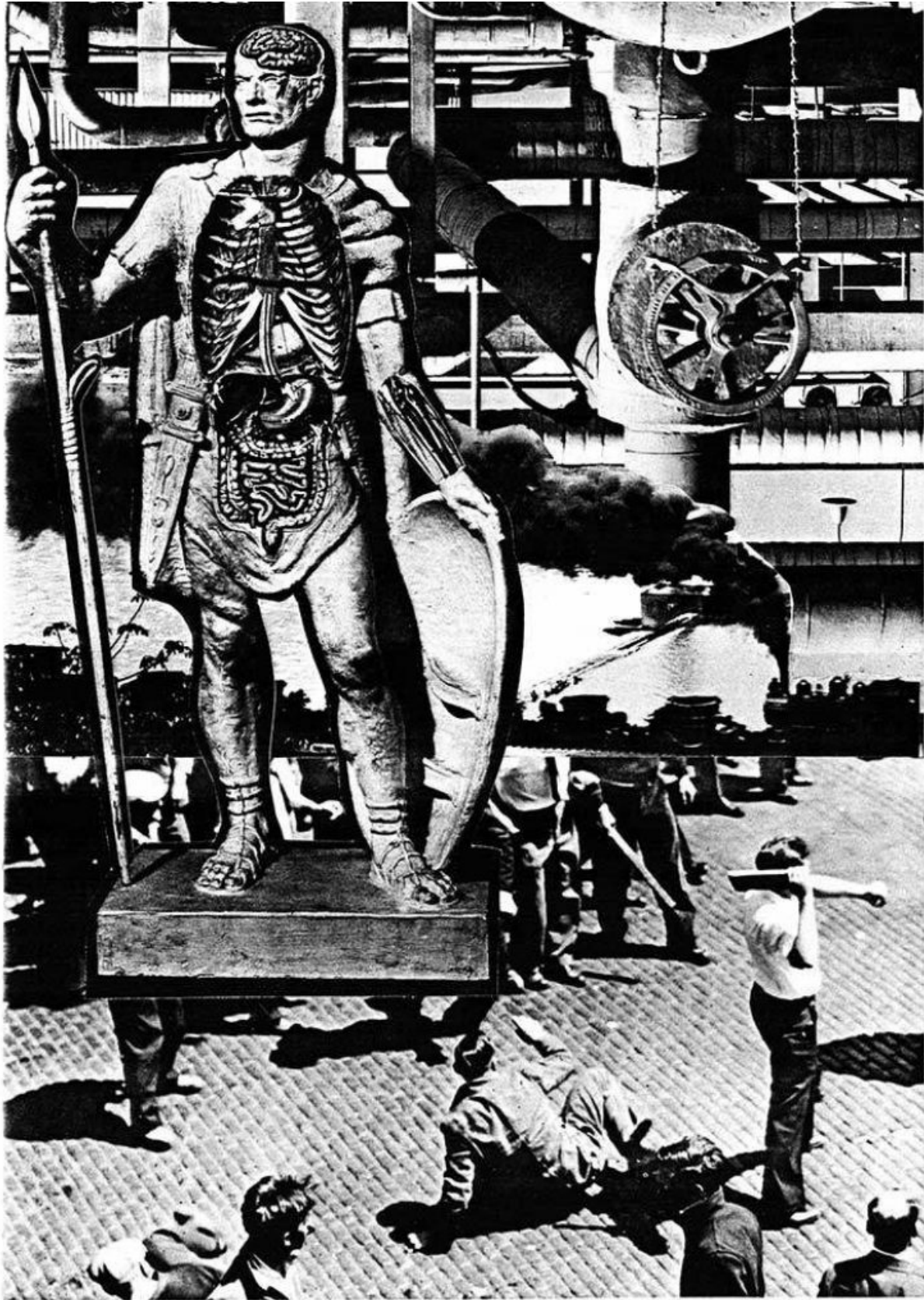
David Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz, Primary Information, and P.P.O.W.

There once was a scrawny kid who ran away from his abusive household in Red Bank, New Jersey, before arriving in Manhattan where he sold his body and time to older men. He made graffitied cow heads on the decaying walls of the city's West Side piers. He wrote voraciously and honestly, painted murals that damned the inherent violence of America, and put images to film that would spark outrage even decades later. The conservative government of his time (and later, of our own) raged against his work, and he raged back. He watched his closest friends die from a plague while the government blamed them and refused to help. He himself got sick and died when he was just thirty-seven years old. In October of 1996, his ashes were thrown by his partner onto the White House lawn.

In 2018, the Whitney Museum of American Art hosted a retrospective of David Wojnarowicz's work. Had he lived to see it, it would have stirred a complicated response in him. To see his work displayed in such a sprawling and ritzy venue, one that sits atop the very spot he once cruised and made art, would likely have nauseated him. The surreal sight of children watching his film *A Fire in My Belly* (1986–87), which has remained a centerpiece of the culture wars, might have been poignant; but if he witnessed museum-goers pass distractedly through an empty room in which recordings of his furious, poetic polemics played on a loop, he probably would have left feeling depressed.

In 1989, P.P.O.W. gallery, a still-frequent champion of Wojnarowicz's work, presented an exhibition of his entitled *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*. As a supplement to the show, a zine/catalogue of the same name was published in an edition of fifty copies. This zine, with an introduction by the philosopher and psychotherapist Pierre-Félix Guattari, showcased Wojnarowicz's visual art alongside text in which he turns artist statements into works of stirring memoir and political urgency.

In the Shadow of Forward Motion has recently been republished by Primary Information. To engage with Wojnarowicz's work is to participate in an act of confrontation between ourselves and the artist. Included in the zine are images of ants embedded in eyeballs embedded in dollar bills. Wojnarowicz subverts a photograph of a flexing beefcake by superimposing onto the figure's macho pose Spanish literature on the anatomy of flowers. "Fuck you faggot fucker," says a doodled man on another page, plunging his big cartoon cock into a man wearing a beret. "Ooh la la!" the beret-wearing man exclaims.



David Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz, Primary Information, and P.P.O.W.

Entire pages are consumed by these stark black-and-white collages and crass sketches. Yet a tenderness comes through as well, particularly in the paragraphs opposite these ferocious images. At these moments, Wojnarowicz is more intimate. "Spirituality," dedicated to his friend Paul Thek, evocatively collapses landscapes, bodies, thoughts of sex, and death in a verbal collage:

In examining the death of spirituality in america; a death brought on the real wheels of the steam engine as it blasted its way on blood-slicked rails through the western dawn, I thought of a night in semi-rural louisiana [sic] in a small rock n roll club filled with a tribe of macho toughs slamming into each other during the more frenetic songs; what with the beer and whiskey and body heat the place was dripping with sweat within twenty minutes and I thought of the whirling dervishes of the distant mountains across the ocean and the various attempts through history to reach heights in an attempt to touch the sources of mortality and thus possibly immortality...

There are reasons to be grateful that the previously rare *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* has been given a chance for resurgence. The fascism of ignorance reigns, and a pandemic has emptied the streets. The White House lawn may once again be dusted with the remains of human lives. Wojnarowicz's work is a survival guide, a textbook on the power of the body, of grief, and of anger.

David Wojnarowicz's *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* is available from Primary Information.