

How David Wojnarowicz Met the First Great Love of His Life

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On a dark night in 1970s Paris, David Wojnarowicz encountered Jean Pierre Delage and formed an unforgettable connection; the new book *Dear Jean Pierre* brings together three years of their correspondence

Text: Tony Wilkes

“Met a fella towards dark dark evening,” wrote **David Wojnarowicz** in his journal, “a stranger leaning against the doors of the Louvre.” It was November 1, 1978, and Wojnarowicz had been in Paris for a month. Fresh from New York, he had arrived with various plans: he would write a novel; he would illustrate poetry, like Arthur Rimbaud’s *Illuminations*; he would make his living from his drawings and writings and become, in effect, an artist. The fella in the dark, by the doors, was **Jean Pierre Delage**. “I went to cruise in the gardens of the Louvre,” Delage tells AnOther, “at the exact place the big pyramid is now.” Rather than by the museum, the two met, he admits, “in the bushes.”

This midnight stranger quickly became the first great love of Wojnarowicz’s life. The feeling was mutual. “How to explain ... ,” Delage says. “It was just a perfect connection. And when David had to go back to New York, it was unthinkable to be apart from each other. So we had to keep in touch.” What followed was a passionate three-year correspondence, from 1979 to 1982, which has now been published by Primary Information. *Dear Jean Pierre* collects every one of Wojnarowicz’s letters, and totals nearly 600 pages. “I realised,” says Delage, “that this was a big opportunity to show everything I had.”

Like his idol Arthur Rimbaud, the French renegade poet, Wojnarowicz is inseparable from his legend. “The background that David came from is a classic background for a serial killer,” his friend Fran Lebowitz has said. Raised by an abusive father, he ran away as a child and lived on the streets, turning to hustling in order to survive. When he died in 1992 from HIV/Aids, aged just 38, he had become a star on the New York art scene, and left – across photography, painting, and literature – a record of electrifying lyricism and blistering rage. “My primary interest in David is his heroism,” Lebowitz says. “I would say David is the most heroic person I have ever known.”

But in 1979, none of this work – or his legend – existed. Instead, aged 24, he wrote in his journal: “Who the fuck am I? And what am I racing towards?” It’s these questions the letters of *Dear Jean Pierre* begin to collectively answer. Over the next three years, he’ll create his famous photography series *Rimbaud in New York*, form the New Wave band 3 Teens Kill 4, begin to publish and exhibit his work, and become part of the then-emerging East Village art

scene. “The art world was aching for an act of artistic rebellion to kick it in the teeth,” wrote his biographer Cynthia Carr. “What rock musicians had been in the 60s, artists would be in the 80s.”

If you know where to look, Delage – known in the letters as simply ‘JP’ – is there in the work. In 1979, visiting Wojnarowicz for a month in New York, he posed for a group of the *Rimbaud* photographs - his head masked by a cut out of the poet’s face. Wojnarowicz was drawn to Rimbaud for several reasons: both were runaways; both were queer; and both created visionary art that devastated dominant values and morality. Many of Wojnarowicz’s *Rimbauts* are surrounded by the ruins of the New York piers, a place used by gay men for illicit sex. “It was lots of fun,” Delage recalls. “We went to different places to do it. Sometimes it was embarrassing because there were people around us. But I wore the mask with pleasure.”

As difference is increasingly targeted in politics and the media, Wojnarowicz’s voice is as important as ever. “You’re collecting evidence,” he said of his work. “I’m trying to show my own sense of things, that challenges the record that we’re given daily, whether through the newspapers, the television, politicians. My two biggest impulses for [creating art] were – if some kid gets a hold of it and would feel less alienated, great. I really suffered as a teenager because I never had any indication that there was anything out there that reflected myself. But I also wanted to leave a record. I’d like some of my experience to live on.” In *Dear Jean Pierre*, his experience does.

Dear Jean Pierre by *David Wojnarowicz* is published by *Primary Information* and is out now.