

An Intimate Record of a Love: On David Wojnarowicz's "Dear Jean Pierre"

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ON SEPTEMBER 14, 1978—his 24th birthday—David Wojnarowicz arrived in Paris for a vacation with his sister Pat and her partner, Jean-Pierre Pillu. He had met them a few days earlier in Normandy, where Jean-Pierre had a house. Although Wojnarowicz had begun work on a book, a series of monologues inspired by the characters he'd met on the streets of New York, he was half-convinced he might stay in Europe for the rest of his life. In a letter he sent to an editor in the hopes they might publish his book *Sounds in the Distance: Thirty-Eight Monologues From the American Road* (1982), he wrote: "I recently erased my own borders and have come to live and write in France. I stay on and off in Paris and Normandy with family." This was only one month into his stay.

He ultimately remained in France for nine months—not forever, though it may have felt that way in the moment. During his time there, Wojnarowicz met another Jean-Pierre: Jean Pierre Delage, who would become one of the great loves of his lifetime. The two met while cruising and quickly moved in together. "We were really living a kind of mad love," Delage says in a video interview on the website for the gallery PPOW—a longtime champion of Wojnarowicz's work. "It was very, very strong."

The correspondence between the two lovers following Wojnarowicz's departure was the subject of a [show](#) last year at PPOW, *Dear Jean Pierre: The David Wojnarowicz Correspondence with Jean Pierre Delage, 1979–1982*, curated by Wojnarowicz biographer Cynthia Carr along with Anneliis Beadnell, the former director of the gallery who is now an archivist for the artist's estate. The show was impressively detailed, made up of hundreds of postcards sent over the four-year period, and smartly illustrated by a number of Wojnarowicz's prints, drawings, and photographs. That show now lives on as a book by the same name, published as a [massive catalog](#) by Primary Information.

When I received the book in the mail, I picked up the package and was instantly confused: *Why is this so heavy?* *Dear Jean Pierre* is the most comprehensive book on the artist since Carr's definitive 2012 biography *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*; it's also a very big book—over 600 pages. In addition to Wojnarowicz's letters, *Dear Jean Pierre* also gives us a good glimpse at his early visual art. In one of his most well-known projects, the *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* series of [photographs](#), Wojnarowicz ventured around the city capturing portraits of himself and friends wearing a hand-crafted mask of the poet Arthur Rimbaud. The genesis for this series occurred in Paris, where Wojnarowicz saw street art similarly depicting the famous poet. It's pretty much impossible to tell who might be behind the mask in each photo, but a letter from December 19, 1979, substantiates that the

Rimbaud standing in front of the Parachute Jump at Coney Island is Jean Pierre Delage himself: “I send you one of the photographs of you with the Rimbaud mask in Coney Island. I think that you will like it, I think it’s great. I just developed a little bit in the darkroom, when I have money I will make them much larger.”

In that same letter, Wojnarowicz writes about a dream he had in which he witnessed the murder of filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini. He also mentions some books he’s been reading: *Confessions of a Mask* (1949) by Yukio Mishima and *The Thief’s Journal* (1949) by Jean Genet. “It made me very excited and hungry for travels and also made me feel good about my own past life in America and growing up as a boy.” (One wonders what he could have meant by this, as Wojnarowicz grew up in a terribly abusive and traumatizing household.) The opposite page displays a Rimbaud in a blazer standing in front of a shuttered bakery.

The illustrations included in the book also show Wojnarowicz’s knack for collage. In a rudimentary combination of images simply titled *Arthur*, he takes a childhood portrait of the French poet and slaps two snakes onto it, as well as a speech bubble that reads, “YOU ARE NOT DREAMING ... YOU ARE EXPERIENCING A POWERFUL FORCE FROM OUTER SPACE!” In another piece, titled *Nancy’s Mexican Sleep*, Wojnarowicz inserts Ernie Bushmiller’s Nancy character, tucked into bed, into some kind of stone environment full of staircases, with additional Nancy heads dotting the steps. The result is M. C. Escher-ish, but it also brings to mind the collages of the gay poet and visual artist Joe Brainard, who famously incorporated Nancy into much of his work.

The emotional effect of seeing all the words of a relationship laid out is quite something. In the case of *Dear Jean Pierre*, it is poignant, tender, endearing—not words often used when describing Wojnarowicz’s work. Perhaps this is because *Dear Jean Pierre* is not a collection of his own work per se, but a generous vantage of a moment in a young man’s life, a young man who is now so often remembered—and therefore flattened by history—as an artist, an activist, a person with AIDS. He was a person who went to Paris in search of the kind of life Rimbaud described but instead found infatuation; instead of poems, he wrote those letters and postcards. While *Dear Jean Pierre* reveals the sheer breadth of the relationship between Wojnarowicz and Delage, it unfortunately only shows Wojnarowicz’s side of it, as Delage’s responses were seemingly lost, unable to be preserved behind glass or memorialized in the pages of a book. *Dear Jean Pierre* can therefore only tell half the story. This could create the impression that Wojnarowicz was deep into a one-sided relationship, sending letter after letter with no response, but that’s not true.

That said, things were complicated. Wojnarowicz seemed to really love Delage, but he also had a boyfriend back home, Brian Butterick. One feels for Butterick, future renowned drag performance artist and co-founder of the Pyramid Club, mentioned offhand throughout the letters, as he likely had a limited knowledge of the extent of Wojnarowicz’s feelings for his

French lover. (Butterick, who died in 2019, was recently celebrated with a posthumous retrospective.) What's more, Delage revealed to Wojnarowicz that he had slept with one of his friends when they came to visit Paris. The two broke up in 1982.

While they were together, however, Wojnarowicz and Delage's relationship was full of passion. In Paris, he wrote in his journal (published in 1998 as *In the Shadow of the American Dream*):

I get struck by this sense like some great revealing section of his mind and body has suddenly merged within my bloodstream and I'm breathing a sense of him in such a way that we are just about indistinguishable, this is all in silence in the car with landscape drifting and what I suddenly feel is that he is mine and in some sense possessed within my coarsing blood in my pores, not a selfish owning sense but just a total merge within and at that exact moment in comes arrowlike a realization that he is an entirely separate person and living independent of me and my blood and that it's a subtle unknown thing that has drawn us together [...]

One of the stories that *Dear Jean Pierre* tells is of a twentysomething coming to terms with living in his country. There's a reason why Wojnarowicz wished to spend the rest of his life abroad. His early life at home, particularly growing up in the suburbs of New Jersey with a physically abusive, alcoholic father, was beyond painful. While he sometimes romanticized the wild life he then made for himself as a young sex worker on the streets of Manhattan, it was no way for a child to grow up. Wojnarowicz spent his early teens getting into trouble, shooting up heroin. He really did not want to go back to the United States. When Pat suggested at one point that Delage move back with him, Wojnarowicz erupted in anger. But eventually, Wojnarowicz did return to the US. On his last evening in Paris, he wrote in his journal:

I sat here in the gray light, sudden downpours, clearing, typing out on a piece of paper a good-bye letter to Jean-Pierre. In the middle of it, kids in the school yard screaming, I broke down swiftly—last week of stunned sense in leaving, all of it came out, wailed over them fuckin' type keys, flashed on Normandy and night J.P. went back to Paris, me typing the weekend out on paper to avoid emotional scenes in solitude, it happened anyway. [...]

We got to the room. [...] [H]e read for a long time, I wondered if he didn't understand what I had written, if the language was too difficult, he turned finally after slowly folding up the letter, noiselessly and deep in thought, he turned and said, It's beautiful and it makes me feel strange. We embraced and held each other as strongly as possible. He lifted up his head and looked me in the eyes and said, I never told you how much I love you because I was afraid to make it too heavy. I thought you might one day leave and I didn't want it to be

difficult. I held him and felt such a harsh love for him, a thick fist rising in my heart, he said, You know I'm sad you go back to America, but I'm happy. I'm happy I had the chance to love you for this time.

Back in the United States, where *Dear Jean Pierre* begins, Wojnarowicz's early letters show him attempting to find a job, something he wasn't able to do in his time in France. In a handwritten note from September 1979, he says, I have had a very strange and difficult time this past 2 weeks—actually, its been like this since I arrived back in New York from France. [...] [I]f I don't find a good job I will take a bad job, it is necessary that I earn some money soon so that I don't become a burden on Brian or anyone else. I will probably feel much better when I'm working.

In October, he and Brian are able to get an apartment together, but he's still looking for work. In early November, he writes about selling his blood for cash. By the 18th, he's got a job—a strange gig, working in a piano factory. It only lasts less than a week: "I am going to stop my work at the piano factory, jean pierre, it is terrible work—I must rise at 5:00 a.m. before the sunrise and be to work at 7:30, it takes one hour on the subway and then I work until late afternoon and return home after night arrives." He then writes that he'll try to get a job at a bookstore. Reading these dispatches is a sobering reminder that before one can become a full-time working artist, or even a part-time worker wishing to be an artist, one is very often mostly unemployed and bursting with the urge to create. It's amazing, in hindsight, how effective Wojnarowicz was in making his name known in the short span of his life.

As the days and months go by, the letters continue, the collages continue, *Rimbaud in New York* continues. Page by page, visual motifs recur: there are postcards of whales, one of Wojnarowicz's favorite animals, and doodles of black dogs. Later on in the book, we hear about the formation of his punk band, 3 Teens Kill 4. He finds new work as a busboy at the famous nightclub Danceteria. There, he soon meets fellow employee and artist Keith Haring. With *Dear Jean Pierre*, we can chart the ups and downs, the personal and creative trajectory of Wojnarowicz's life. Until he's able to find some recognition from the galleries for his artwork, so much seems up in the air. What remains constant, however, is Wojnarowicz's deep love for Jean Pierre Delage.

As Carr notes in the timeline at the back of *Dear Jean Pierre*, Wojnarowicz really did see Delage at the time as the only great love of his life. In 1980, he wrote to Delage, "I do not think I will be in love again in my life, except with you. These are honest words." And then in March 1981, "I want you to realize you are the only man I have ever loved." In that time, however, he met Peter Hujar, a photographer with whom he ended up having a brief affair. But beyond that affair, Wojnarowicz developed with Hujar perhaps his most important and enduring relationship—an artistic mentorship built on love and mutual respect. While Delage

may have been Wojnarowicz's first true romantic love, he certainly loved Peter Hujar as well, although as more of a father figure. There would also be Tom Rauffenbart, Wojnarowicz's romantic partner until his death in 1992.

But with Jean Pierre Delage, something special had ignited—a love that would live on past Wojnarowicz's lifetime. If he could only know that Delage would treasure each of his postcards for decades beyond their creation, so much so that when the gallery that would preserve and champion his work came to Delage, now in his old age, asking to share them with the world, his French lover would hesitate to reveal his treasures. If the plague of AIDS had not robbed David Wojnarowicz and his friends of their futures, then he too could thumb through these pages and relive his memories. *Dear Jean Pierre* carries a profound weight, not simply because of the tremendous amount of days accounted for within it. It is an intimate record of a love and lifetime that had faded into the background of history, now present and alive for us once more.

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