

# The Love Letters of David Wojnarowicz

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October 24, 2023

In the fall of 1978, the writer and artist David Wojnarowicz, aged twenty-four, arrived in Paris, met a hairdresser named Jean-Pierre Delage, and fell in love. As Wojnarowicz told it, he first saw Delage leaning against the Louvre in the moonlight. Delage remembers it differently, claiming that Wojnarowicz popped out of a bush at the Tuileries Garden, a favorite cruising spot for gay men at the time. (Wojnarowicz was a keen mythologizer, and it's likely that Delage's version is closer to the truth.) Within a week, Wojnarowicz had moved into Delage's apartment near the Eiffel Tower. A photo from around this time shows Wojnarowicz as his lover would have seen him, typing away at his sister's apartment on the Rue Laferrière, a classic portrait of a bohemian at work. Wojnarowicz didn't last long in Paris—unable to find work as a soft-skilled English speaker, he went back to New York after nine months—but he and Delage kept up a passionate epistolary romance until 1982.

By then, Wojnarowicz was on his way to becoming a downtown New York art star. His renegade work in many media—including graffiti-inflected paintings on televisions and D.I.Y. papier-mâché—was heady, wild, and trashy, with imagery plucked from dreams as a way of bypassing the deadening conformity of what he called the “pre-invented world.” In the late nineteen-eighties, as his community was devastated by *AIDS* and artists were demonized by the Christian right, his art took an explicitly political turn. (Wojnarowicz learned that he was H.I.V.-positive in 1988.)

In our era of algorithms that favor succinct statements of rage, Wojnarowicz's work has connected with a new generation of activists and artists in part because it is easy to meme. His stencils of burning houses circulate frequently on social media, as does a picture from 1992 or 1993, “Untitled (Face in Dirt),” showing the artist half buried alive, and “One Day This Kid,” from 1990, a print that details a litany of abuse directed toward a queer kid. The American-in-Paris snapshot of Wojnarowicz isn't what we remember today. It's another photograph, taken by Bill Dobbs, of the artist protesting at the F.D.A. headquarters, in 1988, wearing a leather jacket with these words painted on the back: “*IF I DIE OF AIDS—FORGET BURIAL—JUST DROP MY BODY ON THE STEPS OF THE F.D.A.*”

The revealing new art book “Dear Jean Pierre” returns us to an earlier Wojnarowicz, before his work and persona became synonymous with the social trauma of *AIDS*. This volume, edited by James Hoff and published by the indispensable press Primary Information, is based on an intimate and affecting exhibition that was put on by P.P.O.W. gallery last spring. The show, curated by Cynthia Carr—author of “Fire in the Belly,” a brilliant 2012 biography of Wojnarowicz—and Anneliis Beadnell, presented the letters, postcards, photographs, and artwork that Wojnarowicz sent to Delage beginning in the summer of 1979.

The correspondence reveals Wojnarowicz as funny, uncertain, insecure, elusive, transgressive, and unexpectedly devoted. In his best-known book, "Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration," he writes, "If I could figure out a way to remain forever in transition, in the disconnected and unfamiliar, I could remain in a state of perpetual freedom." But, as Carr's biography shows and the letters make vivid, Wojnarowicz's embrace of the disconnected and the unfamiliar was a way of making the best of a preexisting condition. His life may have been perpetually transitory, but that wasn't entirely by choice. In "Fire in the Belly," Carr carefully pieces together a broken, violent childhood that she characterizes as "almost Dickensian." Wojnarowicz's sister, Pat, told Carr that Wojnarowicz's alcoholic father, an intransigent merchant mariner, used to beat his three children one by one in the basement as the others waited on the lawn, listening to the screams. Wojnarowicz coped by hiding, literally and figuratively, taking solace in writers such as Rimbaud and hustling in Times Square to make money and find fleeting connection.

Wojnarowicz minimized his history of sex, violence, and poverty in his letters, presenting a less complicated version of himself to Delage. The first postcard in "Dear Jean Pierre," dated June 1, 1979, is a dashed-off and superficially casual note written on Wojnarowicz's way out of France: "Be well. Try and take it easy—Okay? Au revoir . . ." The rest of the correspondence from 1979 and 1980 is preoccupied with finding an apartment, making ends meet (working for a week at a piano factory, selling blood on Forty-second Street), and finding a way back to Paris—he wanted dual citizenship but balked at the thought of French compulsory military service.

Reading any unedited, chronological record is, at best, an intermittently blissful experience, and Wojnarowicz's letters are no exception. The drama of the correspondence is simple and universal. It's a lover's discourse with four repeated figures: I miss you, I hope to see you soon, I wish you well, I love you. But if the writing is sometimes flat—Wojnarowicz's attempt to communicate across a language barrier—the images are always vivid. Wojnarowicz was seduced *by* and seduced *with* an assortment of stunning visuals: postcards (some marked up with Wojnarowicz's brilliant Keith Haring-esque doodles) and photocopies of his own artwork, which he slipped into the envelopes.

Perhaps playing to his French lover, Wojnarowicz seems especially taken with Americana. Among the images he selects for Delage are photos of James Dean and Yankee Stadium, an illustration of the Empire Diner on Tenth Avenue, black-and-white prints of a handsome cowboy, Jim Dine's watercolor hearts, and Edward Hopper's masterly portrait of alienation, "Office at Night." It's as if Wojnarowicz's attachment to Jean-Pierre has enabled him to observe his home country, which he had been so eager to leave, with a fresh perspective, finding things to love that he might have taken for granted (diners, cowboys) while also being attuned to the alienation of American life (Hopper).

The letters show an artist in the thrall of French Surrealism, art-house cinema, and New Wave music. As the correspondence goes on, a portrait emerges of Wojnarowicz as an autodidact hungry for experience. He spends a night reading Yukio Mishima and eating peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. He sees Larry Clark's frank photographs of sex, guns, and drugs. He anticipates the conceptual sculptor Joseph Beuys's notorious U.S. debut at the Guggenheim, looks forward to seeing "In the Realm of the Senses" by Nagisa Oshima, and goes to *MOMA* to view Man Ray, Rodchenko, and Duchamp. (Wojnarowicz summed up Rodchenko's photos with one word: "Ah!") He's forming his personal canon: spiky, defiant, earnest, and sensual.

"Dear Jean Pierre" is also a chronicle of compelling omissions. Because the letters are presented largely without editorial comment, it's helpful to read the book side by side with "Fire in the Belly." In the biography, Carr writes that in June, 1979, a month of prolific correspondence to Delage, Wojnarowicz discovered the dilapidated piers and abandoned warehouses along the Hudson, where he sunbathed, took films and photographs, cruised, and painted graffiti. This lawless paradise became the heart of Wojnarowicz's aesthetic and sexual life, but you'd never know it from his letters to Delage from that period, which are focussed on longing and the logistics of a reunion.

In later years, Wojnarowicz was increasingly forced to defend his art against the Christian right. In 1990, the American Family Association founder, the Reverend Donald Wildmon, took aim at Wojnarowicz's exhibition "Tongues of Flame" and mailed a collage of selectively edited sex scenes to members of Congress, the media, and religious leaders, hoping to get the National Endowment for the Arts defunded. Wojnarowicz pointed out that his antagonists were acting like appropriation artists, making "pieces of their own" from his art. But, writing to Delage, Wojnarowicz sees no need to protect himself from political attacks, and he isn't worried about his art being misunderstood. He casually presents cheerfully depraved pieces—for example, his 1979 Xerox collage of a saintly Jean Genet with Jesus shooting up—without fear or commentary, a form of reserve that reads as an expression of trust. Despite his reticence, Wojnarowicz's brilliance can be glimpsed in occasional shards of shining prose. In October, 1979, he wrote, "There is much news on the radio about the Pope on 5th Avenue. Many people are excited. Meanwhile, the nuclear plants in America are spilling [radioactive] waste," a fragment that presages the expressive adjacencies of Wojnarowicz's mid-nineteen-eighties collagist cut-and-paste paintings.

Wojnarowicz's first break came in the summer of 1980, when *SoHo News* published a centerfold of his photographic series "Rimbaud in New York." The series was inspired by the artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest's life-size wheat-pasted posters of Rimbaud in street clothes, which Wojnarowicz likely saw with Delage in Paris. In the photographs, his friends wear a mask of the poet as they pose throughout New York City, in decrepit warehouses by the piers, butcher shops, and subway cars, sometimes injecting drugs or masturbating.

“Dear Jean Pierre” makes the full context of the images clear, giving the series new depth. The photographs testify to Wojnarowicz’s intense cathexis of Rimbaud, and his lifelong methodology of the self as other—a notion cribbed from the French poet’s classic teen line “Je est un autre.” But reading the letters alongside these images shows that they’re about more than Wojnarowicz’s desire to be notorious and disguised. They also commemorate his yearning for his absent lover, who appeared behind the mask in a few Rimbaud photos taken during a brief visit to New York.

Those reunions were infrequent, and, by 1981, the strain on their relationship had begun to show. Wojnarowicz’s art and his life both changed dramatically that year. He met his friend and mentor Peter Hujar, a downtown photographer once affiliated with Warhol’s Factory. Hujar and Wojnarowicz began a largely chaste love affair that would last until Hujar’s death from *AIDS* in 1987. True to form, Wojnarowicz masks, or at least downplays, this momentous meeting in his letters to Delage. On January 5, 1981, he reported: “Spent the night talking with a new friend about life / photos etc.—rare that I have chance to just talk and listen to interesting things.” Hujar also takes portraits of Wojnarowicz that open his subject up. Wojnarowicz wrote to Delage in August, 1981, “I looked at the photos he made and was surprised: they are very beautiful—I never saw myself like this before.”

As Wojnarowicz got closer to Hujar and deeper into his art, the tone of the conversation with Jean-Pierre began to sound more mournful, and doubt crept in. In January, 1982, he wrote, “Please be patient with me.” There are no letters from March 18th to June, 1982, included in the volume. According to Carr’s biography, Delage slept with one of Wojnarowicz’s friends in Paris around this time. “Dear Jean Pierre” contains Wojnarowicz’s hurt reaction in one of the last letters in the collection: “I can not think about living with you at this time. I need to solve my problems with my work and my life.” The problems with work, at least, were good ones to have: on June 11, 1982, Wojnarowicz appeared in a group show at the Alexander Milliken Gallery on Prince Street with Jean-Michel Basquiat, Francesco Clemente, David Hockney, and other art stars, which led to his first solo show in December of that year.

This pre-*AIDS* arcadia didn’t last. Four months after that solo show, and right around the time that “Dear Jean Pierre” closes, Larry Kramer published “1,112 and Counting,” the first clarion warning: “Why isn’t every gay man in this city so scared shitless that he is screaming for action? Does every gay man in New York want to die?” The lone, oblique reference to the epidemic in the correspondence appears in a coda to “Dear Jean Pierre” from September, 1991, nine months before Wojnarowicz’s death. By that time, he had been largely consumed by the political and medical emergency of *AIDS*. He sent Jean-Pierre a card, a dispatch from a different world, referring to “a lot of different illnesses.” He wrote, “I don’t have much energy. I take a walk every day if I can. It’s difficult inside my head—I wish I could get a reprieve from these sensations and isolation.”

Wojnarowicz found reprieve in art and activism, but a comment he made to Zoe Leonard in 1989 suggests the trajectory that he could have taken in a better world. As Carr recounts in “Fire in the Belly,” Leonard asked Wojnarowicz to look at her aerial photographs, dreamy black-and-white images of feathery clouds. She was worried that the work was at odds with her activism around the *AIDS* crisis. Wojnarowicz told her not to worry: “We’re being angry and complaining because we have to, but where we want to go is back to beauty.” Of course, there’s beauty in Wojnarowicz’s political art, a quality deepened by seeing the artist in love in “Dear Jean Pierre.” The book is yet another monument to the incalculable lost potential of the *AIDS* epidemic. But it’s also a joyful reclamation of an epoch of discovery in Wojnarowicz’s art—and in the lives of its subjects, who, it is clear, were deeply affected by their time together. Speaking to a reporter about the P.P.O.W. exhibition, Delage said of his Wojnarowicz archive, “I keep it like sacred things.”