

Better Shopping Through Living V: Wojnarowicz in Love — Frank Garrett

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During the devastating global AIDS crisis of the 1980s, a profound tragedy unfolded along with the loss of human life: the irrevocable destruction of innumerable personal archives. This loss resulted from the pervasive disposal of individuals' belongings, either summarily cast into the abyss of a landfill or heedlessly incinerated by grieving families and survivors. Motivated by misguided fears of contamination or in some cases prejudice against Queer content, these acts obliterated a wealth of personal histories and creative expressions.

If we were to reflect on this incalculable loss, particularly considering the remarkable creativity of some of the more well-known victims, the sheer magnitude of this misfortune becomes almost unbearable. The erasure of these archives not only represents a tangible void in personal narratives but also underscores the broader societal impact of the AIDS crisis, leaving an indelible blank emptiness in our shared cultural history.

From out of the echoes of lost narratives and creative legacies during those tumultuous times, the recent *Dear Jean Pierre* has materialized thanks to the efforts of Jean Pierre Delage, [P·P·O·W](#), [The David Wojnarowicz Foundation](#), curators Cynthia Carr and Anneliis Beadnell, and publisher [Primary Information](#), among others. Through David Wojnarowicz's correspondence to Delage in the form of postcards, letters, photographs, drawings, stencils, collages, flyers, and contact sheets we get to see a twentynothing Wojnarowicz (predominately between the ages of 24 and 28), after having fallen madly and carelessly in love with the Frenchman, start to become the artist, writer, and activist we know him as today.

“Communication was in the eyes and fingertips. The senses we traded back and forth in small gestures would make statues blush. I felt so good and comfortable in his arms, in contact with his body and mind that I coulda wept at the release it provided—it was a sudden and great unleashing of sexual tensions and held-in desires.” (Edited for clarity.)

Journal Entry, November 1, 1978; David Wojnarowicz Papers; MSS 092 “1978: Normandy/Paris, 1978”; Box 1, Folder 8; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries. Permalink: <https://hdl.handle.net/2333.1/rxwdbtb2>.

Here we are granted access to Wojnarowicz's self-doubt (“I don't know how to go slowly.”), his money problems (“I imagine I do not have to worry about success for some time.”), health issues, and endless weather reports over the years. His adoption of an awkward, stilted diction throughout appears, in effect, to mimic Delage's English, providing us with another facet of the otherwise commanding, incisive voice we hear in Wojnarowicz's other writings. All of this takes place in the shadow of an elusive UNESCO job that might

get him back to France, though it seems Wojnarowicz never actually applied or otherwise made any real effort to pursue it.

Amid heartfelt longing to be with Delage, to return to Paris, we also get to read accounts which offhandedly mention Wojnarowicz's relationships and milieu: the development of his *Rimbaud* series, going to performances by the Talking Heads and Philip Glass, the early stages of his friendship with and mentorship under Peter Hujar, Dennis Cooper's interest in publishing his photography in *Little Caesar*, working with Keith Haring and other artists at Danceteria, writing fan mail to William S. Burroughs, his first payment as an artist (\$150), and forming the no-wave band 3 Teens Kill 4. This book provides us with one of the few genuine glimpses into Wojnarowicz's life and personality before the fame and (self-)mythologizing, before the disease and policies that would demand his urgent transformation into a staunch champion of Queer/HIV rights.

Perhaps my favorite aspect of the book was being able to follow the growth and refinement of his stencils and drawings. Throughout 1980, for example, we see the appearance of his black dog drawing. At first, the dog, which never seems to be drawn as an afterthought, appears flat and depthless atop the postcard image as if it were simply an appliqué. But later Wojnarowicz begins to take the time to situate the dog within the scene. Though still retaining its flatness, the drawing somehow becomes increasingly weighted and perspectival, more anchored and integrated within the image.

Frustratingly, too little survives of Delage's correspondence to Wojnarowicz, which included his own art work and presumably his own confessions of love. (For Delage's account, I recommend watching the 37-minute interview with him from February 2022 at the bottom of the [P·P·O·W](#) web site.) While *Dear Jean Pierre* is not great literature, great history or great art, its lack of profundity in no way diminishes the importance and value it provides to Wojnarowicz scholarship. *Dear Jean Pierre* is still an impressive 616-page testament that not only traces the mundaneness of Wojnarowicz's extraordinary life and times but also salvages and safeguards against an all-too-easy forgetting of 1980s' Queer life and love menaced by disease and a political agenda based on fear, neglect, and hatred. It reminds us that love has always been beautiful and blameless and revolutionary.

Writer and translator **Frank Garrett** shops in Dallas, Texas, and is essays editor at *Minor Literature[s]*. His series Better Shopping Through Living will appear monthly. He can die happy just as soon as he shits on Ronald Reagan's grave.