

DEAR JEAN PIERRE

David Wojnarowicz

Edited by James Hoff

Primary Information (\$40)

Although acclaimed as an artist for many reasons, David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) has long been known among poets for his Rimbaud series of photographs. This early set of work features Wojnarowicz and various friends wearing a life-size cutout mask of Arthur Rimbaud, taken from the New Directions edition of *Illuminations*, while posing in New York City locales. A number of these photographs appeared in the 1980s Los Angeles-based poetry magazine *Little Caesar*, edited by Dennis Cooper. In the early 2000s, David Brazil and Sarah Larsen's Bay Area stapled mimeo *Try!* featured one in which the masked model is laying on a bed, genitalia in hand. There's an immediate street punk vibe to the series, an authenticity of sorts that grabs the eye—and Rimbaud's visage is, for poets at least, unmistakable. That distant, hazy look sums up the attitude found in the late 19th-century seer's work with which readers of poetry today can still identify.

In late 1978, Wojnarowicz had split for Paris, intoxicated with Romantic notions of never returning to the U.S. One night while out and about in the Tuileries, a large garden west of the Louvre notorious for gay cruising, he encountered Jean Pierre Delage and soon had moved into Delage's cramped quarters. Hopelessly in love, the two shared six months together before Wojnarowicz's long-term New York boyfriend Brian Butterick flew over to accompany him back home.

It may have been memories of those frenetic Paris days that sparked the Rimbaud photos, which began weeks after the artist's return to New York—when Wojnarowicz launched himself into pursuing art on multiple fronts (photography, writing, film, painting, and music). He also remained intermittently



postcard art from *Dear Jean Pierre*

focused upon the possibility of a long-term relationship with Delage, who took part in the Rimbaud series by posing on Coney Island while visiting in August 1979.

Dear Jean Pierre intimately chronicles these early years (1979 to 1982) of Wojnarowicz's full emergence as an artist via his correspondence with his distant lover. In the earliest missives, Wojnarowicz consistently declares his intention of permanent residence abroad with Delage. Yet as time passes, his scheming of ways to achieve that goal increasingly run up against the hard reality of work requirements for a residency visa and the continual blossoming of his artistic activities, along with financial difficulties, in New York. Nevertheless, there were cross-Atlantic visits during these years as the couple struggled to maintain their romance.

That Wojnarowicz's love for Delage was genuine is arguably most vividly illustrated by the frequency of the letters and the urgency with which he shares his daily struggles, worries, and hang-ups. There is little posturing. He may not be explicit in every detail of his life—he was still cruising in New York, having short-term relationships along with flings on the side, and using heroin (his frequent mentioning of feeling weak from having a case of “the gripe” haunts the correspondence as a foreboding of AIDS,

which ended his life)—but he shares his inner thoughts with the open longing of a lover missing the beloved and seeking to reach out through pen and paper:

I just have to sit down and write you and tell you what I am feeling and thinking. This is so difficult to see you and then leave you again. When I was in paris with you I felt many times insecure. You see, I love you very much and you are the only man I have ever loved like this.

As only Wojnarowicz's side of the correspondence is presented in *Dear Jean Pierre*, it is difficult to judge Delage's own impressions and assessment of the relationship. Yet, it is Wojnarowicz the artist that is the draw here, not necessarily the trials and tribulations of the romance. All the correspondence has been scanned and meticulously reproduced in color on oversized pages, making the handwriting as easily readable as possible, and there are several typed letters as well. In addition, Wojnarowicz generally wrote on postcards or notecards adorned with art—many of which he altered with his own drawings—as well as on the back of flyers and other printings of his own work, all of which is captured here and gives a genuine archival feel to the book.

In June 1980, the New York weekly *SoHo News* printed a selection of the Rimbaud photos, featuring them on the cover and in a center spread, images of which are reproduced in this book. Wojnarowicz also contributed to that publication a few short bits of prose, which are interspersed among the photos: “I still don't believe in systems of order, policemen or borders, nor do I retain any illusions concerning that animal mirage called liberty that grooms itself within the windy mouths of politicians.”

Dear Jean Pierre offers a vivid testimonial to the insatiable drive of resistance and continual struggle that fueled not only Wojnarowicz's youthful love but also his self-making as an artist. Filled with his passionate, life-filled frenzy, this marvelous book leaves the reader inspired, invigorated, and a bit exhausted—as good art should.

—Patrick James Dunagan