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‘ANY KIND OF OUTCAST WHATSOEVER’
The Art and Politics of David Wojnarowicz

by

Elizabeth Shek-Noble

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
The University of Sydney
March 2014
I declare that the research presented here is my own original work and has not been submitted to any other institution for the award of a degree.

Signed: Elizabeth Ann Shek-Noble

Date: 31 March, 2014
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ABSTRACT

‘Any Kind of Outcast Whatsoever’: The Art and Politics of David Wojnarowicz

This doctoral thesis examines the sexual, gender, and bodily politics of the multimedia artist, David Wojnarowicz (14 September 1954 – 22 July 1992). Wojnarowicz coined the term ‘ONE-TRIBE NATION’ to describe the illusion of a heteronormative and monocultural America that demanded compliance of its citizens through the violent suppression of non-normative ontologies. Wojnarowicz’s art and literature sought to destroy the symbolic and literal stranglehold of the ONE-TRIBE NATION over the potentialities of the American population by bringing into public visibility the myriad sexualities, genders, and corporealities that were perceived as compromising the stability of the body politic. By repeatedly pressing at the boundaries of what was visually and imaginatively permitted by the ONE-TRIBE NATION and challenging the highly circumscribed depiction of the ideal American citizen as heterosexual, male, white, able-bodied, and upper-middle class, Wojnarowicz aimed to improve the circumstances of the most dispossessed and marginal individuals of his society.

For Wojnarowicz, the apparatus of the ONE-TRIBE NATION reached its apotheosis with the intersection of Reaganite politics, right-wing religious rhetoric, and biomedical orthodoxy during the first decade of the AIDS crisis, granting that his dedication to issues concerning social justice and reform extended beyond his immediate biographical context. Wojnarowicz’s value as an artist is and must be associated with his political identity as a person with AIDS (PWA). However, the importance of Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre extends beyond its singular categorisation as a form of AIDS activism by resituating his politics and motifs as amenable to a variety
of contexts. Consequently, this thesis also emphasises the politics of expression at work in Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre, arguing that his literary and artistic strategies generate multiple networks of association and intersection among discrete aesthetic and historical moments in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Chapter one revisits the posthumous removal of Wojnarowicz’s *A Fire in My Belly, a Work in Progress*, from the National Portrait Gallery exhibition, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. The chapter clarifies misperceptions about the offending crucifix sequence, arguing that the text, existing as it does in various extant versions, defies any attempt to singularise its meaning. I therefore undertake a filmographic analysis of these versions to consider their aesthetic resemblances to the Surrealist procedures of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. Identifying significant differences between the versions in their imagery, structure, and duration, confirms the semantic complexity of *A Fire in My Belly*. This filmographic analysis also elucidates some of Wojnarowicz’s preeminent thematic concerns, such as spirituality, death, and sexuality.

Chapter two examines how Wojnarowicz responded to the intersection of biomedical knowledge, symbolic representation, and public policy in 1980s America, which created a pernicious social environment where (gay) PWAs were vilified for engaging in practices deemed dangerous in compromising the illusion of a monolithic ONE-TRIBE NATION. *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* and *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline* represent through Wojnarowicz’s narratives of individual and communal loss the interpersonal and ideological struggles arising from the pathologisation of PWAs and HIV/AIDS. This chapter argues that Wojnarowicz’s texts were always and already engaged in a discourse of (auto)thanatography, since gay PWAs in particular were perceived as a dispensable group by religious and
governmental structures operating under the ideologies of the ONE-TRIBE NATION at the onset of the AIDS crisis.

The central argument of chapter three is that Wojnarowicz’s narratives about the open road and the automobile are key instruments in his dismantling of the ONE-TRIBE NATION by unveiling the ‘millions of tribes’ that populate America. At the same time, such narratives in The Waterfront Journals form part of an extensive tradition within American literature avowing the transformative and epiphanic possibilities of travel and migration. Of particular interest is how Wojnarowicz’s representations of the emotional, psychic, and physical excursions converging in highway narratives resemble Jack Kerouac’s On the Road and Gregg Araki’s The Living End. Equally, the utopian sentiment underlining Wojnarowicz’s catalogue of the myriad social voices he heard during his automotive journeys suggest the democratic humanism of Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of the Open Road.’

Wojnarowicz rigorously opposed the policing of imaginative and artistic expression, particularly in its disproportionately negative effects on gay PWAs. Chapter four identifies how Wojnarowicz utilised a repository of non-human figures to critique the main axes of civilisation responsible for preventing alternative relations and subjectivities from reaching the wider public. Wojnarowicz employed a politics of vision in which he distorted perspective, size, and scale in his visual artworks to focus his audience’s attention upon what the ONE-TRIBE NATION aimed to conceal from the public sphere, namely homosexuality and homosexual desire. With his inversion of the hierarchy between human and animal and public and private, Wojnarowicz provides his audience with a momentary glimpse into the positive changes effected through the destruction of the ONE-TRIBE NATION.
Chapter five examines Wojnarowicz’s representation of counterpublics such as the subculture of cruising, which involve sexual practices that generate alternative forms of collectivity by resisting the normative logic of sex as dyadic, monogamous, and heterosexual. Such non-normative relations reinforce Wojnarowicz’s dismantling of the ONE-TRIBE NATION through consistently representing behaviour regarded as ‘taboo’ or ‘deviant’ by the status quo. Additionally, Wojnarowicz’s relationship with Peter Hujar challenges pre-existing assumptions about the roles of the carer and cared-for within a feminist ethical framework. Wojnarowicz construes an ethics of intimacy wherein the relationship between the carer and cared-for is reciprocal and interdependent in nature.

In chapter six, I contend that Wojnarowicz utilised the conventions of Victorian mortuary portraiture in his postmortem photographs of Peter Hujar. The genre of mortuary portraiture reinforced the political motives underlying his aesthetics, since through these photographs Wojnarowicz commemorated his departed friend whilst situating his death within the political context of the AIDS crisis. Wojnarowicz’s determination to cultivate new methods to express the discursive entanglements of mourning, witnessing, and testimony was closely related to the cultural activism that proliferated within the gay community as a result of the HIV/AIDS crisis.

For this thesis, I consulted the David Wojnarowicz Papers in Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University, including Wojnarowicz’s personal correspondence and the many audio recordings and unfinished films he made whilst embarking on his cross-country and transcontinental road trips during the 1980s. These materials shed light on Wojnarowicz’s struggle to represent his sexuality and desires in a world he perceived as increasingly hostile to difference in its many forms.
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Figure 8 courtesy of the Smart Museum of Art

Figure 19 courtesy of the Estate of René Magritte

Figures 26-27 and 35 courtesy of the Burns Archive

Figures 28-31 courtesy of the Peter Hujar Archive

Figures 36-41 courtesy of the Zabriskie Gallery, New York

Figure 42 courtesy of the North Carolina Museum of Art
List of Abbreviations

7 Miles a Second

Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration

Memories That Smell Like Gasoline

People with AIDS

The Waterfront Journals

SM

CK

MS

PA

WJ
INTRODUCTION

‘Living on Borrowed Time’: The Mortality-Transcending Projects of

David Wojnarowicz

David Wojnarowicz once noted in an interview with Barry Blinderman that for ‘my whole life I’ve felt like I was looking into society from a[n] outer edge, because I embodied so many things that were supposedly reprehensible’. Wojnarowicz’s perception of himself as existing on the periphery of society reached its apotheosis when he was diagnosed with HIV in 1988, amidst the first decade of the AIDS crisis wherein right-wing, religious, and biomedical orthodoxies swiftly denounced people with AIDS (PWAs) for engaging in what were deemed abnormal or deviant practices.

Yet, growing up as a young child in Redbank, New Jersey, Wojnarowicz already recognised the foreclosure of certain possibilities and ontologies that deviated from heteronormative standards. Wojnarowicz called this the ‘imposed Hell of the suburbs’, where behind the illusion of the perfect family life were the terrifying realities of perpetual violence, the suppression of difference, and the unrelenting control of thought and imagination. As a way to counteract the monotony of

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3 Violence was a large part of Wojnarowicz’s childhood, thereby fuelling his lifelong interest in its representation through art and literature. Wojnarowicz says that his relationship with his father was ‘mostly non-existent other than beating,’ and that ‘what I realize[d] I got from my father as well as a sense of violence and inadvertent eroticism from the books that he left around was a sense of travel because he would sit for hours and talk about places that his ships… got into port… places all around the world… There was just something really mysterious about them all [countries]… it was like a sense of travel and distance and stuff that I got from or, - the excitement of things other than what I was experiencing in New Jersey. So even though I wasn’t, you know, of an age where I could really put it together like get it together and run away from home there which I did a few times but never really got far, I still had that sense of wanting to explore those places be on ships be among sailors and go to different ports and experience different cultures and stuff’. David Wojnarowicz Interviewed by Keith
suburbia, Wojnarowicz escaped to the woods near his home, creating fantastical worlds where he existed in unison with his surrounding environment:

endless hours spent among them [the woods] creating small myths of myself alone or living in hollowed-out trees... Once I discovered the universe of the forests and lakes, I went there whenever possible to escape the irrational brutality and violence in the tiny version of hell called the suburbs... the Universe of the Neatly Clipped Lawn.4

Discovering the ‘universe of the forests and lakes’ was a crucial part of Wojnarowicz’s armature against the hegemony of the ‘Universe of the Neatly Clipped Lawn’ by inserting diversity into this uniform and monolithic structure. Wojnarowicz would also take refuge in the inimitable variety found in animal species, which he also saw as calling into question the need for total homogeneity in sexuality, gender, and desire among humans.

Wojnarowicz was an artist and political activist who maintained suspicion towards the processes by which history and civilisation are constructed; often, he saw the official version of history as ‘made and preserved by and for particular classes of people’ (CK, 144), thereby silencing the legitimacy of alternative narratives, relations, and socialities. Additionally, he found himself questioning the teleological imperative towards progress – ‘the onward crush of the world as we know it’ (CK, 69) – underlining human civilisation, which he blamed as further distancing individuals from one another and from non-human entities. Wojnarowicz not only turned to nature as an antidote to the ‘clockwork of civilization’; he also saw animal behaviour as absolutely divergent from, at the same time as being consubstantial with, human

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4 David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration (New York: Vintage, 1991), 152. All subsequent references will be cited in the text as CK.
organisation: ‘Spent all my time in the woods looking for snakes and insects and other animals. Thought of giant birdnests for humans.’

Wojnarowicz always retained a childlike appreciation for animality and the emancipatory possibilities offered by the imagination. These traits became increasingly crucial to his artistic development with the advent of the HIV/AIDS crisis in America, since his status as a young gay man working within the vibrant artistic milieu of the East Village meant that he was immediately targeted by the political and religious institutions of the 1980s for failing to embody their sexual, gender, and biomedical norms. Consequently, Wojnarowicz turned his focus from the cosmology of the ‘Universe of the Neatly Clipped Lawn’ to the construct of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, a term he coined to denote the enforced socialisation of individuals within society to uphold the normative image of the (American) citizen as heterosexual, white, and able-bodied.

Within Wojnarowicz’s 1980s context, right-wing religious groups that demonised homosexuals and PWAs and the ineffectual Reagan political administration epitomised the determination to silence and eradicate alternative tribes, thereby upholding the illusory image of America as a ONE-TRIBE NATION. In order to dispel this mythic structure, Wojnarowicz found it essential to bring into visibility what the ONE-TRIBE NATION regarded as taboo, obscene, or abnormal; whether in terms of spiritual beliefs that departed from the religious orthodoxies of Christianity or the injunction against any kind of sexual relation that was not heterosexual, Wojnarowicz stressed the absolute importance of unveiling behaviours that had been rigorously denied or concealed from the public domain. Further to this, Wojnarowicz mobilised a fearless and furious critique against the irresponsible

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dissemination of misinformation relating to the transmission and prevention of HIV/AIDS. Wojnarowicz was particularly antagonistic towards the widespread influence of conservative Christian groups over public policy and legislative amendments in America. Not only was he astounded by the official stance of the Catholic Church on abstinence as being the only way to prevent the spread of HIV – ‘Back in the states [sic] the archdiocese with the blessings of the vatican [sic] says that condoms and clean needles are lies in the face of the epidemic’ – Wojnarowicz also condemned conservative members of Congress for using their political clout to further their own heterosexist agendas.

One of the key instruments Wojnarowicz employed against the ONE-TRIBE NATION was to use his writings as a form of testimony for the multitude of desires and sexualities that this structure seeks to conceal from the ‘general population’. In so doing, Wojnarowicz saw as the ‘bottom line’ how ‘each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity’ (CK, 122) and how it was crucial to commit in writing such diversity because ‘IF PEOPLE DON’T SAY WHAT THEY BELIEVE, THOSE FEELINGS AND IDEAS GET LOST’ (CK, 124). This impulse to record for posterity one’s individual experiences in order to effect social and political reforms intensified when Wojnarowicz was diagnosed with HIV in 1988.

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6 ‘Denying all people information that could protect them in an epidemic is nothing more than wholesale murder regardless of the “moral” content of those actions’. Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives, 133.

7 Postscript for Close to the Knives, and Letter from Montanna, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 3, Manuscripts, Subseries A, Box 4, Folder 13.

8 For Jan Zita Grover in ‘AIDS: Keywords’, ‘general population’ refers to heterosexuality as the unspoken norm in society. This term is used as a euphemism and favoured over using ‘heterosexual’ in ‘polite’ company because ‘To employ it around other heterosexuals suggests that heterosexuality is not a given, but… a cultural rather than a natural construction.’ Jan Zita Grover, ‘AIDS: Keywords,’ October 43 (Winter 1987): 23.

9 ‘Time is now compressed…. every painting or photograph or film I make, I make with the sense that it may be the last thing I do and so I try and pull everything in to the surface of that action. I work quickly now and feel there is no time for bullshit…. These days I see the edge of mortality…. I see myself seeing death. It’s like a transparent celluloid image of myself accompanying me everywhere I go.’ Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives, 109-110.
an audio recording he made around November/December of that year, he intimated fear towards his physical degeneration, as ‘all my life I’ve tried to maintain some kind of complete control over myself’. Understanding that his diagnosis pitted him against a potentially ferocious array of opportunistic infections and a wilfully unsympathetic public, Wojnarowicz turned even more to his writings as a weapon of activism, knowing that they would function as discursive remainders of himself following the physical deterioration of his body. As he urged,

When people look at you as this walking disease, this walking illness, this vessel of disease and death, they deny the very life that you carry and writing would allow me to experience that living in terms of words in terms of getting all the thoughts that are boiling in the head of a person who can’t move giving those thoughts access to movement despite limitations of the body…. I want to be able to provoke some change in whatever limited fashion whatever small sense of shift that anything I could do or say could create in people in a person, in numbers, in subtlety and whatever, I just want to be able to make that gesture and I hope that my mind remains consistently clear despite rage despite illness despite weakness despite comfort or despite pain

In this statement, Wojnarowicz makes clear how PWAs are dehumanised when their diagnosis is perceived as the only signifier of their identity: ‘this walking disease, this walking illness’. For Susan Sontag, this discursive move is all too familiar when it comes to the symbolic representation of a disease or illness. She writes how military metaphors pertaining to the transmission of HIV/AIDS have transformed the illness into an ‘alien other, as [one’s] enemies in modern war’; resultantly, ‘the move from the demonization of the illness to the attribution of fault to the patient is an inevitable

11 ‘WHEN I WAS TOLD THAT I’D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT DIDN’T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I’D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL.’ Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives, 114. Wojnarowicz often capitalised words and rendered text in bold to lend further emphasis to his statements.
one, no matter if patients are thought of as victims’. The public perception that HIV/AIDS is tantamount to a death sentence, and that all individuals diagnosed with the illness are ‘patients’ or hapless ‘victims,’ result in ‘deny[ing] the very life that you carry’ in all its variety of emotion and experience. Yet even though Wojnarowicz enthusiastically defended the rights of PWAs by legitimating their struggles and believing that their lives were as valuable as any other member of his nation, he was also acutely aware of the autothanatographical impulses underlining his artistic process. Indeed, the statement above shows how Wojnarowicz believed his posthumous identity could be perpetuated through writing, ‘in terms of getting all the thoughts that are boiling in the head of a person… [in order] to provoke some change in whatever limited fashion’.

Wojnarowicz not only sought within his art to transform the private into the public, with the positive intention of reducing social stigma towards those individuals in society deemed abnormal or dangerous; he also placed extreme scrutiny on those familial structures that perpetuated images of normativity and normalcy. Indeed, Wojnarowicz’s brutal experiences in childhood and adolescence triggered his later determination to perform an ‘X-ray of Civilization,’ which we can see in his gelatin-silver print,Untitled [One Day This Kid…] (Figure 1).

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14 “‘If I had a dollar to spend for healthcare I’d rather spend it on a baby or innocent person with some defect or illness not of their own responsibility; not some person with AIDS…” says the healthcare official on national television’. Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 160.
15 Autothanatography, from *auto* and *thanatos*, describes the textual inscription of the subject’s dying and death. The term may be seen as the obverse of *autobiographical*, since works which are autothanatographical do not concern themselves with a retrospective appraisal of the writer’s life but his/her posthumous reputation. Writing about one’s death, however, results in a paradoxical condition, since such writing memorialises the subject by functioning as a testament to their prospective absence.
Central to the image is a black-and-white photograph of Wojnarowicz as a young boy. His buck-toothed grin and prominent ears remind the viewer of the prototypical gawkiness of childhood and also a lack of self-awareness during youth that is all too often perceived as liberating in retrospect. Wearing braces (i.e. suspenders) over a busily patterned shirt, the audience might be mistaken for thinking Wojnarowicz experienced a picture-perfect childhood, perhaps set against an idyllic backdrop of rural America. Yet, the image exists in tension with the text that surrounds it, where the latter removes any remaining hope of this child’s future as free from coercion and violence. Like Wojnarowicz explains in Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration (1991), the ONE-TRIBE NATION constructs a ‘preinvented existence’ for all of its members, such that those who fail to adhere by its edicts or
who assiduously assert their autonomy in opposition to this structure are swiftly condemned. The first line of the text begins on a positive note, where the future tense of the refrain, ‘One day,’ places positive expectations onto the boy; ‘One day this kid will get larger,’ presumably to suggest growth that is physical as well as intellectual and emotional. Yet shortly thereafter, we note how the young Wojnarowicz already begins to question the ‘preinvented existence’ prescribed by the ONE-TRIBE NATION for him in recognising his homoerotic desires.16

Hence, the initial positivity which we get from this image and first line are quickly inverted once this young man understands how his homosexuality is perceived as dangerous and abnormal within a heteronormative society: ‘this kid’s’ future is filled with terror, violence, discrimination, and rejection, all because he discovered his sexuality deviated from the heterosexual norm: ‘All this will begin to happen in one or two years when he discovers he desires to place his naked body on the body of another boy.’ There is no sense of reprieve or salvation for the young subject, and in the transition from his manuscript to the final version of Untitled [One Day This Kid…] Wojnarowicz also removes the potential face-to-face encounter with his boyhood self as a sense of reassurance and/or support: ‘One day he will come to me in a dream and I will laugh with him, marvel at his existence and wake up with an awesome sense of mortality and design with a sense of the architecture of desire and life within society.’17

16 A key ‘moment’ of the erotic, for William Wendell Haver, is its violation of the normative logic of linearity by introducing unexpected detours or pauses within one’s usual psychic trajectory: ‘The erotic is always a turning, a détournement, a perversity, a queering of an itinerary: the erotic is not for such men as go straight to the point. The erotic itinerary is always the edge of a curve; more, a topology: neither obverse nor reverse, both obverse and reverse, a lamella.’ William Wendell Haver, The Body of This Death: Historicity and Sociality in the Time of AIDS (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 139.
17 ‘One Day This Kid’ – Various Versions/Color Xerox Photos, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 3, Manuscripts, Subseries A, Box 4, Folder 67.
The text of *Untitled [One Day This Kid...]* is in part autobiographical, since Wojnarowicz realised he was homosexual at a young age. This discovery precipitated both sexual experimentation with other young boys in his neighbourhood, and alarming violence from his father, Ed Wojnarowicz, bordering on incest and sexual harassment. However, *Untitled [One Day This Kid...]* is firmly non-autobiographical because of the pervasive experiences of exclusion, persecution, and discrimination which continue to be key features within the lives of many homosexuals irrespective of their age and socio-economic demographic. Wojnarowicz presents the universality of such sentiments by never utilising first person in his text; in effectively making anonymous the sitter of the portrait by referring to him as ‘this kid’, it is possible to substitute any child who has experienced comparable hardship for Wojnarowicz. Herein lies the *pathos* and inconceivable

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18 A disturbing intersection of animality, eroticism, and violence is found in Wojnarowicz’s essay, ‘The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine over a Mouse Hole’ in *Close to the Knives*. As he witnesses with Tom Rauffenbart a *corrida de toros* in Merida, Mexico, the spectacle of bloodshed and violence in front of Wojnarowicz mingles with his own fear of dying from HIV/AIDS; this sparks a number of digressive thoughts ranging from hospital visits to painful childhood memories: ‘One day, the oldest guy [in the gang] caught me alone, playing in a half-built house in the construction zone. Nobody around for miles. He brought me up to the attic and had me stand on a box and tie his hands above one of the low ceiling rafters with a piece of rope. Then he told me to pull down his pants and take his large dick in my hands and pull on it. I did it for a while… I got bored and saw a box of insulation nearby, grabbed a handful of it and wrapped it around his dick and pulled. He screamed and I got scared and ran away. My father got a telephone call later and dragged me to the guy’s house… After two hours of sitting on the law waiting for my father, he came out of the house, took me home, stripped me and beat me. At some point he took out his dick. … He told me to play with it and when I refused he beat me some more.’ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 266.

19 Critic Maurice Berger, after viewing *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)* as part of a show in 1990, relates how ‘The juxtaposition of freckle-faced, jug-eared innocence with the poisonous reality of homophobia moved me deeply,’ and ‘while I have been “out” for almost a decade, the work helped me to accept a part of my queer self that I had never before owned: the gay-bashed, self-hating kid who struggled to survive.’ Maurice Berger, ‘Stonewalled at the Museum,’ *Village Voice*, 18 August 1992, quoted in Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 449-450.

20 ‘One Day This Kid’ – Various Versions/Color Xerox Photos, Wojnarowicz Papers.

21 Wojnarowicz’s early stencil work, specifically the image of the ‘Burning House’ which he sprayed onto street facades before its incorporation into the 1981 painting, *Untitled (Burning House)* likewise functioned at the intersection of the personal and the universal. Whereas the personal in this context is what can be classified as inviolable ownership over one’s personality or artistic creations, and the universal whatever cannot be claimed by a singular possessor, this stencil operates ‘as a kind of personal icon [of Wojnarowicz]… The work addresses themes that the artist would often return to, such as emblems of panic and disaster, of social pressure and the hidden nature of abjection, but does so in an anonymous voice, as if a harbinger or talisman, an apocalyptic warning from a visionary
terror of *Untitled* [One Day This Kid…], where the narrative accompanying this figure of a young Wojnarowicz is but an *exemplum* of the punishment, violence, fear, and discrimination that many still endure because their homosexuality is conceived as an unacceptable deviation from the heterosexual norm. Fundamentally, *Untitled* [One Day This Kid…] demonstrates that although Wojnarowicz’s works were politically resonant in their critique of the intersecting discourses of heteronormative culture, religion, and biomedicine during the 1980s HIV/AIDS crisis, they nonetheless are charged with a fundamental social imperative to improve the visibility and rights of those who continue to exist on the margins of society. Above all, Wojnarowicz’s works commit themselves to unveiling the gross imbalances between the majoritarian minority and the minoritarian majority, and as a consequence short-circuit the systems of right-wing politics and religion in their continuing demonisation of non-normative sexualities, embodiments, and genders.

One of the foremost concerns of my thesis is to investigate the numerous aesthetic and literary strategies Wojnarowicz developed in response to the ceaseless wave of deaths in what he called ‘this killing machine called America’ (*CK*, 108). Fundamentally, the AIDS crisis triggered enormous and unexpected repercussions for the gay male community following the hard-won achievements of the Stonewall Riots with respect to sexual freedom and pride. The high incidence of HIV within gay male populations was used as evidence against the supposed hedonism and moral bankruptcy of sexual promiscuity and profligacy; many would come to regard AIDS through a moralising lens, as a sign of divine punishment for violating the ‘natural’

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22 Reflected on the decimation of his community by AIDS, Wojnarowicz wrote that ‘I worry that friends will slowly become professional pallbearers, waiting for each death, of their lovers, friends and neighbors, and polishing their funeral speeches; perfecting their rituals of death’. Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 122.
order of heterosexual congress. It became vital for Wojnarowicz and others to construct meaningful ways to mourn friends, lovers, and family who had died within a climate of misunderstanding concerning the etiology of HIV, the social stigmatisation of PWAs, and the continuing view that heterosexuality constitutes what is normative and normal human behaviour. Furthermore, the propensity within the media to divide AIDS ‘victims’ into those who are ‘innocent’ (babies, haemophiliacs, pregnant mothers, heterosexual women) and others whose ‘lifestyle choices’ contributed to their own demise (IV-drug users, gay men) entrenched a rhetoric of blame and culpability onto the latter category of individuals. In light of the pathologisation of gay male PWAs and witnessing firsthand the erosion of his community due to AIDS, Wojnarowicz employed a discourse of thanatography to legitimate the lives of his friends and lovers whilst according due respect for the singularity of their deaths and the losses that such deaths precipitated for the living. Indeed, Wojnarowicz found that he had adopted a heightened awareness to his role as a witness to the unfolding of the crisis and its repercussions on his community; he was ‘like a long distance runner who suddenly finds themselves in the solitude of distance among trees and light and the sight and sounds of friends are way back there.’23 Yet I must also take into account how thanatography, the writing of the death of the other, always heralds a meditation on the death of the self.24 Consequently, Wojnarowicz’s thanatography is also an auto-thanatography, in which his writings anticipatorily mourn his own passing from AIDS-related complications. Even in Wojnarowicz’s childhood, he already recognised the necessity of recording one’s experiences as a way to contest

24 Tasia Hane-Devore claims that Wojnarowicz’s ‘ruminations on his own and others’ dying bodies, conversations about suicide, and thoughts on the HIV/AIDS crisis’ in Close to the Knives is of a piece with autothanatographical discourse. Tasia Hane-Devore, ‘Auto/thanatography, Subjectivity, and Social Medical Discourse in David Wojnarowicz’s Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration,’ Intertexts 15, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 104.
the finality of death. Later, writing allowed him to confront the discursive silencing of difference by the ONE-TRIBE NATION:

Making things was like leaving historical records of my existence behind when I left the room, or building, or neighbourhood, the state and possibly the earth… as in mortality, as in death. When I was a kid I discovered that making an object… meant making something that spoke even if I was silent. (CK, 156)

Wojnarowicz took to the road many times in his life, beginning with his bouts of hitchhiking during the 1970s across the United States. The voices he heard and communed with at rest stops, bus depots, deserted parks, and in the interior of trucks would form the basis of his collection of ‘monologues’, Sounds in the Distance (1982). These ‘monologues’ were posthumously republished and reordered under the title, The Waterfront Journals (1996), by editor Amy Scholder and Grove. The open road operated as a literal and figurative vehicle for Wojnarowicz’s self-actualisation, as well as inspired the cultivation of an ‘outlaw’ disposition that he would reference repeatedly in his life as a way to lend credibility to his narratives of gritty urban realism and vagabondage. After his HIV diagnosis, Wojnarowicz took to the road again, this time with Marion Scemama, to Chaco Canyon in May 1991. During this trip, Wojnarowicz asked Scemama to assist him in composing a portrait of himself buried under a mound of dirt and rock (Figure 2).
Scemama described this photograph as having been their ‘last collaboration’; *Untitled* was in fact taken a year before Wojnarowicz’s death and in full knowledge of his bleak medical diagnosis. Robert Sember astutely recognises that this image, despite being taken in 1991, was actually printed after Wojnarowicz’s death (1993), thereby dramatising how the viewer’s ‘witnessing of his death is doubled by the shifting time of the image; we see his death from before and after.’

This doubling ultimately foresees Wojnarowicz’s death in the future and its involution in the past. Sember makes a remarkable point that Wojnarowicz, in this photograph, ‘attempt[s] to create an image of his dying’. I would certainly agree with him on this, however I would also wager that with this pseudo-postmortem photograph, Wojnarowicz was able to portray his death on his own terms; he retained, therefore, control over his physical body and its presentation in death to others.

In her interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Scemama recalls that at one point during their road trip,

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26 Sember, ‘Seeing Death,’ 35.
We had already spoken about the way he had photographed Peter Hujar at his deathbed, and he had asked me to do the same for him; it would be like our last collaboration. But then I knew this wouldn’t be possible: he had made it impossible, because he hadn’t told Tom [Rauffenbart] that I was with him. …

We came back through Death Valley but we kept driving. We stopped at an Indian village and David said, ‘There’s a photo I want to take. Follow me.’ He took me through the village and climbed a little wall and down a cliff where nobody could see us. We couldn’t see the village anymore. He said, ‘You’re gonna help me make a hole, I’m gonna put half of my body in the hole, and then you’re gonna cover me with dirt.’ We started digging with our hand. He took off his jean jacket, his sweatshirt, and then he lay down in the hole. Then I took the camera, stood above him with his body between my legs, and photographed him from different angles.

After that, we walked back not saying a word and sat in the car in silence for a few minutes. Then at some point, we held each other’s hand. We stayed like this for a while. Then I realized he was giving me what he wouldn’t be able to give me later: he made me a witness to his death. He created this image because he knew he couldn’t hold his promise and keep me next to him while he was dying…

Wojnarowicz’s collaboration with Scemama on this ‘self-portrait’ simultaneously rehearses his eventual death yet already testifies to his absence in the present. In this portrait, we can surmise how the photograph functions as a ‘death-dealing apparatus in its capacity to fetishize and congeal time’, since the heavily defined contours of Wojnarowicz’s face, along with the concealment of every part of his body bar this feature, strike me as visually analogous to a death mask. Georg Kolbe identified how the death mask is a mediating object, much like the postmortem photograph, in existing between ‘two phases of existence one of which we believe that we have knowledge, whilst the other we recognise only as we believe.’

27 Marion Scemama, ‘Marion Scemama,’ interview by Sylvère Lotringer, in David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side, ed. Giancarlo Ambrosino (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 139-40.
Consequently, the photograph portrait fetishistically traverses between life and death by visually arresting and segmenting a portion of time.

We can certainly locate this oscillation between life and death in Wojnarowicz’s ‘self-portrait’. In its resemblance to a death mask, Wojnarowicz’s *Untitled* seems to authorise, verify, and anticipate his discursive death before its physical occurrence, thereby producing a temporal disjunction that suggests the very out-of-time-ness which the individual experiences with respect to his/her own death. With the loose pieces of dirt and rock that appear on his face, perhaps having settled there for some time, the viewer apprehends Wojnarowicz in what may be perceived as an eternal moment of immobilisation. In pre-emptively mourning himself through this self-portrait, Wojnarowicz offers a tremendous testament to the existential and phenomenological crises experienced by many PWAs living and dying during the first decade of the AIDS crisis: they were, to evoke the idiom, ‘living on borrowed time’.

However, one might also perceive the looseness of sediment around and on Wojnarowicz’s face as an index of physical movement, thereby creating further ambiguity in the image. Indeed, it becomes unclear whether Wojnarowicz is emerging out of the ground, in the process of being buried alive, or engaged in a childhood game of hide and seek. The chthonic connotations of the portrait may infer Wojnarowicz’s avid interest in pre-Christian forms of spirituality; for instance, Wojnarowicz made visual reference to the Aztec Earth goddess, Coatlicue, in his super8mm film, *A Fire in My Belly* (1986-87), whilst including Hopi Kachina dolls in his mixed media artwork, *Earth* (1987) and *Excavating the Temples of the New Gods* (1986), among others. Taking into account Chaco Canyon as a site inhabited by both ancient and current pueblos along with playing host to a number of burial grounds, *Untitled* may signify Wojnarowicz’s rebirth into this ancient tribe. Wojnarowicz, in
being reborn as a native, reclaims a ‘sense of connection to the ground people walked on,’
which he found impossible within modern European and American civilisation. Thus, Wojnarowicz’s portrait functions as a testament to his figurative liberation from the ONE-TRIBE NATION by recasting himself as a member of one of the ancient tribes that once populated this vast area – the Pueblo, Hopi, or Navajo people. These resonances reflect Wojnarowicz’s determination to reconnect with antiquated practices and beliefs as a way to resist the unwavering momentum of human progress and civilisation. Consequently, an alternative interpretation can be construed from this photograph, where rather than signifying eventual death and stasis, the ‘self-portrait’ represents regeneration and renewal through Wojnarowicz’s emergence out of the primordial ground beneath him.

Wojnarowicz’s status as a social outlaw or outsider weighed heavily on his consciousness, often serving as a means of narrativising his personal struggles whilst placing him within a longer avant-garde tradition of rebellion, vagrancy, and sexual experimentation. The artist himself noted his affinity with early queer icons such as William Burroughs, Arthur Rimbaud, and Jean Genet, finding inspiration in their ability to produce meaningful literature from their experiences of hardship. Indeed, responding to Keith Davis’ question, ‘Did you feel that you were an outcast?’, Wojnarowicz turned to the literature of Genet and Burroughs especially because

31 Wojnarowicz mentions to Keith Davis in a private interview that he started reading Genet and Burroughs at the age of seventeen. Honing in on Genet’s propensity to write about petty thieves, the poor, and the homeless, Davis asks, ‘Do you think your heroes were criminals…?’ and Wojnarowicz responds, ‘Yeah, I think they still are…. At least you know people that made something of their lives you know in terms of art or you know writing… the people that made things out of their experiences’. David Wojnarowicz Interviewed by Keith Davis – Part 2 of 3, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0487. See also Dianne Chisholm, ‘Outlaw Documentary: David Wojnarowicz’s Queer Cinematics Kinerotics, Autothanatographies,’ Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée 21, nos. 1-2 (March and June 1994): 81-102, and Richard Meyer, Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
‘there was no way I could relate… to anybody… anywhere… there was just no frame of reference that was similar to theirs or nothing that they had was similar to mine.’

Whether part of Wojnarowicz’s tendency to self-mythologise and publicise himself as an authentic voice of the streets or functioning to embody the refusal of difference in the ONE-TRIBE NATION, I argue that the discursive figure of the outcast is paramount to Wojnarowicz’s art and literature. Consequently, in my doctoral thesis I examine the relationship between the ONE-TRIBE NATION and those tribes that are conceived as either marginal to or expelled from this imaginary construct. The ONE-TRIBE NATION is a formative aspect of Wojnarowicz’s politics and as such it is necessary to situate his oeuvre within the context of the first decade of the AIDS crisis, thereby observing how his writings and artworks functioned as a form of cultural activism. At this point it is necessary to acknowledge how Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre became increasingly polemical following the death of his long time mentor, friend, and former lover, Peter Hujar, in 1987. Indeed, Hujar’s death precipitated a significant turning point in his career, since his ethico-political views on (his own) mortality shifted to recognise how the ‘preinvented world’ had removed the possibility of an authentic relation to death and dying. He wrote,

I found that, after witnessing Peter Hujar’s death on November 26, 1987, and after my recent diagnosis, I tend to dismantle and discard any and all kinds of spiritual and psychic and physical words or concepts designed to make sense of the external world or designed to give momentary comfort. … I suddenly resist comfort, from myself and especially from others. There is something I want to see clearly, something I want to witness in its raw state. And this need comes from my sense of mortality. (CK, 116)

Nonetheless, Wojnarowicz was always and already committed to speaking out against the discriminatory policies of his society. Consequently, a key focus of my doctoral

32 David Wojnarowicz Interviewed by Keith Davis – Part 2 of 3, Wojnarowicz Papers.
thesis is to consider the aesthetic strategies Wojnarowicz adopted to emancipate humanity from its incarceration within the ‘clockwork of civilization,’ ‘the huge ticking mass of it… in the control of only a few; those that made up the iron cylinders [sic] of the pre-invented machine.’33 One strategy that Wojnarowicz continuously utilised for his benefit was turning to his imagination as a ‘place that might be described as [an] interior world. The place where movement was comfortable; where boundaries were stretched or obliterated; no walls, border, language or fear.’34 The fantasies and possibilities elicited through the imagination – including the potential for unprotected sexual encounters and excessive acts of violence against governmental policymakers – were nevertheless always ‘successfully transformed and concretized… into productive visual presentations for an audience to participate in.’35

Since my thesis takes as its starting point Wojnarowicz’s fundamental determination to improve the representation, rights, and recognition of society’s most oppressed and indigent figures, it is important to note how his oeuvre expands rather than diminishes the ontological gap separating marginal and mainstream voices. As a result, Wojnarowicz’s audiences are given spectacular counternarratives to the rigid hierarchies of oppression and control that persist into the twenty-first century. Wojnarowicz’s critique of normative assumptions relating to sex, sexuality, and intimacy saw him avow the relational and affective possibilities of the subculture of cruising in Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration, where sex in public locations was a pivotal feature of queer worldmaking in the pre- and post-Stonewall eras. The relationships which he developed with other PWAs such as Hujar and Keith Davis attested to the transgressing of normative family configurations within the

33 ‘AIDS and Imagination’, Wojnarowicz Papers.
34 ‘AIDS and Imagination’, Wojnarowicz Papers.
context of the AIDS crisis, where many seropositive gay men turned to others within their community for support and understanding. Moreover, as an inherently spiritual individual who was nonetheless highly suspicious of organised religion, Wojnarowicz held particular interest in revivifying the relationship between individuals and the pre-modern world. He called this pre-industrialised and pre-linguistic space ‘the World’ as opposed to what he termed ‘the Other World,’ dictated by the ‘calendar turnings’ of civilisation.\(^\text{36}\) William Wendell Haver explains that ‘the Other World’ designated ‘the historically overdetermined world of the always-already-there of cultural inscriptions and thereby of the inscription of culture as such’,\(^\text{37}\) effectively denying the capacity to form a relationship with the world unmediated by certain behavioural and ideological scripts. ‘The Other World’ was responsible for ‘den[y]ing access to earth and space; choice or movement’, and as ‘the world of coded sounds; the world of language, the world of lies; the packaged world’,\(^\text{38}\) had ultimately destroyed a relationship with the Earth that appreciated its variegated ecologies and mystifications. Resuming an authentic relationship with ‘the World’ often required Wojnarowicz to unearth certain aspects of history denied by modern civilisation. In order to critique the ‘preinvented world’ and its foreclosure of diversity and individual expression, Wojnarowicz turned to a discussion of ancient forms of spirituality. For Wojnarowicz, a spiritual connection with the world was to be found by directly abstaining from the autocratic, capitalist, and post-industrialising forces of the ONE-TRIBE NATION that he believed coincided with modern western civilisation. In ‘AIDS and Imagination,’ Wojnarowicz wrote that ‘Travelling into primitive cultures allows on a sudden and clear view of the Other World; the invention of the word

\(^{36}\) ‘AIDS and Imagination’, Wojnarowicz Papers.  
\(^{37}\) Haver, *The Body of this Death*, 129.  
\(^{38}\) ‘AIDS and Imagination’, Wojnarowicz Papers.
“Nature” – the dissociation from the ground one walks on.” Recapturing a relationship with ‘the ground one walks on’ was akin to forming a preternatural bond with ancient civilisations, and from this, learning to appreciate differences in culture and ontologies. At the same time, acknowledging the ‘invention of the word “Nature”’ was to recognise the underlying discursive construction of what is perceived as ‘natural’ within the world, whether thought of in terms of sexuality, race, or otherwise. As such, Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre is scattered with references to pre-Columbian and Native American cultures, such as the Hopi Kachina dolls of Earth (Figure 3), images of Coatlicue in A Fire in My Belly, and the hunting practices of the Plain Indians in Untitled [Buffalo] (Figure 4). Such references ask the audience to ponder what ideas and beliefs are lost by enforcing the myth of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, which as an ahistorical and imaginary construct protests any expression of difference in religion, culture, and law.

Figure 3: Earth, 1987
Acrylic and collage on masonite, 72 x 96 inches

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At the same time that I canvass Wojnarowicz’s contribution to the cultural activism of the gay community during the first decade of the AIDS crisis, I introduce new ways of looking at the intersection of aesthetics and politics in his oeuvre by observing how many of his procedures resemble those found in movements including Surrealism, Victorian mortuary photography, and the literature of the open road. Certain scholars, such as Elizabeth Young and Graham Caveney, have remarked on how Wojnarowicz and other writers they classify as part of the ‘Blank Generation’ are indebted to the ‘bohemian traditions of experimentation and artistic excess’ found in dada, Surrealism, and the Beats. Others, including Christopher Reed in *Art and Homosexuality: A History of Ideas*, have turned to Wojnarowicz’s photographic series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978-1979) to claim ‘an ambivalent avant-garde legacy… linking [his oeuvre]… to the heritage of Rimbaud, [Marcel] Duchamp, and

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[Joseph] Beuys’. Nonetheless, to date there has been no sustained attempt to trace such aesthetic influences within his films, artworks, and writings. This is in part attributable to Wojnarowicz’s own (inadvertent) reluctance to discuss overtly his literary and artistic forebears. Although a prolific autobiographer, having produced a voluminous number of audio recordings, journals, and videos, Wojnarowicz nevertheless sidestepped the option of explaining his influences in a systematic and/or comprehensive way for his future audience. For instance, he explained how ‘I generally will place many photographs together or print them one inside the other in order to construct a free-floating sentence that speaks about the world I witness’. Yet this statement, which implies the generation of polysemy through a collage aesthetic where each visual sentence is unmoored from a single referent, does not immediately demonstrate an acknowledgement of Surrealism’s influence on his artistic strategies. By ‘construct[ing] a free-floating sentence’ Wojnarowicz effectively produced ambiguities, contrasts, and incongruities between the different visual registers and layers within his artworks; such features seem indebted to Surrealism’s resistance towards the supposed order and logic of reality in the context of the horrifying and absurd violence of the First World War.

In the words of Carlo McCormick, then, to study Wojnarowicz and acknowledge his indispensable contribution not only to the activist literature of the 1980s but the literature of social dissidents as a whole is to ‘understand fully that the bile he coughed up and spat at the world was never… the last thing anyone needed, but rather precisely the thing everyone needed.’ Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre is essential within any context where difference – whether sexual, racial, gender, or otherwise – is

43 Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives, 144.
met with extreme hostility and/or rejection by the public majority. Given this, it is surprising that Wojnarowicz’s sizeable *oeuvre* has been met with only moderate interest from critics outside of an art historical context. Jennifer Doyle has stated that if Wojnarowicz was ‘one of the most stubbornly under-analyzed artists of his period… it is because his contexts are so little understood.’\textsuperscript{45} This strikes me as a surprising comment, in light of the sizeable amount of literature on avant-garde and gay artists’ (audio)visual responses to the AIDS crisis, whose works focused in particular on the institutional hurdles experienced by these communities due to insufficient drug trials, medications, and realistic educational policies on safer sex. Doyle further adds that ‘The expressive and seemingly personal aspect of his work as a visual artist make it hard to appropriate in the service of large, sweeping statements about work produced in the late 1980s and early 1990s.’\textsuperscript{46} I would firmly argue against the belief that a ‘seemingly personal’ dimension to an artist’s work is difficult to subsume under an overarching statement about the AIDS crisis. It is precisely this ‘personal’ element that was absolutely vital to the success of intra-community artists in this period and their political determination to improve services for and the rights of (other) PWAs. In a context where homosexuality was even further demonised through the biomedicalisation of HIV/AIDS as a ‘gay disease’ transmitted primarily through homosexual sex,\textsuperscript{47} utilising one’s personal observations on living with HIV/AIDS often functioned to humanise the crisis. Like Félix González-Torres’ series of billboard signs distributed across New York City (Figure 5) that have as their focal point the ruffled sheets of an empty double bed, Wojnarowicz’s artworks

\textsuperscript{45} Jennifer Doyle, ‘A Thin Line,’ in *A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, 227.
\textsuperscript{46} Doyle, ‘A Thin Line,’ 227.
\textsuperscript{47} Because of the complex of Pneumocystis carinii pneumonia (PCP) and Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS) that physicians began to identify amongst their gay male patients as early as 1979, AIDS was originally coined GRID (gay-related immunodeficiency), then AID (acquired immune deficiency), and finally AIDS by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) in 1982. Grover, ‘AIDS: Keywords’: 18-19.
demonstrate the entanglement of private and public loss that was the essential feature of the AIDS crisis. Just as the empty double bed attests to the recent death of González-Torres’ lover, Ross Laycock, from AIDS-related complications, *Untitled (Bed)* (1991) also draws attention to intimacy, love, and passion between the two men.

![Figure 5: Untitled (Bed), 1991](image)

Billboard, dimensions vary on installation

Installation View at 11th Avenue and 38th Street, Manhattan, 20 February-18 March 2012
Comparatively, Wojnarowicz’s *When I Put My Hands on Your Body* (Figure 6) overlays on top of a photographic image of exhumed skeletons an intense declaration of the intersubjective union facilitated by the erotic touch: ‘When I put my hands on your body on your flesh I feel the history of that body. … If I could attach our blood vessels so we could become each other I would.’ *Eros* and *thanatos* are inextricably connected within the text, since Wojnarowicz acknowledges the impermanence of their physical contact given the inevitability of one lover dying before the other: ‘It makes me weep to feel the movement of your flesh beneath my palms as you twist and turn over to one side to create a series of gestures to reach up around my neck to draw me nearer. All these moments will be lost in time, like tears in the rain.’

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48 The coupling of death and erotism may also suggest the ego-destroying nature of the sexual relation, whereby the opening of one’s self to the other requires the temporary destabilisation of the mythic belief in the boundedness and plenitude of the physical body.
lover is connected with the incredible amount of loss precipitated by HIV/AIDS: ‘It makes me weep to feel the history of your flesh beneath my hands in a time of so much loss.’ With the image serving as a reminder of what is to come for Wojnarowicz’s lover, *When I Put My Hands on Your Body* successfully merges individual experience of loss and suffering with a political statement on the general public’s failure to advocate for better services and treatment of PWAs.

There are, however, more personal connotations that can be identified in the text of *When I Put My Hands on Your Body*. For instance, the text may suggest Wojnarowicz’s feelings of grief and resignation over Peter Hujar’s death. This is confirmed if we study a particular section of *7 Miles a Second*, in which Wojnarowicz places this passage next to an image of his own hand caressing Hujar’s still and lifeless body.49 This image is juxtaposed with visual insets that show Wojnarowicz kissing with passionate intensity another man’s torso, and another where his own body implodes to reveal a dense network of blood, bones, and flesh. For Wojnarowicz, Hujar’s death effected a violent and sudden separation between them, and passages in *Close to the Knives* demonstrate how the dissolution of the body’s boundedness and singularity in the sexual relation is both mirrored and reversed once the death of a lover occurs. In ‘Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell,’ Wojnarowicz notes that he resisted the urge to cushion his grief over Hujar’s death by overlaying ‘any and all kinds of spiritual and psychic and physical words… designed to give momentary comfort’ (*CK*, 116). Hence, Wojnarowicz’s reflections on death resemble his descriptions of the intersubjective union between lovers as a breaking apart of boundaries and bodies: ‘It’s like stripping the body of flesh in order to see the

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49 Wojnarowicz, *7 Miles a Second*, 60. Despite being a heavily cropped image of a person lying in a hospital bed, the reader can infer that the patient in the image is Hujar, based on what precedes this section. On page 57, Wojnarowicz is seen driving through the American desert, fantasising about his own oblivion, as he recalls the moment at which Hujar dies in hospital: a friend urges Wojnarowicz, ‘David… look at Peter’.
skeleton, the structure’ (*CK*, 116). As Wojnarowicz explains elsewhere in *Close to the Knives*, this return to a state of relative isolation and intra-subjectivity when a lover dies is confusing and painful to the survivor: ‘Peter was dead. I felt the landscape shifting beneath my feet. … When I was in the street walking, it didn’t feel like walking; it was simply the body being jerkily propelled forward on blind legs’ (*CK*, 227).

Another point of disagreement I find with Doyle is her argument that Wojnarowicz’s aesthetic strategies, in being ‘expressive and seemingly personal’, are ultimately resistant to being appropriated for larger political statements about the AIDS crisis. I would argue that Wojnarowicz’s personal iconography is eminently readable and easily translatable to a critique of Reaganite politics, religious conservatism, and the politics of sexual austerity in the 1980s. Wojnarowicz’s personal iconography documented what he perceived as the ‘relentless clockwork of civilization’ along with the foreclosure of possibilities by the ONE-TRIBE NATION through its perpetuation of a ‘preinvented existence’. With respect to the former idea, Wojnarowicz utilised coins and currency to represent capitalism, and Mesoamerican and Native American artefacts to signify non-normative ontologies and counter-narratives to American cultural hegemony. In terms of the latter, Wojnarowicz pressed at the boundaries dividing the public and the private and the macroscopic and the microscopic to comment on the taboos on homosexuality and erotic expression which he regarded as further forcing the ‘millions of tribes’ within America to conform to a singular normative conception of human identity. For example, *Untitled from Sex Series* (1988-89) (Figure 7) incorporates a number of circular discs superimposed onto landscapes of environmental disaster and urban development depicting various sexual acts. The distortion of scale present within the works makes
the viewer feel as if they are spying on these tableaux through a telephoto lens, thereby catching these individuals in sexual congress unawares. As Wojnarowicz has inverted the negative film, however, it is difficult to ascertain the sex or gender of these subjects; at the same time, such visual inversion removes an aspect of obscenity from our viewing orientation, given that we are unaware that such images are in fact vintage pornographic shots taken from Hujar’s personal collection.⁵⁰ Wojnarowicz wanted in *Sex Series* to ‘place some of the variations of sexual acts in various environments that connected the naturalness of any of these acts to the naturalness of any of the environments in order to resist and dispel [sic] the idea of perversity’.⁵¹ As such, both heterosexuality and homosexuality are placed on equal footing within the artworks, thereby demonstrating the latter as no more ‘deviant’, ‘unusual,’ or ‘unnatural’ than the former.

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⁵¹ ‘Sex Series’, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 3, Manuscripts, Subseries A, Box 4, Folder 103.
Whilst arguing against Doyle’s hypothesis concerning Wojnarowicz’s overlooked status within the framework of cultural activism in the 1980s, I am thoroughly convinced by her statement that if we expand rather than close the lens by which we interpret this artist’s work that ‘we see him participating in a broad and long tradition in American Art of using every medium at his disposal to raise the public’s consciousness of the material suffering of the enslaved, the sick, the exploited, and the poor.’ This is indeed correct, insofar as Wojnarowicz utilised an impressive array of mediums – film, video installation, audio recordings, journals, visual artworks, and protest – to propagate a social realist message of political reform and justice for the marginalised and oppressed. As I will show throughout my thesis, each of these mediums draws upon a number of different aesthetic traditions to critique the main axes of control within the ONE-TRIBE NATION and to spur the audience to action when witnessing scenes of intolerance, brutality, and injustice towards ‘any kind of outcast whatsoever’.

I chart a number of intersections between Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre and movements throughout my thesis. As I will show in chapter one, Wojnarowicz’s *A Fire in My Belly* may be defined as a social ethnography, since the film’s extant versions document from a purportedly neutral perspective the endemic poverty of Mexico and some of the country’s more unusual cultural activities. The non-linear structure, incongruous imagery, and the spasmodic editing and arrangement of visual material in each version of the film are procedurally similar to the work of the Surrealist artists, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. Chapter one will be divided into

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53 Wojnarowicz observed that the stories told by his father whilst travelling the world as a sailor were reminiscent of the imagery found in ‘early Buñuel films or something’; ‘men with elephantitis varying their balls in a wheelbarrow through some marketplace in Africa, images like that, they were just totally twisted’. David Wojnarowicz Interviewed by Keith Davis – Part 3 of 3, Wojnarowicz Papers.
two sections: the first will function as a précis of the events and arguments for and against the removal of *A Fire in My Belly* from the Smithsonian exhibition, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* in November 2010. The second part of this chapter will attempt to demystify confusion surrounding the extant versions of the film. In so doing, I put forward the assertion that it is both impossible and heuristically irresponsible to assume *A Fire in My Belly* is either ‘anti-Christian hate speech’ or a profound meditation on the personal losses precipitated by the AIDS crisis.

In fact, both interpretations are insupportable, given the compositional ambiguity and thematic incommunicability of these versions.

Chapter two begins with the premise that Wojnarowicz’s diagnosis with HIV in 1988 intensified his political interests by triggering changes to his sense of self-embodiment. Wojnarowicz’s diagnosis also precipitated a shift in his relationship to his own career, since with the potential for his HIV to develop into AIDS he began to create with added urgency in making every gesture significant in its critique of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. I argue that Wojnarowicz adopted two practices in his writings to counter the hegemonic logic of the ONE-TRIBE NATION as well as combat the political and religious institutions of his 1980s context that condemned PWAs and homosexuals for their allegedly ‘deviant’ lifestyles. The first practice was a discourse of mourning that testified to the profound sense of grief and loss experienced by the gay community due to the failure of the Reagan administration to take responsibility for leading ‘thousands and thousands [of PWAs] to their unnecessary deaths’ (*CK*, 114). The second strategy was his cultivation of a rhetorical of oppositionality and recalcitrance that refused to allow the ‘general population’ to detach themselves from the AIDS crisis and its mounting death toll. In

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other words, chapter two concerns itself with exploring ethical and epistemological challenges relating to (self-)mourning, witnessing, testimony, and politics during the first decade of the AIDS crisis. Wojnarowicz ultimately formed the opinion that it was an ethical responsibility for survivors to testify to the experiences of PWAs so as to effect positive changes in public opinion and social agendas towards this marginalised group.

Chapter three attends to the transformative possibilities that Wojnarowicz saw by undertaking automotive journeys. I argue that Wojnarowicz’s mostly prosaic accounts of prostitutes, hustlers, beggars, and drifters in The Waterfront Journals have a democratising effect, in expanding rather than contracting the mythology of the American nation and populace. In each having their own stories to tell of the acquisition and loss of fortune, geographical migration, and hardships associated with economic and social privation, the ‘monologues’ of The Waterfront Journals are a political corrective to the overwhelmingly prescriptive vision of the American population as white, heterosexual, able-bodied, and upper-middle class. Consequently, The Waterfront Journals functions as a form of social stocktaking, by recording the galería of voices Wojnarowicz met on the open road, thereby bearing resemblances to Walt Whitman’s poem, ‘Song of the Open Road’. Moreover, the intersection of psychic and sexual cruising which we identify in Close to the Knives is akin to Gregg Araki’s film, The Living End.

In my fourth chapter I contend that Wojnarowicz’s persistent fascination with insects of the social hymenoptera bears a family resemblance to the Surrealist imaginings of Dalí. Indeed, such interest in these minute creatures conveys both Wojnarowicz’s aesthetic indebtedness to Surrealism and his determination to unveil the many ecologies and ontologies that have been systematically erased by the mythic
norms of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Mysoon Rizk, one of Wojnarowicz’s most astute and loyal critics, has commented on the affinity Wojnarowicz shared with animals: he favoured ‘animals as stand-ins to represent his experience.’\textsuperscript{55} This would appear to be the inverse strategy of Dalí, who displayed a deep-rooted fear of grasshoppers, and the more general anxiety which he and other Surrealists harboured toward the praying mantis as a symbol of the castrating female-cum-sexual temptress. Yet Wojnarowicz, like the Surrealists, equated metaphorically the allegedly mechanical reactions of animal life with the larger structures and organisational hierarchies of human society. Whilst the praying mantis was routinely associated with dangerous feminine sexuality in Surrealist artworks, Wojnarowicz’s ants represented the unremitting momentum of humanity and the automated processes of civilisation. At the same time, their diminutive size metonymically suggested for Wojnarowicz the meagre value placed upon the life of PWAs within a culture that privileged normative heterosexuality and able-bodiedness.

Chapters five and six attend to how Wojnarowicz utilised the pen and camera as means of reconciling the entanglements of mourning, witnessing, loss, and intimacy in the wake of HIV/AIDS. Chapter five argues that the relationship he sustained with Hujar undermined the normative expectations of the carer and cared-for roles in demonstrating how Hujar had a formative impact on Wojnarowicz’s artistic development. As this chapter on the ethics of care and intimacy will show, Wojnarowicz captured with sincerity and pathos the sense of overwhelming frustration and helplessness many felt in witnessing the death of a friend, family member, or lover from AIDS-related causes. By the same token, Wojnarowicz’s written testimonies provide a public document on the alternative relations and

\textsuperscript{55} Mysoon Rizk, ‘Taking the “S” Out of “Pest”,’ \textit{Antennae} 11 (Autumn 2009): 37.
communities that emerged in reaction to the heterosexist and homophobic proscriptions of the Reagan administration. This chapter also identifies how Wojnarowicz carved out an emotional and psychic space within his imagination to facilitate alternative means of sexual expression, along with paying tribute in *Close to the Knives* to counterpublics such as the piers below Fourteenth Street in Manhattan for their role in establishing emotional intimacy between gay men.

Chapter six consolidates Wojnarowicz’s beliefs that dying as well as grieving for a loved one with HIV/AIDS are inherently political acts within the context of 1980s America. Wojnarowicz used the conventions of Victorian mortuary portraiture in his postmortem photographs of Hujar as a way to memorialise his friend, pay respect to his life, and express extreme distress over the denigration of PWAs by ultra-conservative politicians and religious dogmatists. Like Victorian postmortem images, which were *not* intended to trick the viewer into believing that the sitter was still alive or alternatively to act as a *memento mori* to ‘encourage the living to contemplate their own mortality and the transience of human existence’, Wojnarowicz’s images of Hujar function as a palliative to the loss and grief brought on by his friend’s protracted dying and death. In picturing Hujar in a state of relative ease rather than agony, Wojnarowicz effectively referenced the death-as-last-sleep tradition favoured in the latter half of the nineteenth century amongst Victorian and American portraitists. Furthermore, the absolute care that Wojnarowicz gave to Hujar by venerating his body through a progressive series of images reminiscent of reliquaries, reflect a pre-twentieth century attitude towards death as omnipresent, familiar, and ultimately beautiful.

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It is a sad irony that Wojnarowicz’s intention to increase public awareness towards the mistreatment of those whose ideologies or behaviours deviate from the axioms of the ‘ONE TRIBE NATION’ have often been misconstrued to reflect the same myopic visions that he assiduously fought against. I will end my introduction by setting the scene for my first chapter, by recounting two instances in which Wojnarowicz engaged in public battles with major political opponents against the expression of gay sexuality and non-normative ideologies. Discussing Wojnarowicz’s inadvertent involvement within the ‘Culture Wars’ of the 1980s will show precisely what is at stake in this artist’s oeuvre and its pivotal role in contexts where difference and diversity are feared and opposed for their revolutionary effects.

In 1989, Wojnarowicz became entangled in a controversy following the inclusion of his essay, ‘Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell,’ in the catalogue for Nan Goldin’s exhibition, Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing. Witnesses was slated as one of the first exhibitions to focus on the devastating effects of the HIV/AIDS crisis on the community of artists working and living in New York City’s Lower East Side. As Susan Wyatt, the director of Artists Space, wrote in the acknowledgements to the exhibition catalogue, Witnesses was a unique and timely exhibition in lamenting the imminent loss of this artistic coterie whilst simultaneously drawing attention to its resilience in the wake of HIV/AIDS:

Goldin has selected a group of artists, her friends, who have all shared the experience of living and working together on Manhattan’s Lower East Side over a period of time during which the AIDS epidemic began to surface and destroy that particular community of artists…. The work of the artists in this exhibition is a kind of testimony of survival, of keeping the faith despite the insidious nature of the disease and the prejudices surrounding it.57

Whilst Wojnarowicz would also contribute four prints from Sex Series and three postmortem images of Hujar to the exhibition, some particularly rabble-rousing sections of ‘Postcards’ became the target of unwelcome interest from John Frohnmayer, the then Chairman of the National Endowment of the Arts (NEA). Frohnmayer withdrew the grant awarded to Artists Space on the basis that ‘we find… that a large portion of the content is political rather than artistic in nature.’ For Wojnarowicz, whose iconography was constructed in direct response to the Reagan government’s failure to defend the political and moral rights of PWAs during the AIDS crisis, it was both preposterous and impossible to separate politics from aesthetics. At the same time, when Witnesses was slated as an exhibition oriented specifically to the project of chronicling the forms of artistic expression utilised by gay seropositive artists within this context, there was ‘absolutely no way that you can separate politics from AIDS.’

Wojnarowicz’s comments against those who he perceived as the greatest antagonists of sexual freedom and social equality – Jesse Helms, William Dannemeyer, Dana Rohrabacher, and Ed Koch – formed part of his strategy in utilising the imagination as a testing ground for activism and change. Indeed, ‘in light of [the] governmental murder of citizens on the basis that they are queer or junkies or minorities’ it became necessary to forgo a language of non-violence and passivity in

58 Cardinal John O’Connor is ‘a fat cannibal from that house of walking swastikas up on fifth avenue’. Wojnarowicz fantasised about ‘dous[ing] [Jesse] Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set[ting] his putrid ass on fire whilst ‘throw[ing] congressman William Dannemeyer off the empire state building’. Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives, 114, 120.

59 WOJO NEA #2, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, Subseries A, 092.0458. The title given to this footage is a curatorial description.

60 WOJO NEA #2, Wojnarowicz Papers. Wojnarowicz, in a video made by Phil Zwickler, also states: ‘If I may be dying of AIDS in America in 1989 isn’t that political? Isn’t the fact that I don’t have adequate health – that I don’t have health insurance and that I don’t have economic access to adequate health care isn’t that political?… to try to pretend that the subject of AIDS doesn’t have a political tinge to it is ridiculous.’ WOJO NEA #1, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, 092.0455.
favour of a vocabulary that recognised the emancipatory possibilities of rage. Wojnarowicz responded furiously to the hypocrisy within his nation, where the ‘murderousness’ of politicians was excused ‘in the spirit of “freedom” while anyone else’s fight for self-determination is an “assault”’.

Judith Halberstam has remarked upon the incredible passages of rage and violence that are peppered throughout Close to the Knives. She argues that rage is a ‘political space opened up by the representation in art, in poetry, in narrative, in popular film, of unsanctioned violences committed by subordinate groups upon powerful white men.’ The power of imagined rage is ultimately its unverified connection with ‘real’ violence – such a relationship is ‘unclear, contested, negotiable, unstable, and radically unpredictable’, thereby opening up the possibility of counterrealities to what has been dictated by the guardians of normativity and normalcy. Wojnarowicz noted the potentialities entertained by the imagination, believing it to be ‘one of the last frontiers left for the radical gesture’ (CK, 120). Within his ‘ungoverned imagination I can fuck somebody without a rubber, or I can, in the privacy of my own skull, douse Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire’ (CK, 120). Commenting on this passage, Halberstam contends that through imagining violence Wojnarowicz was able to ‘harness the force of fantasy and transform it into productive fear’, offering his audience a space to retaliate and express dissent freely without fear of reprimand.

Thus, the danger that Wojnarowicz’s essay posed for Frohnmayer was its potential to incite powerful changes within the context of reality; by entertaining the possibility of real-world violence perpetrated by the most disempowered members of society.

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passages like the above serve as ‘wake-up calls’ suggesting that ‘retribution in some form is just around the corner.’

I will need to abbreviate this convoluted timeline of events by stating that Frohnmayer eventually restored the grant to Artists Space on the proviso that the money be used to fund the exhibition only. I abbreviate such matters given that they operate as the backdrop for the continuing disagreements and misconceptions about Wojnarowicz’s iconography following his death in 1992. Specifically, the removal of his film, *A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress*, from the Smithsonian exhibition, *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, replicates many of the legal and curatorial questions surrounding the issue of public funding for the arts. Indeed, Frohnmayer’s objection to ‘Postcards’ and the withdrawal and eventual restoration of the grant to Artists Space demonstrate the challenges faced by artists whose work ventures away from representing the religious, sexual, gender, and racial norms of their time. Furthermore, both events trigger debate concerning the protection of artists and freedom of expression under the First Amendment.

This thesis makes some reference to Wojnarowicz’s early career as a stencil and collaborative artist during the late 1970s to early 1980s, but focuses more on his mature artistic period beginning in the mid-1980s and ending with his death. This is in part because of my emphasis on introducing new ways to read and receive his later political works, along with ensuring adequate focus on the assemblage of socio-political, historical, and cultural relations impacting on his representation of marginal and minority figures within his society. For Wojnarowicz, there was inherent dignity and value to be found in a multitude of ontologies, relations, ecologies, and

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64 Halberstam, ‘Imagined Violence/Queer Violence’: 196.
65 For a comprehensive and entertaining account of these events, see Mysoon Rizk’s ‘Regulating Desire and Imagination: The Art and Times of David Wojnarowicz,’ specifically pages 14-17, in *Crime and Punishment* 37 (2005): 3-32.
phenomenologies, which consequently extended his appreciation for diversity beyond the realm of the human as well as the living. My thesis, therefore, reflects and extends on Wojnarowicz’s compassionate approach to diversity in subjectivity and species. Taking aim at the admixture of homophobia, racism, gender discrimination and bigotry within 1980s America, Wojnarowicz utilised his oeuvre to campaign for the rights of not only PWAs but for those whose differences made them enemies of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Wojnarowicz sought to unveil, therefore, ‘the probable existence of literally millions of tribes’ (CK, 121) forming the backbone of the American nation.

In order to facilitate an effortless navigation of Wojnarowicz’s different artworks, I have placed a chronologist list of texts discussed in this thesis as a part of my bibliography. Each of my chapters traces a number of Wojnarowicz’s works, often being different in terms of medium as well as time period. Multiple texts are studied on the basis of their thematic and conceptual continuities with one another despite changes in spatio-temporal coordinates. I rationalise this thematological rather than chronological methodology, as my thesis claims that there are two essential concepts that run throughout Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre, unifying the period preceding and following his HIV diagnosis. The first concern is his theorisation of the ONE-TRIBE NATION as a constellation of ideologies and structures that impose a ‘preinvented existence’ onto members of society. The second essential feature of Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre is the evolution of his politics of artistic expression; as we will see, a panoply of aesthetic registers and moments converge in his works to make sense of the tensions existing between epistemological frames of reference that function to divide society into a discursive centre and margin.
CHAPTER ONE

Censorship Ant-ics: The Case of Wojnarowicz’s A Fire in My Belly

You would not be wrong if you claimed you had seen it all before: a conservative political right howling about the misuse of taxpayer funds to support flagrant art; a religious fringe group hailing itself as the arbiter of good taste and unassailable morality; art officials capitulating to the demands of the few and trampling on the First Amendment as they do so; and an artist who, having been caught in the cross-fires, is unable to disentangle his/her reputation from the ensuing controversy. And so it is with David Wojnarowicz and his super8mm film, A Fire in My Belly, which in a move eerily reminiscent of the Culture Wars of the late 1980s, became the subject of national controversy when G. Wayne Clough, the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, removed it from the exhibition, Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. Secretary Clough removed the film amidst complaints that it was ‘sacrilegious’ and ‘an obvious attempt to offend Christians during the Christmas season.’

The four-minute version of Wojnarowicz’s A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress, was removed from Hide/Seek following criticism from the religious right that its sequence involving ants crawling on a crucifix was a direct attack against Christianity (Figure 8).

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1 With respect to the media and legislative hubbub surrounding his exhibition catalogue for the Artists Space exhibition, Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing, Mysoon Rizk finds it surprising that this episode is often overlooked within the larger context of the 1980s ‘Culture Wars’. She writes, ‘I am equally concerned to empathically re-insert the artist in the “culture war” narrative as well as challenge his absence from the contemporary general record, given his own invaluable modeling for how better to construct society.’ Mysoon Rizk, ‘Regulating Desire and Imagination: The Art and Times of David Wojnarowicz,’ Crime and Punishment 37 (2005): 6.

Wojnarowicz had earlier been branded as proffering anti-Christian messages in his collage, Untitled [Genet]. This work was featured in the catalogue for his retrospective, Tongues of Flame, which opened on 23 January 1990, at Illinois State University. Soon after its opening, Wojnarowicz filed a lawsuit against the President of the American Family Association (AFA), Reverend Donald Wildmon, as the latter distributed a pamphlet to members of Congress featuring heavily cropped images of this work and others, including the Sex Series. Wojnarowicz sued Wildmon and the AFA for defamation of character (libel) and violation of the New York Artists and Authorship Right Act. The suit complained that Wildmon’s deliberate cropping turned Wojnarowicz into a ‘pornographer and not a serious visual artist.’

Wojnarowicz also took aim against Wildmon’s dim appraisal of Untitled [Genet];

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4 Wojnarowicz’s lawsuit, filed on 21 May 1990, charged Wildmon and the AFA with ‘unauthorized copying, deliberate distortion and mutilation of, and misrepresentation of seven works of art’ and ‘false and malicious defamation of the character, reputation and professional stand of Mr. Wojnarowicz.’ Quoted in Cynthia Carr, Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 486.
whereas Wildmon regarded the feature of Jesus shooting heroin as deliberating goading Christians with its blasphemy, Wojnarowicz turned to Jesus as a metaphorical expression of empathy for contemporary addictions and suffering. Although Wojnarowicz would prove victorious, his initial claim to be awarded one million dollars in damages⁶ was knocked back by Judge William C. Connor, since it could not be determined whether Wildmon’s actions in distributing the pamphlet had adversely affected Wojnarowicz’s reputation. In the end, Wojnarowicz was awarded merely one dollar in damages.⁷

An earlier controversial incident involving Wojnarowicz occurred in October 1989, when John Frohnmayer, the then Chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, retracted financial support for Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing at Artists Space, on the grounds of an essay written by Wojnarowicz entitled ‘Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell’.⁸ This essay, which was included in the catalogue accompanying the exhibition, was blisteringly critical of the systemic social and political injustices Wojnarowicz saw in his 1980s American context. Pinpointing in particular the foot-dragging of the Reagan government when it came to funding experimental drug trials for people with AIDS (PWAs), the enactment of the Helms Amendment as a dangerous precedent for the suppression of non-normative

⁶ According to a flyer distributed to members of the American Family Association (AFA), the suit against Wildmon and the AFA was for $1,000,000 on five separate counts, a total therefore of $5,000,000. Wildmon-flyer Denouncing Wojnarowicz, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 7, Subjects, Subseries B, Box 15, Folder 82, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.
⁷ ‘I’ll either spend it on an ice-cream cone or a condom, depending on my mood.’ In the end, he asked to be paid via cheque so that he could incorporate this piece of his history into a future artwork. The cheque is available for viewing as part of the David Wojnarowicz Papers. Wildmon-AFA Check for $1.0, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 7, Subjects, Subseries B, Box 15, Folder 105.
sexuality,⁹ and Cardinal John Joseph O’Connor’s deliberate avoidance of safer sex education leading ‘thousands and thousands to their unnecessary deaths’ (CK 114), Wojnarowicz’s essay powerfully interwove political commentary with personal testimony on the outrage of PWAs towards their mistreatment within this heterosexist culture. One of the major weapons used by Wojnarowicz to dismantle the image of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, the moniker he coined to invoke an illusory America that is culturally, sexually and ideologically homogeneous, was to make visible to a public audience those behaviours and thoughts regarded as taboo by the majority population. For Wojnarowicz, keeping silent was tantamount to advocating that certain lives, particularly those of homosexual men with HIV/AIDS, are less worthy than those of their normative heterosexual, male, and able-bodied counterparts. As he stridently pronounced in Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration, it is vital for people to disclose a ‘fragment of [their] private reality’, for in so doing ‘The term “general public” disintegrates’ (CK, 121):

**BOTTOM LINE, IF PEOPLE DON’T SAY WHAT THEY BELIEVE, THOSE FEELINGS AND IDEAS GET LOST. IF THEY ARE LOST OFTEN ENOUGH, THOSE IDEAS AND FEELINGS NEVER RETURN. (CK, 153)**

Wojnarowicz was inarguably a highly vocal individual who was more than willing to defend himself when he and his artworks were scrutinised in the mainstream press. Consequently, the posthumous censorship of A Fire in My Belly by Clough is

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⁹The Helms Amendment to the fiscal year 1988 appropriations bill prohibited any educational programs and resources that would ‘promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual activities.’ The Simon-Hatch amendment was introduced shortly thereafter and reworded parts of the Helms amendment, such as part 3b of Section 2, which contained even more outrageous attacks on homosexuality and called for the enforcement of sodomy laws. However, as Gregory M. Herek notes, ‘By supporting the Simon-Hatch language [over Helms’], they [the Senate] could safely vote against Helms’ amendment without being labeled pro-gay and anti-family.’ Gregory M. Herek, ‘Jesse Helms: “If You Want to Call Me a Bigot – Fine.”’, Beyond Homophobia, 4 July 2008, accessed 11 June 2013, http://www.beyondhomophobia.com/blog/2008/07/04/jesse-helms-if-you-want-to-call-me-a-bigot-fine/.
problematic, insofar as Wojnarowicz was neither able to explain his authorial intention behind its composition nor decry the violation of his rights under the First Amendment. Moreover, in the ensuing defense of Wojnarowicz’s film by well-meaning advocates, inaccuracies relating to its compositional date and meaning have spread rapaciously in the mainstream press. In the first part of this chapter, I will review the voluminous coverage of the censorship of *A Fire in My Belly* and in so doing argue that both detractors and supporters of Wojnarowicz used his film to further their own agendas concerning arts and culture policy. In particular, I claim that the debate between Wojnarowicz’s sympathisers and critics circled around the issue concerning the extent to which the American government should promote or deny public funding for artworks of a potentially contentious subject matter.  

Similarly to the furore surrounding Andres Serrano’s *Piss Christ* (1987) and the retrospective of Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography at the Corcoran Art Gallery in 1989, we see how Wojnarowicz’s *A Fire in My Belly* is used as a straw man in order to deflect attention away from the violation of public sensibilities and propriety. Thus, I contend, like Gordon Shockley and Connie L. McNeely, that the debate...
surrounding *A Fire in My Belly* is only ‘ostensibly about the public funding of controversial art.’ In actual fact, Wojnarowicz’s film, like the allegedly blasphemous nature of *Piss Christ* and the homoerotic overtones of Mapplethorpe’s retrospective, is emblematic of a greater debate around ‘the values conveyed by or embodied in the very notion of government support for the arts in the United States’.  

What are most intriguing when sifting through the often fallacious and inaccurate responses made by the Religious Right, government officials, and advocates for the arts following the censorship of *A Fire in My Belly*, are larger curatorial, museological, and constitutional questions that emerge concerning artistic license and expression. Such questions cannot all be answered, let alone extensively, within the confines of a first chapter. Nonetheless, it is my aim to consider how notions of ‘responsibility,’ ‘morality’ and ‘decency’ can often apply pressure to curatorial decisions, particularly in the case of publicly funded exhibitions.

As is the norm with censorship debates, it is often difficult to appraise the content of *A Fire in My Belly* without recourse to its surrounding controversy. The short crucifix sequence included in the 4-minute version of *A Fire in My Belly*, edited by Jonathan Katz and Bart Everly for inclusion in *Hide/Seek*, was enough to denounce the entire work as ‘blasphemous’, with Andrea Peyser in a particularly toxic article branding it ‘lazy, sophomoric Christian bashing’.  

The third part of this chapter will parry such interpretive generalisations about *A Fire in My Belly* and attempt to counter the dichotomous image of the film as either ‘anti-Christian’ or, as S. Brent Plate laments, ‘a deeply religious artwork made by an artist struggling with and

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through the embodied life of the spirit.' In part, the incorrect claims that *A Fire in My Belly* was composed as a homage to Peter Hujar following his death in 1987, and that Wojnarowicz had already been diagnosed with HIV by the time the film was composed, led to the well-meaning, yet nonetheless shortsighted claim that the sequence was evocative of the suffering and victimisation of PWAs. Helping to perpetuate this misinterpretation, the National Portrait Gallery issued a public statement after the denunciation of the ant scene by religious commentators, apologetically stating that it ‘was part of a surrealistic video collage filmed in Mexico expressing the suffering, marginalization and physical decay of those who were afflicted with AIDS’. That both Tom Rauffenbart, Wojnarowicz’s surviving partner and executor of his estate, as well as Wendy Olsoff, director of PPOW, the gallery directly connected with his estate, have eagerly dismissed the ant scene as being a comment on the ‘torment of AIDS, created in reaction to the death [of Peter Hujar]’, is perhaps irrelevant, given the currency this interpretation holds and continues to hold with liberal audiences of the film. Adding to the confusion is that the film exists in multiple versions, none of which can be identified as the ‘original’ object. Subsequent to the censorship of the 4-minute version edited by Katz and Everly, protestors and PPOW disseminated this version along with three others found within Wojnarowicz’s personal items onto video websites including Vimeo and YouTube.

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17 There are a number of versions of *A Fire in My Belly* available for viewing on YouTube. What is interesting to note is that *A Fire in My Belly* was first uploaded by semiotext(e) in 2007, a full four years before the Smithsonian controversy.
leading to confusion in the media about which iteration of the film was removed from *Hide/Seek*.

That this work exists in multiple versions is evidence of Wojnarowicz’s citational approach to textuality. Not content to work in one medium alone, Wojnarowicz’s writings, paintings, photographs, and films parasitically draw their content, style, and semiotics from one another. In doing so, his works undermine the normative logics of order, hierarchy, and boundedness, in favour of a ‘queer’ textuality that advocates productivity through the cross-pollination and recycling of ideas. As Karl Schoonover writes, Wojnarowicz’s *oeuvre* ‘always undercuts its originality and singularity with brazen gestures of appropriation, citation, and duplicity’.

Certain symbols that recur in *A Fire in My Belly*, including bandaged hands, a spinning globe, locomotives and Mesoamerican artefacts, are part of a larger visual repository that Wojnarowicz developed prior to his writings about HIV/AIDS. These images are in direct conversation with his political commentary on the automatic mechanisms of the ‘clockwork of civilization’ and the hegemonic constructs of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Consequently, the third part of my chapter will tease out the semantic differences between each of the four versions of *A Fire in My Belly*. This filmographic methodology will offer a counter reading of not only the 4-minute edited version by Katz and Everly included for *Hide/Seek*, but the temptation to apply a process of reverse causation when interpreting his texts. Indeed, as Marvin Taylor, the Director of Fales Library & Special Collections at New York University, claims, ‘There is a tendency to limit his [Wojnarowicz’s] work to the anger over AIDS’, even though *A Fire in My Belly* was allegedly composed before Hujar’s death and Wojnarowicz’s involvement with activist groups such as ACT

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What I am therefore suggesting is expanding the semantic possibilities for the film, in turn asserting its polysemy and thematic complexity. I am not disputing such the validity of a reading that sees *A Fire in My Belly* as an (auto)thanatographic work of mourning testifying to the AIDS crisis, but I am attempting to identify other responses, both aesthetic and structural, to the film and its extant versions. Consequently, I agree with Barry Blinderman’s argument that ‘*A Fire in My Belly* should be considered in terms of Wojnarowicz’s prodigious artistic output as a whole’, given that the visual vocabulary of the film predates its composition, as well as is seen to proliferate across and amongst many of his photographs and paintings in the 1980s.

I will provide in the third section of this chapter a close analysis of the four extant versions of *A Fire in My Belly*, those being the iterations produced for *Hide/Seek* and Rosa von Praunheim’s *Silence = Death*, as well as the 13-minute ‘Work in Progress’ and 7-minute ‘Prostitution’ section, the latter included on a separate reel at Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University. The ‘Prostitution’ section, as Fales Library & Special Collections explains in its ‘Fact Sheet for *A Fire In My Belly*’, was edited down to produce the 4-minute version exhibited as part of *Hide/Seek*. My rationale for undertaking this formalist approach is to render the problem of *A Fire in My Belly*’s meaning insoluble if we claim to search for its meaning in the singular. Further adding to this hermeneutic impasse is

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19 Even though *A Fire in My Belly* was composed before Hujar’s death and Wojnarowicz’s own diagnosis, it is still plausible to consider the correlative relationship between Wojnarowicz’s use of ants and representation of HIV/AIDS. In ‘AIDS and Imagination’, Wojnarowicz states that ‘With the appearance of AIDS [sic] and the subsequent death of friends and neighbors I now have the recurring sensation of seeing the streets and radius of blocks before me from miles above; only now instead of focusing on the form of myself in the midst of this Other World, I see everything at once: like pressing ones [sic] eye to the earth above a small crevice from which there are streams of ants uttering from the shadows – and all of it looks amazing instead of just deathly.’ ‘AIDS and Imagination,’ David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 3, Manuscripts, Subseries A, Box 4, Folder 1.

'how the film recycles passages or images from the artist’s other well-known works.' Almost as if adopting the cinematic equivalent of a theme and variations structure in classical music, Wojnarowicz introduces in each of his versions a main ‘subject’ that is ornamented, imitated, and repeated to produce new ‘variations’ and visual textures to this work.

With its rejection of chronological order and spatial unity, along with the production of disjunctive and associative sequences, *A Fire in My Belly* takes many of its cues from the Surrealist procedures of Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. By cataloguing the variegated cultural practices of Mexico and documenting with a dispassionate eye the often difficult conditions in which its people live and work, the thirteen minute ‘Work in Progress’ of *A Fire in My Belly* can be seen to draw influence from Surrealist aesthetics as well as the documentary genre. Wojnarowicz employed a Surrealist aesthetic in order to question the ability for the documentary genre to depict with neutrality the experiences of foreign ‘others’ in the so-called ‘third world’. Wojnarowicz’s use of collage also allowed him to disrupt the hegemony of the ONE-TRIBE NATION by inserting his ‘multilayered synchronic vision’ of history in the world, in which neatly demarcated boundaries between the past and present, and the public and private, are made to dissolve. We see Wojnarowicz utilise a collage aesthetic in the 13-minute ‘Work in Progress’ of the film through his experimentation with the order, duration, and frequency of scenes and particular images.

With respect to the primary ‘antagonists’ of the censorship debate, that is, the miniature insects of the social hymenoptera, I will turn to Wojnarowicz’s unfinished

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21 Schoonover, ‘David Wojnarowicz’s Graven Image.’
films and visual artworks to contest rigorously their depiction as a threatening force against Christ and Christianity in *A Fire in My Belly*. This will form the second section of my chapter. Overwhelmingly, Wojnarowicz employed ants in his *oeuvre* as a metonym for the destructive nature of humanity in its relentless pursuit of progress. With their willingness to sacrifice themselves to guarantee the functionality and stability of their eusocial system, the roles and lives of ants epitomised for Wojnarowicz the ‘reinvented existences’ of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Keeping with my earlier claim that Wojnarowicz’s compositional methods dovetail with Surrealist procedures, Wojnarowicz’s utilisation of ants connects him conceptually to the entomological studies of Dalí and Buñuel. For these three figures, ants symbolised ‘the un-monumental forces of everyday life that so easily infect middle-class complacency if given the chance.’

**Fires in Their Bellies: The Controversial Censorship of Wojnarowicz’s Film**

The offending passage leading to the withdrawal and thereby censorship of *A Fire in My Belly* from the NPG exhibition was an 11-second sequence of ants crawling over a crucifix. Although the exhibition opened quietly on 30 October 2010, by 29 November *Hide/Seek* exploded into the public view after the Christian News Service was tipped off about the exhibition’s allegedly prurient content. In an article by Penny Starr appearing in CNS, she catalogued a list of supposedly offensive images featured in the Smithsonian exhibition, including ‘an ant-covered Jesus, male genitals, naked brothers kissing, men in chains, Ellen DeGeneres grabbing her breasts, and a

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*Schoonover, ‘David Wojnarowicz’s Graven Image,’*
painting the Smithsonian itself describes in the show’s catalog as “homoerotic.”

The following day, Eric Cantor called for the removal of *A Fire in My Belly* because it was ‘an outrageous use of taxpayer money’. House Speaker John Boehner also issued a stern rebuke of the film, warning that public funding for the arts would face tougher financial scrutiny if institutions such as the Smithsonian were to continue to fund religiously divisive artwork. As a spokesman relayed to *Washington Post*, Boehner claimed that ‘American families have a right to expect better from recipients of funds in a tough economy’, thereby making an implicit judgement that budgetary constraints should have a say in what is exhibited in national galleries. Adding fuel to what had already become a media brushfire, William Donohue of the Catholic League condemned the 11-second sequence as ‘anti-Christian hate speech’, designed to inflict maximal offence in its proximity to the Christmas holiday season. For Donohue, there was an implicit double standard in the manner in which Washington patronised the arts: ‘If the government can’t fund the promotion of religion, it shouldn’t be in the business of funding an animus to religion’.

Certainly, the enmity Boehner, Cantor, and Donohue displayed towards *A Fire in My Belly* had very much to do with the question of public funding for the arts, at a time when tougher scrutiny was applied to America’s economic spending following the Global Financial Crisis. By the same token, however, resorting to politically charged rhetoric such as ‘hate speech’ and arguing for equality of representation in promoting both religion and its antithesis raise further questions as to which social

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25 Eric Cantor, quoted in Dobrzynski, ‘Fires in Their Bellies.’
groups government-funded artworks should be catering for. Should publicly funded artworks maintain the status quo by reinforcing heteronormative ideologies and majoritarian viewpoints? Or is it the purpose of public funding to support the perspectives of minority groups in order to challenge conservative agendas, and to promote alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and representing the world? It would seem that the answer to these questions would depend on which side of the political fence one found himself/herself on.

Part of the backlash of the censorship of *A Fire in My Belly* included a number of panels organised by universities across America to discuss the curatorial, editorial, legal, and aesthetic consequences of this event. One such discussion was held at A&AA Portland, which featured guest speakers including the former Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts, John Frohnmayer. Already mired in an earlier controversy with Wojnarowicz, for which he openly accepts blame – ‘I made a colossal mistake’ – Frohnmayer demystifies the meaning of the First Amendment and in particular which groups are protected by it. Whereas critics of *A Fire in My Belly* called for its removal on the grounds of the film violating their First Amendment rights, they were entirely incorrect in invoking this part of the US Constitution as part of their argument. As Frohnmayer confirms, the First Amendment exists to protect the speaker, in this case, the artist, from a suppression of their work if certain ideas contained within it are contrary to those of the majority.

29 Although having not seen the exhibition at the time of Barry Blinderman’s conversation with a reporter for National Public Radio, Frohnmayer would also make condemnatory statements about *Tongues of Flame* that Blinderman saw as indulging the bigotry of the Religious Right. As Blinderman says, ‘The Mayor of Normal said that he found the show a little depressing, but there’s nothing about it that offended him or should offend any of his constituents in any way. And what my gripe is, how come the Mayor of Normal who doesn’t know much about art but knows enough that he could respond to this show in a favourable fashion, how come he can respond so well and John Frohnmayer, the head of the NEA, has to say that he found these images disgusting and offensive? Why couldn’t he just say I didn’t see the show, and I’ll comment on it when I have seen the show? Why does the person who’s supposed to be defending the NEA have to fall prey to pressure to condemn this show?’ *Tongues of Flame* Opening, 7/26-7, 90 Normal, IL-NPR Interview (Parts 1 and 2), Wojnarowicz Papers.
The irony of *A Fire in My Belly* for Frohnmayer, then, is that with public outrage comes the clearest demonstration of the success of the First Amendment: ‘offence is one symbol at least in my view that the First Amendment is working, because if we were never offended we’re never going to see those things with which we might disagree.’ In sum, Frohnmayer argues that it is the non-negotiable duty of institutions such as the NEA or a public broadcasting service to support artworks that the public market would not necessarily fund itself. Publicly funded exhibitions present ‘a reasonable alternative’ to what the public market *expects* to see, both ideologically and aesthetically. Without this ‘reasonable alternative’, Frohnmayer queries the value of having institutions such as the NEA in the first place – ‘you have to question why they’re there or whether they’re doing what they’re supposed to do.’

Similarly, Lauren Berlant, in a panel discussion held at the University of Chicago, argued that *A Fire in My Belly* can be categorised as ‘difficult art’, since it holds a complicated relationship with the public and popular culture. As it is the rationale of ‘difficult art’ to ‘represent something ambivalent’, it is inevitably inimical to popular culture because the primary aim of popular culture is to induce an affect of (ideological) comfort, rather than ‘different kinds of discomfort’, for its audience. Whilst Frohnmayer argues that the censorship of *A Fire in My Belly* is damaging for its further muddying of the First Amendment, Berlant is more concerned about its

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30 John Frohnmayer, ‘ART + CENSORSHIP: A Response to the Wojnarowicz Controversy,’ WMV recording, from a panel recorded by University of Oregon on 26 January 2011, obtained through personal communication with Sabina Poole.

31 Frohnmayer performs here a remarkable volte face on public funding and its relation to artworks of a political or sexual nature. Speaking about the Serrano and Mapplethorpe controversies, he previously advised that ‘I think the last thing we need is for public funds to be used to try to rub it [political or sexual commentary] in the face of the critics.’ Speaking out after news of Wojnarowicz’s *Tongues of Flame* including art that Dana Rohrabacher described as ‘an orgy of degenerate depravity,’ Frohnmayer invited himself to comment on Wojnarowicz’s work without having even visited the exhibition: ‘The images are disgusting and offensive to me, and undoubtedly a large majority of the population. … I would hope, that with the procedures I am implanting at the Arts Endowment, images such as these would not again been funded.’ Elizabeth Kastor, ‘NEA Pulls Grant to “Political” Exhibit,’ *Washington Post*, November 9 1989, quoted in Dubin, *Arresting Images*, 213.
repercussions in further privatising the ‘open secret of sexuality’ and inhibiting the development of counterpublics through active suppression of alternative viewpoints.

Placing the issue of censorship in a temporal continuum, she claims:

Censorship isn’t just about the past or about managing the present but also about the future and about what can become a referent and what can get built up… it’s about foreclosing and blocking futures.\(^{32}\)

The futures that she fears will be ‘foreclos[ed]’ and ‘blocked’ are those decidedly ‘queer’ socialities and communities that resist normative relationalities of family, kinship, and heredity. For Berlant, government funding for the arts should indeed favour ‘queer’ resistances to phallogocentrism and heteronormativity precisely for the reason that Frohnmayer gives: such artworks engender ideas that the public market will not fund on its own because they deviate from those beliefs held by the majority.

What we observe in the debate concerning public funds is an increasing tendency for artists to engage in self-censorship in anticipation of a public relations nightmare following disapproval or outrage in the media. Whether represented as civic responsibility, the protection of children or otherwise, the ‘chilling effect’ of controversies like A Fire in My Belly is that it encourages curators and museum directors to engage in processes of self-censorship ‘because you are afraid of being censored’.\(^{33}\) In Frohnmayer’s glacial metaphor, he hones in on the major affect that

\(^{32}\) Lauren Berlant, ‘Panel Discussion: A Fire in My Belly.’

\(^{33}\) Frohnmayer, ‘ART & CENSORSHIP: A Response to the Wojnarowicz Controversy.’ This is precisely the approach Susan Wyatt adopted when faced with the crisis over Wojnarowicz’s ‘Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell’ for Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing. According to Dubin in Arresting Images, Wyatt – not the NEA, the curator, nor the artists – devised the plan to separate the work in the show from the catalog, even though this is a spurious distinction…. But Wyatt was attempting to anticipate the arguments of Helms, Rohrabacher, Armey, et al., and to beat them at their own game: “Those people say, ‘do it on your own time and your own dime.’ And that’s why I thought, okay, we’ll do it on our own time and our own dime.”’ The goal was to insulate the most provocative material from the critics of public support by taking it off limits.’ Dubin, Arresting Images, 209.
informs the decision to self-censor: fear. Yet the irony of the fear of reprisal which triggers the censorship of works such as *A Fire in My Belly* is that it only increases the visibility of the work through its dissemination through other avenues. As Karl Schoonover notes, ‘In a wonderful inversion, the NPG’s capitulation to the Catholic League led to the [sic] *A Fire in My Belly*’s distribution well beyond any audiences the gallery could have accommodated,’ where major publications like *New York Times* and *Washington Post* posted links so that audiences could view the film for themselves. Moreover, following the withdrawal of *A Fire in My Belly* from *Hide/Seek* protests in the form of screenings occurred in institutions such as Transformer Gallery in Washington DC, which had the film showing on a continuous 24-hour loop in its front window. In another example, the Brooklyn Museum and Takoma Museum of Art together organised a tour of *Hide/Seek* with *A Fire in My Belly* reinstated as part of the exhibition. Other protests were launched by lone individuals via portable devices at the NPG, such as one involving Mike Blasenstein, who stood at the second-floor entrance of the gallery with the film playing on an iPad hanging around his neck. Speaking to Jacqueline Trescott of *Washington Post*, he remarked on the eerie parallels between the current censorship of Wojnarowicz’s work and the initial days of the AIDS crisis:

Suddenly I realized that ‘Silence Equals Death’ wasn’t some retro relic, but something that made it possible for me as a gay man to enjoy whatever acceptance and protections I have today. I wanted to make sure that this man who died 18 years ago wasn’t swept from view again – especially from an exhibition professing to honor the marginalized

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35 Mysoon Rizk, personal communication, 25 May 2014.
Blasenstein’s protest is a perfect example of how censorship achieves the opposite aim of what it intends. Mintcheva writes, ‘If to suppress an individual work were indeed the goal, then censorship today miserably fails.’37 Yet if the aim of censorship is to ‘assert cultural presence, to mobilise the anger of key constituencies and, most importantly, to force exhibiting institutions to second-guess themselves… then censorship is singularly successful.’38 The biggest complication that arises from self-censorship, then, is that it sets an alarming precedent39 for future curators and museum directors to remove artworks in anticipation of their being attacked by the public for their discussion of ‘hot-button’ topics. Moreover, with self-censorship comes the further misconstruing of the First Amendment as that which protects the public rather than the artist. For many of Wojnarowicz’s sympathisers, Clough’s action was seen as kowtowing to the demands of would-be censors, who in reductively claiming the film’s message as ‘anti-Christian’ manipulated the ensuing scandal to serve their political ends. Speaking to Jacqueline Trescott, Jonathan Katz, the co-curator of Hide/Seek and co-editor of the exhibition’s version of A Fire in My Belly, expressed shock that he was not involved in the decision to remove the film, saying that ‘It was an incredibly stupid decision. I am flabbergasted that they rose to the bait so readily’.40 Clough later conceded to having withdrawn the film under hasty

37 Mintcheva, ‘Scare Tactics’: 168.
38 Mintcheva, ‘Scare Tactics’: 168.
conditions: ‘he now wished he had taken more time and consulted more experts before swallowing the bait and sinking the Smithsonian’s reputation in the process.’

Undoubtedly, ‘consult[ing] more experts’ would have lessened the near-universal condemnation of the decision to withdraw the film by members of the artistic community. ‘Consult[ing] more experts’ would have also helped Clough to weigh up the consequences of such a drastic action, not only for the future of publicly funded art but the purpose that aesthetic practices should ultimately serve. In some respect, exhibiting art of a controversial nature serves as a litmus test of a society’s acceptance of diversity and difference. Wojnarowicz sought tirelessly to unveil the repressive mechanisms of human society and to engage in alternative worldmaking. These aims are reflected in his appreciation towards the variegation found in social ecologies and the natural world, and his invocation of fantasy and myth. He wrote in Close to the Knives that ‘I have a desire to open up certain boundaries and release information that unties the psychic ropes that bind the ONE TRIBE NATION’ (CK, 143). Whilst the function of art, and more importantly, publicly-funded art, should not always be heuristic or didactic, Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre forces his audience to reexamine our existing prejudices ‘By exploring taboos and testing the boundaries of the permissible.’ Most alarming then, is how the censorship of art, on the grounds of being an ‘offence’ to ‘taxpayer dollars,’ can be used as a tool to attack the public funding of any work which appears to deviate from or explicitly attack patriarchy, heteronormativity, and phallogocentrism.

Frohnmayer’s discussion raises another question about how artistic bodies such as the Smithsonian Institution should respond in the wake of public criticism

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42 Mintcheva, ‘Scare Tactics’: 174.
43 Mintcheva, ‘Scare Tactics’: 175.
towards controversial exhibitions. Frohnmaier dismissed Clough’s removal of *A Fire in My Belly* as a knee-jerk reaction that mirrored his own regrettable suspension of the NEA grant for Nan Goldin’s exhibition at Artists Space in 1989. Frohnmaier atoned for his former mistake – ‘I was stupid. I suspended the grant, before I even saw the show’ – by outlining four approaches that museum executives can take when controversial exhibitions or artworks are met with public outrage:

1) ‘Doing nothing is almost often a very clever thing to do and almost always a clever thing to say’

2) ‘Dialogue diffuses these kinds of issues’

3) ‘Offence is part of our birthright as people who live in a free society protected by the First Amendment’

4) A ‘distinction between the message and the sponsor’ should be made. ‘The message is that of the artist, the sponsor is simply providing the forum in which the particular artist is displaying her or his work’.

Suffice it to say that neither Clough nor the Board of Regents who investigated the removal of *A Fire in My Belly* on 31 January 2011 undertook the above measures. Patricia Q. Stonesifer, the chairwoman of the Smithsonian Board of Regents at the time of the controversy, expressed concern over the lack of distinction made between the sponsor and the artist’s message. For Stonesifer, ‘Doing nothing’ was not an option after Clough’s hurried and drastic removal of *A Fire in My Belly*. The removal was an absolute ‘breach of trust’, adding that ‘we [the Smithsonian] have to explain ourselves’.

Yet there was no explanation.

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44 Frohnmaier, ‘ART + CENSORSHIP: A Response to the Wojnarowicz Controversy.’
45 Patricia Q. Stonesifer, quoted in Stolberg and Taylor, ‘Wounded in Crossfire of a Capital Culture War.’
A Portrait of the Artist as Entomologist

In his interview with the curator and art critic Barry Blinderman featured in Tongues of Flame, Wojnarowicz outlined the symbolic function of ants when offset against other elements of his personal iconography:

Animals allow us to view certain things that we wouldn’t allow ourselves to see in regards to human activity. In the Mexican photographs with the coins and the clock and the gun and the Christ figure and all that, I used ants as a metaphor for society because the social structure of the ant world is parallel to ours.46

This statement compels us to reject the anti-Christian thesis with respect to A Fire in My Belly, which states that Wojnarowicz deliberately arranged for the ants to move over a bloodied crucifix in order to desecrate Jesus and offend his religious followers. As Wojnarowicz explained to Blinderman in the first sentence, entomological and anthropological studies are interrelated, insofar as insects can help us to learn more about human society and civilisation. Thus, by pairing the ants with cultural, economic, and religious symbols such as the Mexican photographs, coins, and Christ figure in the film, Wojnarowicz urges us to consider how the eusocial system of the hymenoptera might in fact be a prototypical model of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, wherein each insect has a pivotal yet preprogrammed function to guarantee the stability and survival of the colony.

Given that Wojnarowicz regarded the social organisation of ants as analogous to human civilisation, the ant sequence could conceivably demonstrate ‘human life [being] mechanically driven by its own needs, heedless of anything else.’47 Like

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Buñuel, Wojnarowicz perceived human civilisation in the same way as an entomologist scrutinising insect life. Like the martial characteristics of these warriors under Patroclus or the invading army of Majorcan civilians that ‘swarm over the rocks like ants’ in Buñuel’s *L’Âge d’or* (1930), humans in Wojnarowicz’s universe could easily adopt what are perceived as the most commendable yet alarming features of these insects, such as their supreme productivity, indistinctiveness, and expertise in battle.\(^4^9\)

Nonetheless, to draw an equation between Wojnarowicz’s uses of non-human animals with a critique of human civilisation would be to simplify what is ultimately an intriguing constellation of usages, meanings, and associations that these creatures conjure in his *oeuvre*. In my fourth chapter, I will delineate the variegated significations triggered by Wojnarowicz’s depiction of animals in his visual and literary works. For the moment, suffice it to say that a defining element of Wojnarowicz’s *oeuvre* is its pairing of human and non-human life, both in terms of embarking on a comparative biology of species and observing congruencies between the instinctual features of certain mammalian societies and the ‘preinvented existence’ imposed upon the ‘millions of [human] tribes’ living in 1980s America. When thinking of how humans are ‘mechanically driven by [their]… own needs, heedless of anything else’, Wojnarowicz probed his audience into questioning the ideologies underlining civilisation, which prompted self-imposed ignorance towards potentialities deviating from the preordained roles of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, as well as the manipulation and exploitation of non-human systems for the amelioration of.

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\(^{49}\) Henry David Thoreau observes the intense warfare between two species of ants in *Walden*, where the scores of dead ants are reminiscent of bloodied fields that follow infantry battle: ‘The Legions of these Myrmidons covered all the hills and vales in my woodyard, and the ground was already strewn with the dead and dying, both red and black.’ Quoted in Matthew Sears, ‘Warrior Ants: Elite Troops in the *Iliad*,’ *Classical World* 103, no. 2 (Winter 2010): 151.
of human labor and progress. Ants were the most prevalent non-human species Wojnarowicz used in his works, and as such the sequence including these diminutive members of the family Formicidae in *A Fire in My Belly* should be read against other instances in which this species is featured.

Located within The David Wojnarowicz Papers is a silent unfinished film entitled *Plain Ants*…⁵⁰ Evident even from a superficial glance at *Plain Ants*… is its stylistic and compositional similarities to *A Fire in My Belly*. Like *A Fire in My Belly*, *Plain Ants*… has a similar roughness in its editing, and its scenes are likewise ordered according to a logic of juxtaposition and incongruity rather than a chronological or synchronic organisation of information. Moreover, Wojnarowicz’s preference in using a minimal number of camera shots and movements per scene are akin to the observational mode of *A Fire in My Belly*, where there is a prevailing mood of detachment resulting from his reluctance to intervene in the action he shoots. However, as with other unfinished films in The David Wojnarowicz Papers, it is impossible to determine what Wojnarowicz had envisioned as being the final product of *Plain Ants*…, or even if the footage was intended to be made into a standalone film or amalgamated into a larger cinematic project. Nonetheless, *Plain Ants*… is an important record of the epistemological, anthropological, and political concerns occupying Wojnarowicz’s work and life from the mid-1980s to his death.

The principal focus of the film is the depiction of ants in situations that makes the viewer question the assumed sovereignty and invulnerability of the human species. As they crawl, jump, and even fly⁵¹ over monuments to democratic progress (the

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⁵⁰ *Plain Ants*…, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, 092.0387.

⁵¹ Salvador Dali was exceptionally fearful of grasshoppers because of their ‘springing’ movement, which makes these Orthoptera seem unpredictable and highly energetic. ‘When you are thinking of it least, the grasshopper springs! Horror of horrors! … At the heightened moment of my most ecstatic contemplations and visualizations, the grasshopper would spring! Heavy, unconscious, anguish, its frightfully paralyzing leap reflected in a start of terror that shook my whole being to its depths.'
American flag), temporal quantification (clock faces), industrialisation (steam locomotive), and human desire (magazine clippings of heterosexual and homosexual sex), the viewer is left to wonder the primacy of the human species given the primordial status of insect life and its capacity to thrive in post-human environments. Indeed, Wojnarowicz’s art and literature are suffused with an apocalyptic imperative which entertains the notion of destroying societal infrastructures in order to construct from this wreckage ethical and compassionate relations within the human species and across the divide to non-human life. With the destruction of human civilisation as we know it, however, comes the attendant question of what is able to survive and even flourish through displacing humans from the rational and ontological centre of our world. *Plain Ants*... tarries with this idea, as Wojnarowicz depicts ants in situations that transform our perception of these creatures as harmless or irritating household interlopers into an unremittingly sinister life form. Wojnarowicz shoots in colour ants as they emerge from their mounds and proceed to scurry at an intense speed across the Earth, thereby belying what appears to be aimless movement. A quick cut occurs to a swarm of ants that fly around and crawl over a toy house. Wojnarowicz, as he does in his collages, *Earth* (1987) and *The Death of American Spirituality* (1987), plays with scale in this sequence, in which the miniaturised home transforms these small insects into a menacing and visually disproportionate force that besiege the protective borders of this human structure. Wojnarowicz pushed to the limit in *Plain Ants*... the disquieting aspects of this species, resulting in part from their absolutely dissimilar

Grasshopper – loathsome insect! Horror, nightmare, martyrizer and hallucinating folly of Salvador Dalí’s life.

I am thirty-seven years old, and the fright which grasshoppers cause me has not diminished since my adolescence. On the contrary. If possible I should say it has perhaps become still greater. Even today, if I were on the edge of a precipice and a large grasshopper sprang upon me and fastened itself to my face, I should prefer to fling myself over the edge rather than endure this frightful “thing.” Salvador Dalí, *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, quoted in Gene Kritsky, Dan Mader, and Jessee J. Smith, ‘Surreal Entomology,’ *American Entomologist* 59 (Spring 2013): 31.
anatomy to human beings as well as their instinctual behaviour. For in choosing to feature ants crawling ceaselessly over objects created by humans, Wojnarowicz conveyed what is ultimately the most disturbing feature of insects of the social hymenoptera: as part of an evolutionarily stable strategy, each ant ensures the survival of their community by carrying out their preordained task irrespective of outcome.

Like Dalí, ants appear in Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre in situations that cause vexation or initiate traumatic associations. Ants for Dalí were part of a larger chain of significations conjured by insect life, including the praying mantis and grasshopper. As in The Persistence of Memory (1931), for Dalí the Formicidae family was symbolically aligned with death, putrefaction, and excrescence, whereas in his collaboration with Buñuel in An Andalusian Dog (1929), these insects depicted the permeable surface of the human body as well as the physical materialisation of unconscious desires. Particularly, the sequence in An Andalusian Dog where the hand of the male protagonist appears to have an abscess in which ants crawl in and out of his body recalls an earlier childhood memory where a seven-year old Dalí allegedly saw a ‘swarming mass’ of ants on the buttock of a young child. Yet the visual analogy of the hand covered in ants, in combination with other bizarre instances in An Andalusian Dog, such as when the underarm hair of a young woman transforms into a sea urchin, point to the Freudian process of displacement pivotal to dreamwork. Ants, therefore, come to symbolise not one, but many themes in Dalí’s oeuvre, and so too form part of a large collocation of images and objects found in the non-human world.

Kitsky, Mader, and Smith narrate an early childhood incident they claim as the origin of Dalí’s association of ants with decay and death. Reputedly, when Dalí was five, his older cousin shot and wounded a bat which was then presented to Dalí as a gift. Dalí was transfixed with the wounded bat, even kissing it. Returning to it the next day, Dalí discovered the animal had died and was ‘bristling with frenzied ants’. Distressed, Dalí noticed a young woman peering at him through his garden gate; instead of kissing the dead bat either to intimidate or express his despair in her presence, he ended biting its body teeming with ants. ‘Shuddering with repugnance,’ he discarded the bat in the washhouse. Dalí, The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí, cited in Kritsky, Mader, and Smith, ‘Surreal Entomology’: 31.

Wojnarowicz often drew an equation between the relative invisibility of ants to the human eye and the deliberate concealment of homosexuality in the public domain. For instance, *Untitled [Desire]* (Figure 9) deliberately truncates the naked body of a man in order to focus the viewer’s attention on his torso and genitals, inverting the typically heterosexual and scopophilic gaze to one that is homoerotic. Yet Wojnarowicz has superimposed two disproportionately large ants on the subject’s body and one that is dangerously close to his genital region, as if commenting upon differences between the hymenoptera and human species with respect to sexuality and sexual reproduction. Whereas haploid males in the hymenoptera are produced through meiotic parthenogenesis, and females of certain ant species are able to reproduce asexually, non-reproductive sex and homosexuality are still regarded as marginal and ‘abnormal’ practices in human societies and ultimately threatening to the stability of the system rather than fundamental to its survival.

*Figure 9: Untitled [Desire], 1987
Gelatin-silver print, 27 ½ x 34 inches*
Furthermore, Dalí’s use of ants as a signifier of decay and death has been influential to Wojnarowicz’s work, *Untitled* [Man with Ants] (1987) (Figure 10). Indeed, *Untitled* [Man with Ants] depicts the heedless traffic of ants irrespective of what or whom they encounter, whilst the depiction of Hujar lying on the ground, his eyes open and mouth gaping, evoke a sense of death or paralysis. This gelatin silver print could be considered a mirror image to that of the crucifix shot in profile as the ants continue to swarm over it, yet also suggests the mass of ants that furiously exit the body of the young man in *An Andalusian Dog* via an open wound on his right hand. Like *Untitled* [Desire], Wojnarowicz’s fascination with pictorial scale is evident here, as in the opposition between the Lilliputian ants as they besiege a perspectively gargantuan human being vis-à-vis Gulliver.

Figure 10: *Untitled* [Man with Ants], 1987
Gelatin-silver print, 5 ½ x 7 ½ inches
Many Fires, Many Bellies: Filmographic Analyses of the Four Extant Versions of Wojnarowicz’s Film

Hide/Seek Version of A Fire in My Belly

When viewing the 4-minute version of A Fire in My Belly produced for Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture, it is plainly evident that the crucifix sequence forms not only a minor part of the film but is inconsistent with a reading that claims it to be a brazen declaration of Wojnarowicz’s anti-Christian values. James Malinaro, the former President of the Staten Island borough, argued vociferously against the decision made by The Brooklyn Museum to display the film following its ban from the Smithsonian: ‘This is not art, this is Christian-bashing’. Putting aside that neither of these categories is mutually exclusive, Malinaro’s outcry exemplifies how the ant sequence has overshadowed the aesthetic merits and conceptual depth of A Fire in My Belly. This, however, is a criticism that applies equally both to Wojnarowicz’s detractors and sympathisers, since many of the latter also hastened to tie down the meaning of the film in order to reinforce its legitimacy as ‘serious art’. Frank Rich is but one of Wojnarowicz’s sympathisers who, in an op-ed piece for New York Times, stated that A Fire in My Belly expressed Wojnarowicz’s extreme fury and grief over Peter Hujar’s death and the all-consuming sense of hopelessness that emerged in the context of the AIDS crisis: ‘Christ figures in Wojnarowicz’s response

to the plague – albeit in a cryptic, 11-second cameo. A crucifix is besieged by ants that evoke frantic souls scurrying in panic as a seemingly impassive God looked on.56

In the following pages, I provide an overview of how certain editing decisions made by Katz and Everly, the curators of *Hide/Seek*, had the effect of imposing an overarching meaning onto the film. Specifically, Katz and Everly’s decision to include a soundtrack to the film of recordings Wojnarowicz made at ACT UP demonstrations in June 1989 reinforces the unproven view that the artist’s ‘intention was to depict the suffering of an AIDS victim.’57 I locate an alternative interpretation of the crucifix sequence that conveys Wojnarowicz’s difficult relationship to Christianity, where he saw in Christ a redemptive figure whose sympathy extended to his society’s most troubled members. I extrapolate from this that a distinction must be made between Wojnarowicz’s critique of iconoclasm and the manipulation of Christian doctrine to serve political agendas and Christianity *per se*. As Katz has said, what becomes lost in the noise produced by the controversy of *A Fire in My Belly* is how ‘thoroughly informed he [Wojnarowicz] is by a Catholic iconographic tradition and how he is reinvigorating it to describe new social realities’.58 Not only this, Wojnarowicz was, like other American avant-garde artists working within the East Village in the 1980s, fascinated by the ‘pictographic idiom of saints and crucifixes drawn from the quotidian and idolatry practices of the Caribbean, Latin America, and

57 Martin Sullivan, ‘Statement on “Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture”,’ *National Portrait Gallery*, 30 November 2010, accessed 4 January 2013, [http://www.npg.si.edu/docs/hide-seek-statement.pdf](http://www.npg.si.edu/docs/hide-seek-statement.pdf). This claim has since been overridden by a public document submitted by Marvin Taylor, Director of Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University. Entitled ‘Additional Clarifications,’ the document now appears on the official website of *Hide/Seek*, and under point 4 reads, ‘A Fire in My Belly was not created as an homage to Peter Hujar. In fact, it is questionable if it was created as a response to AIDS. It predates Wojnarowicz’s finding out that he was HIV positive and the change in his work that reflects his status [as such].’ *Versions of A Fire in My Belly*, HIDESEEK.org, accessed 27 March 2014, [http://www.hideseek.org/versions/](http://www.hideseek.org/versions/).
Consequently, considering Wojnarowicz’s earlier unfinished film, *Heroin*, along with other instances in his oeuvre where Christian symbols of penitence and suffering appear, will lend clarification to Wojnarowicz’s orientation towards Christianity and its followers.

According to the official website for *Hide/Seek*, the 4-minute version of *A Fire in My Belly* was intended as a distillation of the salient themes and elements of the longer 7-minute ‘Prostitution’ section, and as Katz has stated in an interview with Tyler Green for *Artinfo.com*, he along with David C. Ward and Everly ‘edited in terms of length, [rather than]… to remove content [purposefully]. We felt the imperative to represent David Wojnarowicz’s work as he designed it.’ However, what is notable in a comparison of ‘Prostitution’ and the *Hide/Seek* version is the near omission of two key sequences – one involving an image of Christ’s head engulfed in a pyrotechnical display, and a naked hustler masturbating in a club. The omission of these scenes is telling: arguably, Katz and Everly were already prescient of the potential for sequences in *A Fire in My Belly* to incite criticism from mainstream audiences, thereby engaging in a preemptive form of censorship through the editorial decisions they made. However, given that the rationale for *Hide/Seek* was to correct an imbalance of representations between heterosexual and homosexual desire in national exhibitions, it is indeed disappointing that Katz and Everly would cut this scene so drastically as to bear almost no relation to masturbation at all. Such editing proves a lack of nuance in Katz and Everly’s understanding of Wojnarowicz’s politics. What is of fundamental importance to Wojnarowicz’s politics is the need to recalibrate audience expectations relating to the division of the private and public

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59 Schoonover, ‘David Wojnarowicz’s Graven Image.’
60 ‘Editors attempted to include every scene in the 7 minute version.’ ‘Versions of *A Fire in My Belly.*’
61 ‘Q & A with “Hide/Seek” Curators Jonathan Katz and David C. Ward.’
when thinking about sexuality and desire. It is precisely the disclosure of what the normative heterosexual public would spurn or even condemn as ‘obscene,’ ‘inappropriate,’ or ‘abhorrent’ that Wojnarowicz saw as crucial to the project of social reform. Wojnarowicz, as Rizk so elegantly writes, ‘challenged the notion that bodies are fundamentally obscene, whether naked, sick, martyred, (homo)sexualized, or otherwise. … He advocated… for expanding rather than constraining imagination’; and he did this through going beyond representing what subject positions and ways of being chimed with the political interests of his context.

With the inclusion of a soundtrack on their *Hide/Seek* version of *A Fire in My Belly*, Katz and Everly have altered dramatically the meaning of the earlier text. The once ambiguous and expressionistic images of the ‘Prostitution’ excerpt have now been subsumed under a master signification. The master signification that is communicated through Katz and Everly’s version of the film is that *A Fire in My Belly* testifies to Wojnarowicz’s battle against the political and religious administrations of his time which discriminated against PWAs. The suturing of two halves of a bread loaf, a prominent motif of the film, is a fitting analogy for what Katz and Everly have undertaken in their 4-minute version: the curators have embarked on a crude tying-together of the often contradictory, incongruous, and idiosyncratic imagery of ‘Prostitution’ and in so doing have affixed a totalising interpretation onto this work. For instance, the images of Wojnarowicz’s lips being sewn together with red string recalls the ACT UP slogan, ‘Silence = Death,’ whilst the blood which drips down from his face as a result of these wounds is a palpable reminder of the discursive violence that inheres in the denial of one’s voice and subjectivity. Rizk corroborates this interpretation that sewn lips for Wojnarowicz emblematised the

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political struggle of PWAs to articulate their desires and militate against the Reagan
government’s inequitable policies; Wojnarowicz came to be associated with this
visually striking image in mass media representations of his tousle with Wildmon and
the AFA, going so far as to appear on the cover of *High Performance* with his lips
sewn together alongside the headline, ‘Why is Reverend Donald Wildmon Trying to
Censor This Man?’

Moreover, when we consider other images in the film that evoke Christian
symbols of sacrifice, charity, penitence, and suffering, the identification of *A Fire in
My Belly* as anti-Christian ‘hate speech’ is further cast into doubt. If the ant-sequence
could be interpreted as a debasement of Christ, it could equally be regarded as a
reminder of Christ’s body on the crucifix as ultimately a *human* body subjected to
agony and humiliation. S. Plate’s interpretation of the sequence is an entirely
plausible one:

Now, in the time of Advent, a time of reflection on the in-fleshment
of the divine in a human baby, there is little more important than a
deep understanding of the humanity of Jesus. And to be human
means to take on this mortal body, to suffer, and to die. To become
food for the ants.  

Plate’s interpretation of Christ’s body as an entirely human body taking on the
suffering of others is one I believe Wojnarowicz would embrace, given a former
dispute concerning another of this artist’s works. Peter F. Spooner gives a thorough
report in his ‘David Wojnarowicz: A Portrait of the Artist as X-Ray Technician,’ of
the events leading up to Wojnarowicz’s lawsuit against Donald Wildmon and the
American Family Association in 1990. Having heard about but not seen
Wojnarowicz’s *Tongues of Flame*, the Republican congressman, Dana Rohrabacher,

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63 Rizk, ‘Regulating Desire and Imagination’: 6.
64 Plate, ‘Wojnarowicz’s Ant-Covered Jesus: Blasphemy or Religious Art?’
distributed a pamphlet to colleagues on 20 February 1990, describing his art as ‘sickeningly violent, sexually explicit, homoerotic, antireligious and nihilistic’. Of particular grievance for Rohrabacher was the black-and-white collage, *Untitled [Genet]* (1979) (Figure 11), which included an illustration of Jesus shooting heroin.

Following Rohrabacher’s denunciation of the work, on 28 March 1990, the AFA published a full-page advertisement in *USA Today* criticising the NEA for its support of ‘pornographic, anti-Christian “works of art.”’ Wildmon then proceeded to distribute in April of the same year a pamphlet to members of Congress that included fourteen heavily cropped images of Wojnarowicz’s artworks, including *Untitled [Genet]* and *Sex Series [Bridge]*. Wildmon failed to acknowledge that the images

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67 Spooner, ‘David Wojnarowicz: A Portrait of the Artist as X-Ray Technician,’ 335, 344.
were in fact details of larger artworks ‘rang[ing] from only 2.05 percent to 16.63 percent of the total area of the actual works.’

Fundamentally, this earlier dispute demonstrates how Wojnarowicz’s antagonists in the AFA misrepresented the impetus underlying his depictions of non-normative sexualities and the use of religious figures. As Wojnarowicz emphasised in the affidavit for his case against Wildmon and the AFA, his images of sexuality are ‘not meant to titillate the viewer… but are part of a broad comment on many aspects of human existence.’ Indeed, Wojnarowicz anticipated the positive consequences effected by speaking out against the suppression of what is regarded as subversive or dangerous to the stability of the body politic, for to ‘describ[e] the once indescribable can dismantle the power of taboo… if repeated often enough in clear and loud tones’ (CK, 150). Furthermore, Wojnarowicz rightly mentioned that his artworks as visual bricolage must be viewed in their totality to comprehend how their meanings are generated through the juxtaposition, association, and interplay of their elements.

Let us turn to the section of Untitled [Genet] that so thoroughly offended Wildmon’s sensibilities: the inset of Jesus personified as a heroin addict, with a tourniquet wrapped around his right bicep and a needle protruding from the inside of his elbow. The myopic concentration on this unconventional yet strangely apposite illustration of Christ as tormented sufferer ignores the salient element of the work, that being the representation of Jean Genet in the front and centre of the image. Genet is presented to the viewer as if beatified, since his head is swathed in a nimbus one knowingly finds in Renaissance religious iconography. Wojnarowicz found in Genet a prototype of the social outcast, which served as creative stimulus for an artist whose

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68 Dubin, Arresting Images, 218.
69 Wildmon-Wojnarowicz’s Affidavit, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 7, Subjects, Subseries B, Box 15, Folder 102.
own experiences seemed to reflect the perilous and prurient scenarios of the poet’s protagonists. According to his ‘Biographical Dateline’ for 1974, Wojnarowicz also realised after watching Genet’s *Un chant d’amour* that ‘one could transcend society’s hatred of diversity and loathing of homosexuals’. Rizk groups together Genet with other dissident authors that perennially fascinated and influenced the young Wojnarowicz, for entertaining alternative sexualities and ontologies to the ‘preinvented existence’ of the ONE-TRIBE NATION: ‘His [Wojnarowicz’s] works often served as devotional objects in tribute to such inspirational mentors as Arthur Rimbaud, Jean Genet, and William Burroughs’. Wojnarowicz also provided his explanation of the image’s meaning and use of religious iconography during his lawsuit against Wildmon and the AFA:

… I thought about my upbringing, I thought about what I had been taught about Jesus Christ when I was young, and how he took on the suffering of all people in the world, and I wanted to create a modern image that, if he were alive physically before me in the streets of the Lower East Side, I wanted to make a symbol that would show that he would take on the suffering of the vast amounts of addiction that I saw on the streets…

Moreover, the genesis of *Untitled* [Genet] lay in an apocryphal tale where Wojnarowicz, whilst travelling in France, saw a mound of hypodermic needles discarded outside the window of a rural country home; the needles were in fact used to treat the diabetes of his friend’s grandfather. Wojnarowicz would return to New York City shortly after only to find a score of his friends languishing as a result of their heroin addiction. For Wojnarowicz, heroin addiction was pervasive within his artistic community and particularly for those who were associated with the Cinema of Transgression and the

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70 Wojnarowicz, ‘Biographical Dateline,’ 117.
71 Rizk, ‘Regulating Desire and Imagination’: 5.
73 Rizk, ‘Regulating Desire and Imagination’: 15.
downtown Manhattan nightclub scene of the late 1970s/early 1980s, when Wojnarowicz worked as a busboy and performed as part of the post-punk band 3 Teens Kill 4 at such locations as Danceteria and Peppermint Lounge. Wojnarowicz was himself a heroin user for a short period of time, until an especially terse moment with Hujar, as reported within Close to the Knives, gave him the necessary impetus to kick his habit. In an audio recording he made on 27-28 April 1982, Wojnarowicz discussed his frustration towards his life and his (former) craving for ‘junk’. ‘I’m starting to feel nauseous again, like I want to sit up and throw up. I’m really tired of throwing up. I’m tired of what my life is sometimes. Things seem to get out of control, and it’s like I’ve resigned myself to not having any control over my life…. I want to change that somehow.’ Junk Journal, April 27-28, NYC (Parts 1 and 2), Track 1, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0538. On the second side of the recording, he says, ‘I didn’t really enjoy doing this, taking the junk. It’s only cos of Brian and Jesse were and I had it and I knew I’d do it some day at some point so I just did it this morning on impulse…. I did the whole thing thinking that I was extremely weak, or mild drunk and, because friends at work had bought it, and they had given me my portion they had done there’s and said that it was really nothing, and when I did it it turned out to be extremely strong. So I don’t think this tape really achieved anything in terms of speech or ideas or logic or thought. I’ll have to listen to it maybe weeks or months from now. But all in all it charted something of what I feel, both of my life at this time and under the influence of drugs.’ Junk Journal, April 27-8, NYC (Parts 1 and 2), Track 2, Wojnarowicz Papers.

Heroin was a thematic mainstay in the Cinema of Transgression. In Submit to Me, a man is seen shooting up in a derelict building, with the camera whirling in 360-degree motions as the narcotic kicks in. You Killed Me First, Submit to Me, Death Valley ’69, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, 092.0072.

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75 Interview: Mary Hayslip re: Montanna’s Death 4/8/90/ Phil: Health Stuff/Richard Last Tape (Parts 1 and 2), David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0516 and 092.0518.

76 Brent Phillips, personal conversation with media archivist, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University, 3 October 2013.
directions they were moving in.’ The colour and silent reels of footage are the visual parallel to Wojnarowicz’s intention to show ‘the vast amounts of addiction that I saw on the streets’.

Although not the same image as *Untitled* [Genet], the crucifix sequence of *A Fire in My Belly* could be interpreted as suggesting Wojnarowicz’s criticism of the Catholic Church in its distortion of the religion’s edicts, rather than an attack on Christianity as a whole. Moreover, with the dropping of coins into dishes of blood, two significant aspects of the Christian offertory are combined: the Eucharist and the giving of alms. With the dropping of money in the wine as Christ’s blood, however, Wojnarowicz provokes us to consider the potential distortion of the religion through commercial incentive and autocratic greed. In displaying no overriding narrative logic, it is perhaps more useful to group particular sequences according to the commonality of their images. I provide below a filmographic breakdown of all scenes included in the *Hide/Seek* version:

1) Spinning gears
2) Two beggars, both of them double below the knee amputees, walking on the streets of Mexico
3) A person walking in front of a red velvet curtain (possibly a nightclub), shown from the knees down
4) One of the two beggars of (2) crosses the street
5) An elderly female beggar sits on the street
6) Repetition of (1)
7) Policemen are talking on the side of the road
8) An image of two halves of a bread loaf which are being sewn together with red string
9) An image of a mouth (Rauffenbart’s) being sutured together with red string
10) Continuation of (8)

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78 Heroin – Unedited Color Footage, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and film, 092.0378.
79 Wojnarowicz did in fact show his own lips as being sewn together with red string during his post-diagnostic period. This image, as featured in the article, “Why Is Reverend Donald Wildmon Trying to Censor This Man?,” works seamlessly with his AIDS politics, by offering a suitably disturbing image in which religiously conservative right wing groups silence symbolically and physically the voices of PWAs. See Rizk, ‘Regulating Desire and Imagination’: 6.
11) An extreme close-up shot of ants crawling over money
12) A beggar on the street argues with someone off-camera
13) A leopard restlessly paces within a cage
14) A rapid zoom out of the mouth of a mummy from Guanajuato
15) The pacing leopard of (13)
16) The arguing beggar of (12)
17) Día de Muertos dolls – a pan from left to right
18) Continuation of (9)
19) Policemen on the street are in conversation with civilians. A possible continuation of (6)
20) Footage from a moving vehicle (possibly a car) shows Mexican streets and suburbs
21) A below angle shot of a hand dropping coins from above and over a red screen
22) A fire blower on the street (22)
23) An above-angle shot of a bandaged hand receiving coins, placed on top of a sports betting section of a newspaper. A complementary image to (21)
24) A snake devouring what appears to be a lizard
26) Repeated footage of (24)
27) A strobed scene focusing on a statue depicting the Aztec Earth goddess, Coatlicue
28) A close-up shot of an image of Jesus’ head with its crown of thorns; this is Wojnarowicz’s appropriation of a lenticular-holographic portrait of Jesus
29) Return to the Lotería card of (25)
30) Continuation of (28), where Jesus’ eyes close
31) Coins drop into a dish of blood or wine
32) Return to (28)/(30)
33) A crucifix on the ground splattered with blood is shown; coins are scattered around the crucifix and ants crawl over it
34) Continuation of (10)
35) Return to (33), with a focus now on the crawling of the ants over the crucifix
36) Return to (31)
37) An image of an animated woman engulfed in flames
38) Footage of a fire blower (22)
39) Reiteration of (37)
40) A statuette of a female saint crying, with blood dripping from her eyes
41) Continuation of (34)
42) Continuation of (18)
43) Continuation of (41)
44) Return to the blinking eyes of Jesus (28)/(30)/(32)
45) Rapid zoom out of the mouth of a cartoon image of Frankenstein’s monster
46) Return to (44)/(28)/(30)/(32)
47) Return to the suturing of the bread, continuing on from (43)
48) Long shot of a crowd
49) Continuation of the sewing together of Wojnarowicz’s lips (42)
50) Dancing puppet against a wall wearing a sombrero

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80 Mysoon Rizk, personal communication, 25 May 2014.
51) Continuation of (49)
52) Repetition of the crucifix image (33)
53) Continuation of (31); a bandaged hand drops into the frame
54) A below angle shot of a hand dropping coins from above. A complementary image of (21)
55) A strobed sequence of Wojnarowicz undressing, touching his torso, and fingers lingering over the fly of his jeans
56) An image of an abattoir, with men transferring large carcasses hanging from a wire rack
57) Follow-up of (55), where Wojnarowicz starts to undo his jeans
58) Return to the image of a fire blower on the street (22)/(38)
59) Continuing from (57); we see Wojnarowicz’s naked body in profile and a very faint outline of his genitals
60) A similar image to (54), (21) and (23); a bloody and bandaged hand viewed in profile receiving coins dropped from off-screen and above
61) A man climbing out of an empty pool in the nighttime
62) A zoom into a black-and-white Día de Muertos mural
63) Black-and-white footage of flowers floating on water
64) A zoom into the face of a Guanajuato mummy (inversion of 14), then a pan leftwards to another mummy
65) Strobed lighting of hands receiving water
66) Another Guanajuato mummy, with a zoom into its face; this is similar to (64) and a reversal of (14)
67) Footage of mourners cleaning a grave
68) Día de Muertos memorabilia placed on the ground alongside flowers; ants crawl over and around them
69) A fire blower; repetition of (22)/(38)/(58)
70) Continuation of the lips sequence; they are finally sutured together, and blood drips from the wounds
71) Continuation of (50); dancing puppet lays motionless, with green paint splattered on it and the wall behind it
72) Strobe lighting used as camera focuses on a clown mask
73) Repetition of (22)/(38)/(58)/(69)
74) Repetition of (27)
75) An extreme close-up shot of a cockroach lying on its back
76) Repetition of (22)/(38)/(58)/(69)/(73)
77) The dancing puppet of (71) is now on fire and appears to be ‘dancing’. It then collapses onto the ground
78) Rotation of (46) by 90 degrees. This image of Jesus now has him lying on his side. His eyes continue to open and close
79) Work engaged in the repairs of a church following the earthquake in Mexico of 1985
80) Continuation of (56), animal carcasses being transferred to a truck
81) A close-up shot of the face of the dancing puppet on fire; a continuation of (77)
82) Rapid cutting between the different faces of the Guanajuato mummies
83) A blue screen with a disembodied eyeball spinning and on fire
84) Complementary image to (84); there is a spinning globe on fire and then a fade out.
Consideration of Sequence 28-35

This sequence begins with an extreme close-up shot of Jesus’ face adorned with a crown of thorns. In a lenticular-holographic image, Wojnarowicz has managed to present Jesus as if his eyes are opening and closing of their own accord, lending him a demeanor of having just awoken. We then have an image of what appears to be a heart-sacrifice ritual of the Aztecs, as recorded by the Spanish-Mexican monk, Diego Durán. Following this, the film cuts to Jesus’ eyes, coins dropping into a dish of blood or wine and then we return to Jesus’ face. The sequence that sparked the censorship of the film now appears: ants crawl over a bloody crucifix with coins scattered around this object. Finally, Wojnarowicz sews together two halves of a single bread loaf. A potential interpretation of this sequence involves a comment on the human body under physical strain through the penetration of its corporeal limits. The invocation of Christian symbolism by Wojnarowicz could be considered as a reflection of postmodern art’s tendency to use religious artefacts in order to appropriate their atavistic power and authority, or offering redemption to those who are regarded as social pariahs. For Jerry D. Meyer, postmodern artists incorporate religious iconography for the following reasons:

the issue of regenerating divinity and broadening or redefining the humanity of Christ, with particular attention to the claim by some that a phallogocentric religion has marginalized women or that the orthodox church is too often exclusionist; the application of religious imagination to a prophetic tradition, a call by the culturally or socially marginalized to the politically empowered for a moral reexamination of cultural constructs; and within that prophetic tradition, a call to sacralize anew bodily fluids, identified with aspects of suffering and martyrdom for redemptive cause.81

Meyer suggests that the blood on the crucifix could be seen as purified by its connection with Christ, rather than Christ being debased by his association with human bodily fluids. Whilst crucifixes are an important and iconic symbol of Christianity, and one which Wojnarowicz also used in his gelatin silver print, *Spirituality (For Paul Thek)* (Figure 12), he nonetheless was concerned with a more general discussion of spirituality and its involvement in the formation of civilisations rather than engaging in a sustained and specific attack on Christianity per se.

![Image of gelatin-silver prints on museum board, 41 x 32 1/2 inches](image)

**Figure 12: Spirituality (for Paul Thek), 1988-89**
Gelatin-silver prints on museum board, 41 x 32 1/2 inches

This is readily noted in the cutting script for *A Fire in My Belly*, where Wojnarowicz grouped the crucifix with other spiritual icons such as the Mesoamerican Earth

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82 *A Fire in My Belly*, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 3, Manuscripts, Subseries A, Box 4, Folder 24.
goddess, Coatlicue, and her animal counterpart, the snake, and objects fundamental to Catholic worship and penitence including the collection of alms (‘coins in blood’), the Eucharist (‘sewn bread’), and hagiographic artefacts (‘saint with eyes on plate’). Interestingly, Wojnarowicz introduces a cross-cultural and religious study through the pairing of Christ and Coatlicue. Whereas sacrifice in the Christian religion is inextricably connected with the crucifixion of God’s only son and thus comes to symbolise atonement and salvation, the worshipping of Coatlicue requires the sacrifice of an ‘impersonator’ during the annual autumnal festival of Quecholli, in order to increase the chance of a successful hunt.\(^{83}\) Moreover, whereas the sacrifice Christ made for humankind is ritualised in the consumption of his blood by his worshippers during the Eucharist, Coatlicue’s power and terrifying nature are reinforced through the physical threat that she embodies to her people. The basal statue depicting Coatlicue in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City (the one which Wojnarowicz films in \textit{A Fire in My Belly}) shows her neck adorned with human hands and hearts. Further adding to the inapt interpretation of \textit{A Fire in My Belly} being specifically designed to incite hatred towards Christianity is the fact that Wojnarowicz’s title for section 5 in the cutting script, that is, the section featuring the crucifix, was merely descriptive, indicating the main images featured therein: ‘ANCIENT CULTURE RELIGION’\(^{84}\). Therefore, even at his most agitated, Wojnarowicz’s works can be seen to rally against the leaders of the Christian religion rather than the religion itself, for their considerable role in disseminating misinformation about the etiology of HIV/AIDS and vitriol against groups such as homosexuals who were disproportionally affected by the illness. Moreover, given

\(^{83}\) \textit{Ancient History Encyclopedia}, ‘Coatlicue,’ by Mark Cartwright, published on 28 November 2013, \url{http://www.ancient.eu.com/Coatlicue/}.

\(^{84}\) ‘A Fire in My Belly’, Wojnarowicz Papers.
the preponderance of iconography associated with Mexico and Mexican history, Wojnarowicz may also have been criticising the ‘LEADERS of the Christian religion’ responsible for the European conquest of the New World.

The gaping mouths of the Guanajuato mummies featured in *A Fire in My Belly* are also evocative of other artworks in which faces, either appearing petrified or undergoing ossification, are featured. One such example includes *Spirituality (for Paul Thek)* (1988-89) (Figure 2), which conveniently includes a still from the crucifix of *A Fire in My Belly*. Through the proximity of this image to other insets, Wojnarowicz invites the viewer to determine their meanings through interplay and contrast. The Guanajuato mummies are given a graphic match in the inset of the fourth square, where a young boy appears aghast. The first square, showing American currency as well as the larger rectangle of the crucifix with an art crawling over Jesus’ face, are highly suggestive of the ant sequence in the film.

This brief analysis demonstrates that the ‘meaning’ of *A Fire in My Belly* cannot be determined by studying any of its units in isolation. Each of Wojnarowicz’s recurring images must be considered as part of a larger chain of signification. *A Fire in My Belly* requests the viewer to adopt a strategy of collocation, when images such as the spinning eyeball and globe, dancing puppet, and crucifix, only come to mean something when they are joined together to form a larger filmographic sequence. Furthermore, the citation of deracinated body parts and Christian iconography makes it necessary for the viewer to consider Wojnarowicz’s other texts, and how their frames of reference may come to bear on one’s reading of *A Fire in My Belly*. 
Out of all the versions of *A Fire in My Belly*, the 13-minute ‘Work in Progress’ is the most structurally contained yet the most semantically opaque.\textsuperscript{85} With its extended scenes of quotidian Mexican life as viewed from moving vehicles, an aerial perspective, or on the ground, the ‘Work in Progress’ could be defined as a travelogue or social ethnography. In part, Wojnarowicz’s intention may have been to document the endemic poverty of Mexico along with its supposed retention of connections to the natural landscape and spirituality. As per an audio recording he made entitled ‘Cross Country – Great Dreams,’ he saw the fate of New York City as the current state of Mexico’s capital circa 1989: ‘I remember going to Mexico City and walking around and you know riding around the outskirts at some point around the slums and just realising that, that was the future of New York’. From the cutting script Wojnarowicz made of *A Fire in My Belly*, the viewer learns that the film was to comprise a total of eight sections that would each capture a different aspect of Mexican life. For instance, section 4 Wojnarowicz titled ‘HUNGER ECONOMICS OF SILENCE: CONTROL’; within this section, Wojnarowicz planned to include images relating to the suppression of speech such as the suturing of two halves of a loaf of bread vis-à-vis a mouth, and footage of animals in varying states of deprivation. There are certainly differences between the cutting script and *A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress*, for Wojnarowicz appears to have amalgamated sections 1 and 2 and incorporated live footage of a bullfight into section 4. Nonetheless, the cutting script does give us important clues as to the subjects and

\textsuperscript{85} *A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress*, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, 092.0179.
themes that Wojnarowicz would use to organise his raw material. From the cutting script, we also learn that the section, ‘Prostitution’, is in fact the ‘excerpt’ that has ultimately been mistaken for *A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress*, in having been given to/taken by the producer, Michael Lupetin, for von Praunheim’s film, *Silence = Death*.

The title page of the 13-minute version is an animated image of a young boy flanked by mountains and unsheathing a sword. Such signifiers suggest that the boy is embarking upon a voyage of discovery, his smiling face capturing the frontier spirit. Following this, there is a rapid zoom into a map of Mexico, giving a clear signal to the viewer the geographical focus of the film and the scrutiny that Wojnarowicz will apply to his study of the nation, a common visual that introduces a travelogue. In adopting a cinematic mode of documentation, ‘Work in Progress’ partakes in the exoticisation of developing countries by the cultural West through representing anachronistic activities such as cockfighting and bullfighting, which are juxtaposed with quotidian scenes of Mexican life that are rendered strange to the viewer in warranting such interest. As such, the version privileges an affect of disorientation and foreignness, as if composed for a tourist encountering Mexico for the first time.

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86 Certain images that are listed in the cutting script would find their way into *Mexico Film Footage* Parts 1 and 2. Presumably, these silent, black-and-white films are the offcuts and/or fragments that did not make it into the ‘Work in Progress’. Such images which Wojnarowicz planned to include as per the cutting script include ‘giant fish in tank’, ‘man pulls baby from water’, ‘hands with water’, and ‘digging’. In *Mexico Film Footage* Part 1 the viewer identifies many images relating both to water and marine species, such as sequences involving swimming fish, jellyfish, waves breaking, and a hand in water grabbing coral. In *Mexico Film Footage* Part 2 we see the digging of graves, the use of strobe lighting as hands receive water, and a baby being lifted from a tub of water. See *Mexico Film Footage* and *Mexico Film Footage II*, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, 092.0191 and 092.0196. The titles of both items are curatorial descriptions.

87 According to a fact sheet distributed by the Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, on 21 January 2011, the additional section from *A Fire in My Belly*, ‘Prostitution,’ was used by Wojnarowicz and von Praunheim in von Praunheim’s film *Silence = Death*, 1989. We have a super8mm film roll that Wojnarowicz titled that reads “Peter, etc…. Mexico, etc.” and contains the name “Michael Lupetin” written in pencil and has Wojnarowicz’s phone number “228-7024 NYC” – all written in Wojnarowicz’s hand. Lupetin was the producer of *Silence = Death*. Based on the edge code, the film stock is dated 1986-7. “*‘A Fire in My Belly’*, fact sheet obtained through personal email with Brent Phillips, dated 21 January 2011, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University, 1.
This certainly does not make the film amenable to an interpretation centering on Wojnarowicz's political response to the AIDS crisis. In fact, the taxonomisation of Mexico’s inhabitants by Wojnarowicz, which includes unveiling their subjection to poverty, disability, and illness, is of a piece with the social stocktaking of the documentary and ethnographic genres.

‘Work in Progress’ is more structured than the 7-minute ‘Prostitution’ and *Hide/Seek* versions, having as recurring motifs a black-and-white drawing of a steam train and Lotería cards in order to separate the film into discrete parts. Each part focuses on a different theme, but overall, this version attempts to evoke through a frame of ‘otherness’ the retention of spirituality in Mexico, which Wojnarowicz saw as completely absent in contemporary American life. Blinderman opines how Wojnarowicz ‘often lamented the death of spirituality, other than the pre-packed variety in contemporary American culture’; his travels to Mexico and South America gave him an opportunity to marvel at ‘the sense of connection people have to the ground they walk on, a joy in the event of living, [even if this joy] might be at subsistence level with “cycles of life and death incredibly evident”.’ The first section, entitled ‘El Mundo’, defines Mexico for the viewer in broad strokes. The name which appears on the Lotería card gives us a clear indication by Wojnarowicz that the ‘world’ he wishes to focus on is not our own. Far from being commonplace in the urban locales of 1980s America, children are seen walking accompanied on the street with barn animals, whilst street vendors peddle unknown goods, panhandlers appear on the corners of every street, and adolescents engage in fire blowing to earn a living. Moreover, the viewer is immediately unsettled through the inclusion of street footage taken from the interior of a moving vehicle, intercut with newspaper clippings

88 Blinderman, ‘Panel Discussion: A Fire in My Belly.’
89 Wojnarowicz, quoted by Blinderman, ‘Panel Discussion: A Fire in My Belly.’
detailing grisly homicides and sexual assaults in the country. A spinning eye set against a blue screen, which Schoonover describes as recalling the ‘deliriously overwrought expressionism of 1980s music’, is also reminiscent of Wojnarowicz’s interest in various regimes of vision: the elephantine size of the eye is a metonym for the world and the absorptive capacity of one’s vision when adopting the position of a tourist. Yet the eye takes on a menacing valence when paired with the newspaper clippings detailing murders and other heinous crimes.

For the viewer, the second section of the 13-minute ‘Work in Progress’ seems to have recreation as its overarching theme, marked by the transition from ‘El Mundo’ to the Lotería card, ‘La Botella’. Yet, Wojnarowicz titled this section in the cutting script as ‘AGRESSION [sic]’. Following on from the travelogue style introduced in the first section, we are immediately led into a panning shot of Lucha Libre dolls, their miniature and cartoonish qualities serving as a visual complement to the footage of a Lucha Libre match. The theatrical elements of this sport, where matches are often staged rather than unfold organically, are immediately opposed to the vicious and spontaneous nature of cockfighting. Wojnarowicz provides us with behind-the-scenes footage of the rituals that precede each fight, such as where spurs are taped and tied to the legs of each cock. For a viewer in a country where cockfighting is illegal, witnessing the brutality of the sport is confronting, especially when paired with another bloodsport: bullfighting. The rituals of bullfighting interested Wojnarowicz immensely, and the footage of a bullfight in the ‘Work in Progress’ version may have served as the inspiration for a particularly poignant section in Close to the Knives, where the suffering of the bull is a figurative parallel to

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90 Schoonover, ‘David Wojnarowicz’s Graven Image.’
91 This section is actually listed in the cutting script as section 3. However, as noted earlier, sections 1 and 2 have been combined in the filmic counterpart to the script.
Wojnarowicz’s own sense of impending mortality. The remaining part of ‘La Botella’ alternates between these three fight sequences, as if asking the viewer to comment on their contiguities in physical movement and divergences in outcome. Through such alternations, the viewer is led to regard the Lucha Libre match as the least barbaric ‘sport’ of the three, what with its comically stylised and highly choreographed ‘routines’ that feign rather than conclude in serious injury.

‘El Borracho,’ the third section, moves on from sports to another form of entertainment: the travelling circus and vaudevillian performance. It begins with a long panning shot of posters advertising a travelling circus which includes such highlights as ‘King Kong’ and ‘Ji Man’, and then segues into footage taken in the interior of the circus tent. Trapeze artists, performing monkeys, a ringmaster, and a pacing leopard lend a Dionysian aesthetic to this section. Another notable section is ‘El Corazon’/‘El Cantarito’ (section 5), focusing on nature and pre-Columbian sites of worship. According to the cutting script, Wojnarowicz referred to this part as ‘ANCIENT CULTURE RELIGION’, listing as a central motif ‘ANTS ON CRUCIFIX.’ Mexican flora and fauna, alongside historical artefacts, are included. This is followed by ‘La Campana,’ (section 6) a short reflection on death and spirituality, as shown through its documentation of Día de los Muertos memorabilia, and a strobe lighting scene of hands receiving water poured from above the cinematic frame, as if sanctified by this liquid. Section 6, together with the equally expeditious sections that are 7 and 8, superficially correspond to the notes for Sections 6 and 8 of the cutting script. Indeed, the collection of Lotería cards as the introductory image to Section 8 is faintly reminiscent of the cue for the cards to ‘fall’ and ‘rise’, according

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92 This section is listed as section four in the cutting script, under the title ‘HUNGER ECONOMICS OF SILENCE: CONTROL.’ ‘A Fire in My Belly,’ Wojnarowicz Papers.

93 At this point, this section syncs up once again with the ordering of parts in the cutting script. All that was included under section 4, ‘La Bota,’ was a yellow and red leader lasting for around 5 seconds.
to the subheading ‘Wind’ in Section 6 of the script. Section 8 of the film, featuring a Mexican puppet dancing and then being shot by an unknown figure, and the map of Mexico burning from within the country’s borders, are cues taken from the more elaborate list under section 8 found in the script.

**A Fire in My Belly: ‘Prostitution’**

According to Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University, the additional section of *A Fire in My Belly* located on a different reel to the ‘Work in Progress’ became the accepted version of the film following its inclusion in Rosa Von Praunheim’s documentary *Silence = Death* (1990). This section, entitled ‘Prostitution,’ is found on a film roll named ‘Mexico, etc… Peter, etc…’ and is approximately seven minutes in duration. ‘Prostitution’, however, begins at the 3-minute mark of the roll; prior to this, we have black-and-white footage of Peter Hujar as he lies dying in the hospital, interspersed with serene images of a beluga whale swimming within a tank. I will comment on the significance of this section of ‘Mexico, etc… Peter, etc…’ in my fifth and sixth chapters.

It could be argued that ‘Prostitution’ is a condensation of all elements found in the longer, 13-minute piece, *A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress*. Indeed, included within this section is a continuation of an earlier motif used in *A Fire in My Belly* (Section 1, ‘El Mundo’) where a bandaged hand both drops and receives coins from an unknown source; in this section, however, the bandage wrapped around the

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94 ‘Prostitution’ refers to the 7-minute footage found on a separate reel to *A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress* (approximately 13-minutes). The contents of ‘Prostitution’ correspond to material found under this section of the same name in Wojnarowicz’s cutting script. ‘Prostitution’ begins approximately 3-minutes into a film reel titled ‘Mexico, etc… Peter, etc…’ Mexico, etc…, Peter, etc…., David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, 092.0201.
hand is bloodied and is dropped into a dish of blood. Moreover, Wojnarowicz retains footage taken from the streets of Mexico City demonstrating the extreme poverty of some of its inhabitants. Elements from Section 4 of the cutting script and which are included in the 13-minute ‘Work in Progress’ are replicated and extended upon in ‘Prostitution,’ such as footage of the adolescent fire blower, people begging for spare cash, and below-the-knee amputees walking along the footpath. Perhaps of even more significance is the fact that ‘Prostitution’ includes some of the more controversial images referred to in the cutting script but which did not appear in the 13-minute version of the film. For whilst ‘Prostitution’ does incorporate those features listed under section 7 of the cutting script, such as that of a ‘Hustler undressing’ and ‘QUICK SHOT MEAT [on] 14th STREET,’ Wojnarowicz has also taken many elements that did not make it into Sections 5 and 6, ‘ANCIENT CULTURE RELIGION’ and ‘TRAGEDY AND CELEBRATORY DEATH’ respectively. Specifically, the lenticular-holographic image of Jesus blinking, the sewn mouth, and ‘saint with eyes on plate’ in Section 5, and ‘mummies,’ ‘temple mayore psychedelics,’ and ‘ants on skull close ups’ of Section 6, end up being transferred to the ‘Prostitution’ section, in addition to the most notorious image of the text, that of the ants and bloodied crucifix.

Rosa von Praunheim’s A Fire in My Belly

Having multiple versions of A Fire in My Belly has had the unfortunate effect of generating confusion about which one can be said to approximate best Wojnarowicz’s

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95 Under ‘Section 5’ of the cutting script, there is a reference to ‘coins drop[ping] in blood’. However, the image never appears in A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress.

96 This version of A Fire in My Belly is available for viewing on YouTube. ‘Fire in My Belly by David Wojnarowicz, Diamanda Galas,’ YouTube video, 4:10, posted by ‘semiotexte,’ 12 December 2007, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0fC3sUoR7U.
compositional intentions. Such confusion is exacerbated by an absence of firm textual boundaries, given the fact that *A Fire in My Belly* exists in an unfinished status. Of equal concern, however, is the extent to which the museum curators, Katz and Everly, and the director, von Praunheim, are the primary authors of rather than collaborators on the 4-minute versions for *Hide/Seek* and *Silence = Death* respectively. Following the media confusion generated by the film’s censorship, Fales Library & Special Collections submitted to the public a document on 21 January 2011 stating ‘it is debatable whether the piece included in Von Praunheim’s film could be called *A Fire in My Belly*, yet the institution provided no reason for this conclusion.’ Indeed, this version differs markedly from that of *Hide/Seek* through drastically changing the order in which images occur. Whereas David C. Ward has said the curators ‘edited [*A Fire in My Belly*] for length and content,’ aiming therefore to capture the spirit of Wojnarowicz’s longer ‘Prostitution’ section even if needing to truncate its material to conform to standard museological practices, this cannot be said of the *Silence = Death* version in virtue of the attenuation and reorganisation of sequences and scenes.

I have already discussed how including a soundtrack to *A Fire in My Belly* – so politically driven as it is in being audio footage taken during ACT UP protests – has the effect of imposing a totalising meaning onto the text. This final section of my chapter argues that the version produced for *Silence = Death* is no different, as the use of the song, *This Is the Law of the Plague*, performed and conceived by the avant-garde singer Diamada Galás, intrudes upon the filmic space through its deliberately bombastic and fulminating vocals. Additionally, whilst the 4-minute *Hide/Seek* version retains the same order of sequences as the longer ‘Prostitution’ excerpt, the

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97 “*A Fire in My Belly*,’ fact sheet obtained through personal email with Brent Phillips.
*Silence = Death* version differs in this respect. By reordering the film’s visual material and purposefully lengthening and truncating sequences through repetition and delay, the *Silence = Death* version offers us a critique of the religious thesis asserting that HIV/AIDS is a just punishment for practicing sexual behaviours seen as ‘immoral’. Given the ‘lyrics’ of the song are verbatim quotations of the Old Testament, specifically chapter 15 of the Book of Leviticus, and Psalms 22 and 58-59, the film can thus be interpreted as scrutinising the condemnation of homosexuality in the Bible and how such rhetoric was used during the first decade of the AIDS crisis to discriminate against PWAs who are gay or engage(d) in sexual relations with other men.

I earlier made a note that Fales Library regards with suspicion an authorial connection between Wojnarowicz and the *Silence = Death* version of *A Fire in My Belly*. Marion Scemama begs to differ, claiming that ‘David edited this footage to fit with Diamanda Galás’s Plague Mass excerpt’. Regardless of the individual responsible for the editing of this iteration, the higher frequency of images relating to the Christian Eucharist makes obvious a conceptual link between conservative Christian ideology and the AIDS crisis. The images recurring constantly in this version include those connecting symbolically with the defilement and sanctification of blood. This is indeed an apposite use of blood, considering how this bodily fluid, along with semen, has been constructed in epidemiological discourses as the primary conduit for the transmission of HIV. Consequently, the coins that drop into a dish of blood, as well as an extreme close-up shot of Rauffenbart’s oral wounds dripping blood onto his chin, create tension between the deified status of the fluid in Catholicism, where the doctrine of transubstantiation conceives of the wine of the

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98 "*A Fire In My Belly*", fact sheet obtained through personal email with Brent Phillips.
Eucharist as the literal consumption of Christ’s blood, and the phobic discourses surrounding bodily fluids during the AIDS crisis as loci of contamination.

The nexus of religious conservatism and right-wing politics in 1980s America produced a dangerous mix in which church leaders perpetuated vitriol against gay PWAs through the mass media, further reinforcing their image as social deviants. Jerry Falwell’s remark, ‘AIDS is the wrath of God upon homosexuals,’ is but one example among many declaring the disease as a form of divine punishment.\footnote{Jerry Falwell, quoted in Timothy Murphy, ‘Is AIDS a Just Punishment?’, \textit{Journal of Medical Ethics} 14 (1988): 155.} As such, the film touches on the concept of sacred pollution and transfers it to the identification of PWAs as contemporary pariahs, as suggested by the thundering Levitican pronouncement ‘he that toucheth the flesh of the unclean/ Becomes unclean’. The \textit{Law of the Plague} in the context of this film is in fact the cultural ‘laws’ enforced on American citizens by the institutions of the Church and government and the ‘plague’ being the vitriolic dissemination of homophobic discourses rather than the HIV virus. Contemporary lawmakers are those who ‘teach when it is clean and when it is unclean’, thereby indicating their policing of sexual behaviours and their proscription of non-normative sexual activities. Images that support this theory include:

1) The first image in this version, which is in fact the notorious ant sequence. When contextualised by Galás’ \textit{This is the Law of the Plague}, Jesus is seen to have been ‘defiled’ through the thoughtless treatment of this relic in being placed on the ground

2) The extended version of Wojnarowicz masturbating is included in this version. It is counterposed to the condemnation of non-reproductive sex in the Levitican soundtrack

3) Other prohibitions in Leviticus that do not feature in the film’s soundtrack are nonetheless suggestive of other images in the film, which represent actions condemned in the Old Testament. Such
actions include the worshipping of idols, which could be connected with a focus in the film on Mesoamerican totems such as that of Coatlicue. Other facets of the Book of Leviticus, such as the Kosher laws, can also be connected with some of Wojnarowicz’s filmic images, such as the footage taken from an abattoir of carcasses hanging on hooks.

4) Wojnarowicz’s focus on water and hands could in fact be suggestive of purification and cleansing rituals in Leviticus.

In order to lend further evidence to the argument that this version of the film critiques Christian edicts against homosexuality, inferring through Galás’ thundering vocals that such prohibitions are no different from the propaganda issued by an autocrat, we need to undertake a filmographic breakdown of its scenes and sequences. I have separated my analysis below to show how this specific version has four distinct ‘movements’ or sections, demonstrated through changes in imagery as well as patterns in call and response:

0:00-1:11

1) A bloodied crucifix, seen from an above angle long shot from the lefthand side
2) The sequence where bread is being sewn begins
3) The sequence involving sewn mouth begins
4) Continuation of (2)
5) Continuation of (1); this time, an extreme close-up shot of the crucifix is followed by a zoom outwards
6) Coins drop into a dish of blood; the source of the coins is unknown
7) An animated image of a woman on fire; her hands are handcuffed to long chains
8) Footage of a fire blower
9) Continuation of (7), the camera tracks down the length of her body
10) A saint holding her eyes on a plate
11) Continuation of (4) and (2)
12) Continuation of (3)
13) Continuation of (11), (4), and (2)

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100 Lev. 26:1 reads ‘Ye shall make you no idols nor graven image, neither rear you up a standing image, neither shall ye set up any image of stone in your land, to bow down unto it: for I am the LORD your God.’
101 Individuals were hygienically and religiously ‘unclean’ following the slaughter, preparation and disposal of animal carcasses: ‘Whoever carries any such carcass shall wash his clothes and be unclean until evening.’ See Lev. 24-28 and 39-40.
14) A lenticular-holographic portrait of Christ blinking
15) A zoom-out of an animated face resembling a Lucha Libre mask
16) Continuation of (14)
17) Continuation of (13), (11), (4), and (2)
18) Continuation of (5) and (1)
19) A crowd of people gazing outward towards an unknown object or subject
20) Continuation of (12) and (3)
21) A dancing puppet
22) Continuation of (20), (12), and (3)
23) Continuation of (18), (5), and (1)
24) Continuation of (17), (13), (11), (4), and (2)
25) Concomitant image of (6); a bandaged hand drops down into the frame after coins have dropped into a dish of blood

Changes in the order in which scenes occur and the deliberate cutting up of larger sequences to produce repetitions of certain images are worthy of consideration when analysing this version. I identify that the composer’s comments on the parallels between the condemnation and suppression of homosexuality and Christ’s suffering are made apparent through images associated with the defilement and restoration of blood, as well as the logic of the suture. This film relies upon a call and response method, in which grouping different ‘answers’ to a singular ‘question’ produces interesting conceptual results. For example, the scene where Wojnarowicz sews two halves of a bread loaf together via a piece of red string occurs 6 times within the space of 66 seconds; when (2) and (3) are classified as a single unit of call and response, we are asked to ponder a negative correlation between hunger and political silence. Peter F. Spooner has made a similar remark about Wojnarowicz’s Bread Sculpture (1988-9), which, in being the material complement of the filmic sequence, ‘produces a masterfully witty equation between poverty and voice’. Indeed, prioritising basic sustenance over political and social empowerment leads to a situation where silence can be perceived as willing compliance toward societal ideologies rather than

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102 I say composer here because it is questionable how much Wojnarowicz participated in the editing of this version of A Fire in My Belly.
produced out of necessity. Contrastingly, grouping (3) and (4) together as the response to the call of (2) draws a correlation between the Levitican decree against homosexual relations (‘every bed that he lieth is unclean’), and the injunction against non-normative forms of kinship and collectivity during the AIDS crisis amongst gay men. Moreover, the process whereby lips are sewn together using red string, like the bread sequence, is attenuated by the inclusion of various images that delay its culmination. Eight brief images separate its introduction at (3) and continuation at (12), heightening the discomfort of the viewer at witnessing this crude surgical performance. The bread and mouth sequences, however, are always grouped together, and when followed by the lenticular-holographic image of Christ’s eyes opening and closing at (14) (sequence [11]-[14] inclusive) emphasis is placed upon the symbolic significance of Christ’s last supper. Shot (14) through this visual trick infers the resurrection of Christ from his tomb following his crucifixion, where (11) and (13) reiterate the sacrificial nature of the Christian offertory and through (12), this figure’s supreme suffering before his salvation by God. Shots of (16) and (17) are an inversion of (11)-(14), insofar as the lenticular-holographic portrait is now the ‘call’ to the ‘response’ of the sewn bread, whilst sequence (18)-(20) makes palpable the connection between the visual gaze and discursive violence. Indeed, shot (18) is a continuation of shots (5) and (1), that being the bloodied crucifix with ants scurrying over it. Shot (19) is footage of a crowd of people gazing at something or someone outside of the filmic frame, whilst (20) is a continuation of (12) and (3). Extending the call and response pattern of (18) and (20) by inserting (19) recalls the crowd present at the trial of Jesus, commenting therefore on visual spectatorship as a harm perpetrated against the oppressed in the refusal to intervene when witnessing extreme injustice.
26) A blank screen
27) A blue leader
28) The hustler sequence begins; Galás cries ‘and he that toucheth the flesh of the unclean becomes unclean’
29) Coins drop from a hand from above
30) Continuation of (28)
31) Meat hooks
32) Continuation of (30) and (28)
33) Continuation of (31)
34) Continuation of (32), (30), and (28)
35) The fire blower of (8) returns
36) Continuation of (34), (32), (30), and (28)
37) A bandage and bloodied hand receives coins dropping from above; an associated image of (6), (25), and (29)

The viewer identifies a change in theme and section due to the insertion of a blank screen and blue leader ([26] and [27]). Whereas in section I there was significant repetition of the mouth and bread sequences, this comparatively shorter section focuses on three main images: a hustler (Wojnarowicz) masturbating in a nightclub, butchers transporting animal carcasses, and currency either being received or given away. Looking at the above, it is clear that the hustler sequence has been constructed as the ‘call’, and the footage of butchers, coins, and the fire blower of section I as respective ‘responses’. Thus, the composer draws a thematic parallel between sexual politics, economic logic, and the consumption of flesh-as-meat. We visually devour the body of the hustler in the same way as we would readily consume meat, whilst the soiling of both the hand and coins via blood construes a transactional economy between the body and currency, and perhaps the potential sullying of any intercorporeal relationship where money changes hands. The reappearing fire blower ties together both sections as part of a larger filmic project, in much the same way as the red string suturing bread and lips.
A red leader signals the beginning of a new section, and like II, a series of new images produce a different set of themes and concerns. Whereas the earlier sections gave credence to Christianity as a primary narrative by which to comprehend questions of life, death, and retribution, section III considers the pre-Columbian myths and spiritual rituals of the Aztecs via its references to Día de los muertos and the Aztec Earth goddess, Coatlicue. Images of water recur in the section, both in terms of its abundance (running streams) and absence (an empty swimming pool), possibly construing a connection to corporeal vitality and expiration. In keeping with the call and response pattern, the images of water are juxtaposed with symbols of extreme privation (the Guanajuato mummies) and grief (a mourner washing a grave).

Representations of Aztec rituals may reflect Wojnarowicz’s captivation by what he perceived as the spiritual richness of Mexico in comparison to the bankruptcy of and pessimism towards spirituality in the United States. He remarked that ‘Spirituality has become a dirty word in this society because of the destructive nature
of organized religion and the controls exerted by its human structure.'

Hence, this section serves to reinforce how alternative spiritual practices are a means of rediscovering a ‘sense of connection to the ground people walked on’. For spirituality and nature formed part of Wojnarowicz’s armature against the ONE TRIBE NATION, particularly when this structure’s exemplary model in 1980s America was a government disinclined to separate politics from religious ideology. Hence, the representation of Coatlicue, the Aztec goddess of the Earth, draws a keen connection between spirituality and nature through the totemic animal associated with this deity: the serpent. Furthermore, her benevolent yet terrifying status as the goddess of birth and death is reinforced through the two serpents forming her face, having resulted from being killed and sacrificed at the beginning of creation, as well as having given birth to over four hundred children, including Quetzalcoatl and Coyolzauhqui, the latter staging a coup with her siblings to overthrow and kill their mother.

3:16-4:10

52) A blue leader
53) Conclusion of sequence (3), (12), (20), and (22)
54) Continuation of (21)
55) A strobe image of an animated clown face
56) Inversion of (51), (35), and (8)
57) Repetition of (42)
58) An extreme close-up shot of cockroach wriggling on its back
59) Continuation of (56); an inversion of (51), (35), and (8)
60) Continuation of (54) and (21)
61) An associated image of (16) and (14); a side shot of Christ’s eyes opening and closing
62) A man working on a power line
63) Christ’s face is part of a pyrotechnic display
64) A black screen

105 Wojnarowicz, quoted in Lippard, ‘Out of the Safety Zone.’
Continuation of (33) and (31)
Continuation of (60), (54), and (21)
Continuation of (47) and (45); there is rapid cutting between the faces of Guanajuato mummies
A spinning eyeball on fire is set against a blue backdrop
Footage of a spinning globe on fire; fade to black

Section IV offers an apt conclusion to this version of *A Fire in My Belly* by reprising images from Section I and pursuing them to their catastrophic apotheoses. By referring back to Section I, this version of *A Fire in My Belly* obtains a circular structure, and sequences such as that of the lenticular-holographic image of Christ and the dancing puppet are confirmed as part of larger linear progressions that all lead to combustion. The infernal connotations of the title of this film are realised therefore in the images of Christ’s face exploding and the formerly dancing puppet now collapsed on the ground and on fire. Not only this, the final two shots, that of a spinning eyeball and a globe both on fire, can perhaps be read as the apocalyptic consequences resulting from the enforced oppression of political dissension (53) and the brutal control of bodies so that they comply with the heteronormative standards of the ONE TRIBE NATION ([60], [54], and [21]).

Moreover, the dancing puppet of *A Fire in My Belly* finds its sinister counterpart in the Howdy Doody puppet of Tommy Turner’s *Where Evil Dwells*, a film which the Cinema of Transgression filmmaker composed in 1987 and which features Wojnarowicz as the puppet master who is brutally killed by his creation.

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106 Filmmakers of the Cinema of Transgression vary widely in their approach to the (in)dispensability of plot and narrative, as well as use of colour and music. Yet universal to the films are their aim to induce extreme discomfort and even horror in the viewer through violating the boundaries of social and sexual taboos. Although a fairly disorganised movement, Nick Zedd’s ‘manifesto’ encapsulates neatly the zeitgeist of the Cinema of Transgression: ‘Nothing is sacred. Everything must be questioned and reassessed in order to free our minds from the faith of tradition. Intellectual growth demands that risks must be taken and changes occur in political, sexual and aesthetic alignments no matter who disapproves. We propose to go beyond all limits set or prescribed by taste, morality or any other traditional value system shackling the minds of men.’ Nick Zedd, *The Cinema of Transgression Manifesto*, written pseudonymously under the name Orion Jeriko, having first appeared in *The Underground Film Bulletin*. Nick Zedd, ‘The Cinema of Transgression Manifesto,’ *Feast of Hate and Fear*, accessed 17 July 2013, [http://www.feastofhateandfear.com/archives/zedd.html](http://www.feastofhateandfear.com/archives/zedd.html).
Where Evil Dwells, as explained by the puppet, ‘explores the structure of evil in contemporary America’, having been loosely based around a headline grabbing murder in which the American teenager, Ricky Kasso, was convicted of murdering Gary Lauwers in Northport, Long Island in 1984. A particularly gruesome murder and one that intrigued the public due to the reputed practice of Satanism by Kasso and his followers, Where Evil Dwells chronicles the journey of Kasso from his life as a frustrated teenager in suburban America (conceived as the physical referent to the title), through to his murder of Lauwers, and finally his rejection from Heaven and eternal punishment in Hell.

Whereas I have argued that the many versions of A Fire in My Belly utilise Christian iconography to comment upon the atavistic properties of blood and its transmutation into a sacred or polluting substance, Where Evil Dwells uses deliberately provocative scenes of Christ to question the validity and integrity of the religion. There is a recreation of the scene of the last supper, featuring a bespectacled and obese Jesus festooned with a crown of thorns and the Passion emblazoned on his chest, consuming vast quantities of food and smoking. Turner and Wojnarowicz overlaid extra-diegetic sounds of a pastor relaying the evils of television and the sins of the people to his congregation (‘you are snakes, you are vipers, you won’t go through the door that God has opened’); upbeat muzak is incongruously superimposed at this point. Hell is conceived as a phantasmatic and surreal location where Kasso witnesses, upon being rejected from Heaven, scenes involving sadomasochistic sex acts, bondage, attempted gang rape, and hybrid creatures resembling the mythic satyr writhing suggestively over various objects. The devil holds a chalice whilst gleefully looking on as a monk is tied to a wall and tormented. Thus, criticism towards the Christian religion is made explicit in Where Evil Dwells, whereas it is never the true
or sole focus of *A Fire in My Belly*. In keeping with the overarching arguments of my thesis, Wojnarowicz was determined to uncover the systems and structures that were used to uphold the illusory notion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Religion for Wojnarowicz was but one among many institutions that exert literal and symbolic power over the populace. Returning to Section IV of this version of *A Fire in My Belly*, the repetition of imagescombusting forces us to consider one of Wojnarowicz’s enduring apocalyptic fantasies, in which the annihilation of the ONE-TRIBE NATION has as its positive corollaries the unmasking of social diversity in America and the liberation of action and thought. Ultimately, Wojnarowicz could only conceive of the acceptance of diversity and freedom to act upon one’s desires and sexuality without fear of retaliation or punishment through total destruction of the ONE-TRIBE NATION.
CHAPTER TWO

‘The X-Ray of Civilization’: Mourning, Witnessing, and Testimony in Wojnarowicz’s Close to the Knives and Memories That Smell Like Gasoline

When an individual is at his/her physical prime, experiencing little difficulty in mobility and function, it is easy to overlook the fragile materiality of the body and how it can be made vulnerable to injury and infection. One is readily able to go about their daily life without experiencing any disconnection between self-image and embodiment, for ‘as long as the body is healthy and mortality is beyond the horizon of consciousness, associating the self with the body comes easily.’ However, the onset of illness and declining health often pose a direct challenge to an individual’s perception of corporeal boundedness and stability. With an illness that is either protracted or terminal, an individual is faced with the difficulty of having to come to terms with a range of material symptoms that alter irrevocably one’s body-relation to others. An independent and self-sufficient individual may suddenly turn into a person who, for better or worse, must open themselves up to the care and support of family, friends, and clinicians. This shift from perceiving the body as monadic to one that is dyadic signals a relational subjectivity where change, interdependence, and reciprocity become the normative and normal aspects of embodiment. Arthur Frank calls this transformation of the body into a communicative vessel an ethics which

2 ‘Illness presents a particular opening to becoming a dyadic body, because the ill person is immersed in a suffering that is both wholly individual – my pain is mine alone – but also shared. The ill person sees others around her, before and after her, who have gone through this same illness and suffered their own wholly particular pains. She sees others who are pained by her pain.’ Frank, ‘The Body’s Problems with Illness,’ in The Body: A Reader, eds. Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco (London: Routledge, 2005), 320.
primes the individual ‘for the task of discovering what it means to live for other bodies.’

But what would it mean to ‘live for other bodies’ when one is not necessarily ill at all? Perhaps a better question would be, what is at stake, both rhetorically and ethically, when to ‘live for other bodies’ means we are confronted with the inevitability of our death and even its cause, but nonetheless unaware of how rapidly or slowly that day will come? In other words, how does an individual with asymptomatic HIV live for others within the HIV/AIDS community in a way that attends responsibly towards their dying, at the same time as recognising how this task may also be cut short by a range of material symptoms resulting in one’s own rapid physical deterioration?

As I explained in my introduction, Peter Hujar’s weakening health prompted dramatic and irrevocable changes for Wojnarowicz, both in terms of his artistic output in toto and his sense of self-embodiment. Although Wojnarowicz had long been concerned with mortality and physical vulnerability prior to his post-diagnostic period, I would nonetheless argue that these changes were consolidated once he was diagnosed with HIV in 1988. Wojnarowicz recognised strongly at this point that ‘there is no time for bullshit’, since the prospect of developing opportunistic infections and symptoms as a result of his weakened immune system placed immense pressure on making every piece of work count: ‘I make with the sense that it may be the last thing I do and so I try and pull everything in to the surface of that action’.

To make things count was akin for Wojnarowicz to producing written and (audio)visual artworks that spoke to the profound social injustices pervasive within the American

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nation, and how he, as one of those individuals relegated to the discursive margins of society, worked to combat oppression, violence, and discrimination. As he mentioned in the essay, ‘Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch-Tall Politician’ in Close to the Knives, ‘Each painting, film, sculpture, or page of writing I make represents to me a particular moment in the history of my body on this planet, in america [sic]’ (149). Whereas in his childhood and adolescence he saw his political identification and subjectivity as a homosexual as ideologically setting him against the ‘Heads of Family: Mom and Dad’, as he matured he replaced this apparatus of control ‘with Teacher or Policeman or Store Owner or Land Owner or Neighbor or Priest or God or Arresting Officer or Detective or Psychiatrist or Politician or President’ (CK, 149-150). This deluge of appellations reinforces the rhetoric of oppositionality permeating Wojnarowicz’s writings, and indicates the pervasive workings of the ONE-TRIBE NATION in its administering of control and uniformity through institutional and ideological means.

Wojnarowicz would soon turn his attention from the general categories of religion, science, law, and politics, to a direct condemnation of individuals who, by virtue of their status over and influence within the American public, incited hatred towards and misunderstanding concerning gay PWAs and the etiology of HIV/AIDS during the first decade of the AIDS crisis.5 It is evident that Wojnarowicz’s targets

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5 Douglas Crimp wrote in his introduction to Melancholia and Moralism that ‘Much has changed since then [the initial period of the AIDS crisis], but then again much has remained the same. I might mention, for example, that twenty years into the AIDS epidemic, Jesse Helms is still the senator from North Carolina, and he is, if anything, more powerful now than in 1987, when he first succeeded in preventing the federal funding of safe-sex information directed at gay men.’ Helms died on 4 July 2008; during his 52-year political career, he was an imposing political figure who was influential in effecting a number of legislations and bills that targeted homosexuals and pro-choice reproductive rights. One such example was his amendment to the 1988 appropriations bill for the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education, which barred both the Centers for Disease Control and national educational programs from using federal funds that would ‘promote’ homosexuality or non-heterosexual lifestyles. Douglas Crimp, ‘Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction,’ in Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 17.
changed in witnessing the erosion of his community,\(^6\) not as a result of the illness as such, but the systemic homophobia and fear mongering that produced alarming rates of violence against PWAs and saw the development of policies that clearly presented the (gay) PWA as a second-class citizen.

Particularly, Wojnarowicz offered in ‘The Seven Deadly Sins Factsheet’ an astonishing rebuke of those who he saw as responsible for perpetuating ‘FEAR OF DIVERSITY’ within America. He argued that the social aspiration towards the elimination of homosexuality and other non-normative sexual identities and practices had concrete repercussions for PWAs by causing: delays in clinical drug trials, the manufacturing and widespread dissemination of affordable medicines such as Fluconazole, and the availability of clean hypodermic needles for IV-drug users, as well as further propagating moralistic discourses concerning the cause and transmission of HIV. Essentially, Wojnarowicz devised a rhetorical ‘suit of armor’ to assist and protect him during his contretemps with conservative and religious policymakers within the 1980s and early 1990s. His defiant tone and pronouncements were pitted against the likes of Cardinal John Joseph O’Connor, Jesse Helms, William Dannemeyer, and Ed Koch. Writing in ‘The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine over a Mouse Hole,’

I am amazed to discover that I have been building a suit of armor in response to the extensive amount of death overtaking members of my social landscape. That suit of armor consists of making more of an attempt to continue each time I hear of a new death. The grief hardens

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\(^6\) The gay community of New York was also negatively affected by changes in urban demography during the 1980s, in which many ‘previously abandoned or peripheral neighborhoods that were home to gay sexual culture were reappropriated and gentrified by the real-estate industry, thus making them inhospitable to the uses we’d invented for them.’ The closing down of New York City’s piers and rezoning laws instigated by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in the early 1990s further endangered aspects of gay sexual culture, including cruising and the formation of counterpublics. Crimp, ‘Melancholia and Moralism: An Introduction,’ 15. See also Rachel Simon, ‘Note: New York City’s Restrictive Zoning of Adult Businesses: A Constitutional Analysis,’ *Fordham Urban Law Journal* 23, no. 1, article 5 (1995): 187-219.
and is added to the armor. The armor takes the shape of wanting to see an accountability taken by those responsible. (CK, 230)

What the above makes clear is that Wojnarowicz felt compelled to respond not only to the experiences of loss and grief ‘overtaking members of [his] social landscape’, but also to arm himself against those whom he saw as responsible for encouraging, if not accelerating, the deaths of PWAs. As engaged as he was in mourning those around him, he also refused for his own death to be trivialised in the wake of governmental and social ignorance about homosexuality and the experiences of PWAs: ‘If I die it is because a handful of people in power, in organized religions and political institutions, believe that I am expendable’ (CK, 230). Wojnarowicz undoubtedly employed his works as a mode of activism and advocacy for PWAs during the latter half of the 1980s up until his death in 1992. As such, his works conceive of cultural representation, according to Douglas Crimp, ‘as an essential site of political struggle, indeed of the struggle for life itself.’

In this chapter, I argue that Wojnarowicz’s written works, chiefly Close to the Knives and Memories that Smell Like Gasoline (1992), were his attempt to work through epistemological and ethical questions of mourning, witnessing, and testimony in the wake of the AIDS crisis. Of key importance is how Wojnarowicz chronicled the dying and deaths of other PWAs as a way to testify to the immense suffering and difficulties many had experienced due to institutionalised homophobia. Wojnarowicz demonstrates the vital nature of recording for posterity the deaths of PWAs such as Hujar, in order to bridge the divide between personal and public modes of accountability and commemoration. As testimony, Wojnarowicz’s writings function as social praxis, insofar as his bleak and often excruciating descriptions of physical

deterioration work to combat the larger social refusal to acknowledge the deaths of PWAs, let alone responsibility for them. What Jeff Nunokawa discusses in ““All the Sad Young Men”: AIDS and the Work of Mourning” is therefore equally applicable to Wojnarowicz’s textual project: since ‘Homophobia has seldom been more obtrusive than its current disinclination to allow the gay community to grieve its own publicly’, it has become absolutely necessary to ‘mark deaths that the majority culture is simply not disposed to notice.’

Recording powerful emotions such as love, despair, suffering, and grief, becomes one form of weaponry Wojnarowicz utilised against widespread indifference or outright hatred of gay PWAs. Another method of political resistance Wojnarowicz employed was to develop a rhetoric of oppositionality and recalcitrance in Close to the Knives. As Simon Watney has said, ‘for those of us living and working in the various constituencies most devastated by HIV, it seems… as if the rest of the population were tourists, casually wandering through the very height of a blitz of which they are totally unaware.’ Wojnarowicz refused to allow not only other members of his society but also his readerly audience to ignore or distance themselves from the devastations of the AIDS crisis. Indeed, Wojnarowicz places a burden of responsibility upon his reader as he comes to terms with his own failing health and mortal frustrations. As much as Wojnarowicz himself is loath to die quietly, since to do so would be tantamount to a victory for homophobes who aspire to the social erasure of homosexuality and gay culture, he is also compelling his readers to ensure his survival through becoming a witness to his dying and thereby continuing his narrative for others in his absence. Ross Chambers, in Facing It: AIDS Diaries and

the Death of the Author, claims that what we find in AIDS diaries is a ‘narrative structure of relay’, in which the death of the author is the condition for his/her posthumous survival through the enactment of writing, as well as what necessitates the continuation of one’s story through the conduit of the reader. AIDS diaries rarely have a ‘final’ entry, just a note that the author has died; thus, the author’s discursive rather than physical death ‘remains suspended’, the effect being that ‘the suspension of a diary on its author’s death is perceived to transmit an obligation to continue the work of witness, work that is begun by the author as a matter of writing but, interrupted by death, requires realization if not completion through an act of reading, the nature and quality of which is thus crucial.’

Consequently, Close to the Knives and Memories that Smell Like Gasoline produce two levels of narrative relay through their representation of the discursive entanglements of mourning, loss, and testimony: Wojnarowicz is himself a witness to the deaths of PWAs, just as we the readers become a witness to Wojnarowicz’s death and revivification through the textual medium.

‘Facing It’

In her foundational article on Close to the Knives, Tasia M. Hane-Devore classifies this monograph as being an autothanatography or ‘memoir of dying’, since within the text Wojnarowicz confronts the possibility of his death and catalogues the myriad emotions that attend this crisis of psychology and embodiment. Hane-Devore writes that autothanatography, as the writing of one’s own dying, ‘has largely neglected collective experience as a path of analysis and discussion’. She finds, however, that

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*Close to the Knives* sutures the gap between individual and collective forms of loss in order to comment upon the seismic changes occurring within the discursive ‘body’ of the gay male community following the beginning of the AIDS crisis.\(^{11}\) Perhaps a more appropriate way of conceiving the enfolding of the self and other that attends the witnessing of pain and loss in *Close to the Knives* is through what Chambers has called the ‘dual autobiography’, where ‘the writer who records another’s death from AIDS is himself infected and may go on to record his own living out of the same scenario’.\(^{12}\) In taking up the rhetoric of (sexual) transmission to figure the process of textual exchange, Chambers is demonstrating the crucial yet also inescapable predicament that witnessing entails: just as the writing of the other hinges upon both his/her physical death and revivification as an absent presence within the text, the author also recognises how his/her own survival depends upon the very same process with a reading public.

In ‘Spiral,’ Wojnarowicz demonstrates the reciprocal transaction between the acts of witnessing and testimony, in which it is vital to detail the *actual* experiences of PWAs so as to combat the pathologising images of these individuals found in the mainstream media and biomedical literature.\(^{13}\) Wojnarowicz, as John Carlin has elegantly noted, was especially adept in turning his art and writing into ‘important

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\(^{12}\) Chambers, *Facing It*, 7.

\(^{13}\) Biomedical literature played a decisive role in the construction of HIV/AIDS as a ‘gay’ disease transmitted through specifically sexual acts involving the anal sphincter. Indeed, the complex of PCP and KS that physicians began to identify in gay men as early as 1979 meant that AIDS was initially called GRID (gay-related immunodeficiency). Demonstrating the plasticity of signifiers to designate this syndrome, AIDS was then called AID (acquired immune deficiency), before the Centers for Disease Control settled with the term, AIDS, in 1982. As Paula A. Treichler astutely demonstrates in *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Chronicles of AIDS*, the ways in which AIDS has been constructed through language and medico-scientific discourses have had a decisive impact on the demonisation of marginal groups such as gay men. Whilst AIDS constitutes what she calls *‘an epidemic of signification’*, where ‘multiple meanings, stories, and discourses intersect and overlap, reinforce and subvert each other, the rhetorical connections between homosexuality, AIDS, and death have figured centrally in the cultural imagination.’ Paula A. Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 19.
witnesses to the hidden social and psychological effects of the disease'.

Visiting a friend who is dying in hospital, Wojnarowicz explains how his friend’s body is in a physically weak state and that he experiences extreme hallucinations as a result of neurological damage:

my friend is too weak to turn the channels on other people’s deaths. There is also the question of dementia, an overload of the virus’s activity in his brain short-circuiting the essentials and causing his brain to atrophy so that he ends up pissing into the telephone. He sees a visitor’s face impaled with dozens of steel nails or crawling with flies and gets mildly concerned.  

Such descriptions of his dying friend authenticate his suffering and testify to his existence during a period in which the refusal to mourn PWAs was also a refusal to recognise their status as members of the body politic: ‘To witness is to act as a guarantor.’  

Although such a description on initial glance appears to conform to the stereotypical portrait of the PWA as wasted, enervated, and pitiable, such an image is undercut once Wojnarowicz turns his attention to the television in his friend’s hospital room: ‘Seeing dick cheney [sic] looming up on the television screen with that weird lust in his eyes and bits of brain matter in the cracks of his teeth might actually be diagnosed as dementia. I catch myself just as all this stomach acid floods up into my throat, run out to the hallway to the water fountain’ (MS, 44). The reader can infer two things from this passage: first, that Wojnarowicz saw Cheney and his

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15 David Wojnarowicz, Memories That Smell Like Gasoline (San Francisco: Artspace, 1992), 43, 44. All subsequent references to this text will appear as MS.
ultraconservative allies as mentally unsound in passing legislations that entrenched the social devaluation of PWAs; and second, that Wojnarowicz’s illness was directly connected with the governmental policies of his time. The second inference of the passage recalls a damning statement Wojnarowicz made in Close to the Knives: ‘WHEN I WAS TOLD I’D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT DIDN’T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I’D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL’ (CK, 114). Indeed, for Wojnarowicz it was not so much AIDS but ‘this killing machine called America’ (CK, 108) which would be responsible for his death, in its continuing dissemination of false and moralising ideologies that constructed AIDS as the logical conclusion of the hedonistic and decadent sexual culture of the Stonewall era.\(^{18}\) As Watney has eloquently stated, unlike the metaphorical meanings that circulated around leprosy and syphilis, where the material symptoms of the diseases were interpreted as the physical externalisation of social and sexual deviancy,\(^{19}\) HIV/AIDS is unique insofar as the syndrome ‘has less to do with lay perceptions possibly bearing traces of premodern notions of the body’s “humours”, than to do with institutionalised homophobia and racism, with the complete inability of late-twentieth century public political discourse to acknowledge the actual sexual choices and diversity of the populations politicians claim to represent.’\(^{20}\)

Commenting on the correlation between his own declining health and the compounding effects of poverty, governmental neglect, and a lack of adequate medical services, Wojnarowicz becomes physically ill in observing the relentless

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\(^{19}\) For further information on the iconographic portrait of the female prostitute as the exemplary figure of the syphilitic in Victorian England, see Sander Gilman’s Picturing Health and Illness: Images of Identity and Difference (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

wave of deaths in New York City which could have been prevented if more funds were devoted to the care and support of PWAs: ‘A couple of people representing the policy of the city government assured the senators that these people [homeless PWAs] were dying so fast from lack of health care that they were making room for the others coming up from behind… Oh I feel so sick. I feel like a human bomb tick tick tick’ (MS, 51).

It is interesting to note that Wojnarowicz’s descriptions of bodily abjection and evacuation are always connected with the experience of homophobia as a social disease rather than the material symptoms of an illness syndrome such as HIV/AIDS. For whilst Wojnarowicz does acknowledge how his HIV diagnosis is, according to Lisa Diedrich, ‘a traumatic experience that is often apprehended as a rupture… in which illness disrupts time and creates another temporality’, the diagnosis is never registered as an end point but the catalyst for a new body ethics and mode of writing. Even if we identify in Memories That Smell Like Gasoline and Close to the Knives a momentary lapse between embodiment and self-identification following his HIV diagnosis, this quickly gives way to Wojnarowicz reconsidering how his own body is situated within a complex of social and political relations. As he stated in ‘Being Queer in America: A Journal of Disintegration’, ‘Realizing that I had nothing left to lose in my actions I let my hands become my weapons, my teeth become weapons, every bone and muscle and fiber and ounce of blood become weapons, and I feel prepared for the rest of my life’ (CK, 81). These epistrophic clauses powerfully demonstrate how Wojnarowicz, armed with a new ethics, used his

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21 ‘I’ve been trying to fight the urge to throw up for the last two weeks. At first I thought it was food poisoning but slowly realized it was civilization. Everything is stirring this feeling inside me, signs of physical distress, the evening news, all the flags in the streets and the zombie population going about its daily routines. I just want to puke it all out like an intense projectile.’ Wojnarowicz, Memories That Smell Like Gasoline, 48, 51.

22 Lisa Diedrich, Treatments: Language, Politics, and the Culture of Illness (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 117.
own body, codified as gay, male, and ‘diseased’, as a weapon to oppose the homophobic construction of the PWA as a vessel of moral pestilence. For Wojnarowicz showed how living within a body that is gay, male, and HIV-positive is in itself a political statement in a society where heterosexuality and able-bodiedness are both the ideal and norm; it is living loudly, rather than dying quietly, then, which proved most effective in challenging the public silence around the AIDS crisis.

Notwithstanding, being diagnosed with HIV placed Wojnarowicz in an impossible ontological bind, for he found himself in a position where the future possibility of his death was firmly pressed onto his present existence in knowing that his illness could at any time become AIDS. According to Alexander García Düttmann, AIDS typifies a temporal disjunction in which the subject is both a being-not-at-one with time and a being-not-at-one with the self,\(^{23}\) since AIDS does not in itself cause death but signifies a range of opportunistic infections which collectively debilitate the body until the immune system cannot sustain it any further. AIDS, for Düttmann, has a unique psychological profile, since the liminality and uncertainty directed towards the possibility of a rapid outbreak of infections leading to death ‘makes it impossible for him or her to be in one place without at the same time being in another’.\(^{24}\) One cannot, therefore, in Düttmann’s formulation be-at-one with AIDS, for unlike other illnesses or diseases, there is no being-at-one-with time; AIDS problematises the narrativisation of a coherent life and thus the temporal connectivity which forms the psychic backbone of one’s being, given that one attempts to ‘anchor existence in the unity of time, to tie it back into the unity of time – into the unity of life’s coherence that extends from birth to death’.\(^{25}\) This failure to cohere one’s image

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of the body with the actual experience of embodiment, let alone the temporal continuity of one’s body through time, can certainly be ascertained in Wojnarowicz’s appraisal of the psychic and corporeal dislocations triggered by his diagnosis:

> When I found out I felt this abstract sensation, something like pulling off your skin and turning it inside out and then rearranging it so that when you pull it back on it feels like what it felt like before, only it isn’t and only you know it. It’s something almost imperceptible. I mean the first minute after being diagnosed you are forever separated from what you had come to view as your life or living, the world outside the eyes. The calendar tracings of biographical continuity get kind of screwed up. (MS, 47-48)

Wojnarowicz’s embodiment after his diagnosis is akin to an ill-fitting jumper: it is only he who can feel that something is not quite right, even if others around him cannot discern any change whatever: ‘It’s something almost imperceptible.’ Yet as we can see this diagnosis altered his view of life and living irrevocably: ‘The calendar tracings of biographical continuity get kind of screwed up’. Such temporal incoherence and discontinuity that Wojnarowicz suggests are the hallmarks of medical diagnosis are in fact what lend clarity to his understanding of the world and the interior workings of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. As he remarked, ‘With the appearance of AIDS and the sense of mortality I now find everything revealing itself to me in this way’ (CK, 108). His diagnosis was ultimately what allowed him to ‘experience[e] the X-ray of Civilization’ (CK, 112), and in so doing emboldened his determination to demolish those institutional and ideological structures that impose sexual, gender, racial, and religious norms on the American population. In demolishing such structures Wojnarowicz demonstrated that ‘there are millions of separate tribes in this illusion called AMERICA’ (CK, 153), thereby working to destigmatise marginal groups such as PWAs and gay men.
But Wojnarowicz’s diagnosis was also what allowed him to turn to his own writings as a form of restitution and restoration: in writing of his and others’ experiences of living and dying with HIV/AIDS, *Close to the Knives* and *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline* re-establish psychic wholeness and agency. This is, for Frank, an absolutely essential manoeuvre against the ‘institutional colonization’ of the so-called ‘patient’ by physicians and bureaucratic organisations who seek to impose their own trajectory upon the narratives of illness and treatment. According to Frank, ‘embodied paranoia’ characterises the fear many patients experience towards medical institutions which have as their overriding goal to prolong the life of the patient for as long as possible, even if doing so is both illogical and causes unnecessary pain for the patient. One such example of this occurs in *Close to the Knives*, where the narrative trajectory the clinicians impose upon a dying Keith Davis defies both logic and compassion:

> I thought of how he’d expected at least another year but in the last two days he has died twice and now he is taking his time before the third time which would be the final time. At least the doctors had finally agreed to stop jumping up and down on him if he died again and somehow through all of this I realized how much more afraid of death they were than he. (*CK*, 70)

Two things may be surmised from this extract: Wojnarowicz perceives the doctors as refusing to let Davis die since it violates their intractable objective to prolong the life of a patient at all costs. Also, that Davis has been clinically dead not once, but twice, ‘before the third time which would be the final time,’ demonstrates precisely how the subject, following Düttmann, can never be a being-at-one with the self or with time due to AIDS. This is because death from AIDS-related complications can be an event that is protracted and subject to delays, deferrals, and periods of recovery followed by reinfection: thus, Eric Michaels’ comment that AIDS ‘is the disease of a thousand
rehearsals’ rings entirely true. Yet it is not so much the disease but the treatment which so far is hampering Davis’ capacity to die easefully and with dignity; when the doctors finally agree to turn Davis’ life support off, Wojnarowicz is ‘totally amazed at how quietly he dies how beautiful everything is with us holding him down on the bed on the floor fourteen stories above the earth’ (CK, 82).

Hujar also expressed ‘embodied paranoia’ towards the medical establishment, thereby supporting Frank’s belief that ‘People are threatened by institutions ostensibly designed to help them [and]… when decisions about them are made by strangers. The sick role… becomes a vulnerability to extended institutional colonization.’ Shortly before Hujar’s death, he, Wojnarowicz, and their friend Anita Vitale, travelled to Long Island to visit a physician who purportedly found a way to kickstart the immune system by administering typhoid shots to individuals displaying symptoms of pneumocystis pneumonia and Kaposi’s sarcoma. Hujar’s determination to visit this quack doctor resulted from both dissatisfaction towards a lack of improvement within the traditional hospital setting and a decision to becoming the primary decision maker in the treatment of his illness. Wojnarowicz is immediately unsettled by the appearance of the scientist and sceptical towards the efficacy of his treatment plan: ‘He reminded me of a guy who’d sell you dead chameleons at a circus sideshow’ (CK, 95). Nevertheless, he and Vitale humour the scientist, in part to give Hujar the illusion of control over his health, something which both AIDS and members of the medical establishment had so far taken away from him (CK, 90).

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28 Hujar sees an acquaintance sitting in the waiting room and recognises him from the office of a scientist whom both had been seeing in uptown Manhattan. This scientist had been convicted of medical malpractice, claiming that he had developed a ‘cure’ for AIDS developed from human faeces: ‘we found that one person’s shit served as a base for all treatments. Almost all the patients treated with this became extremely ill.’ Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives*, 94.
For Frank, it is not the fear of excessive pain caused by procedures designed to
cure or treat illness which becomes unbearable; in fact it is ‘the oral violation of the
subject induced by medical probes and interventions’ that causes the destruction of
one’s psychic and bodily wholeness. Writing was for Wojnarowicz what ultimately
functioned as a prophylactic gesture against the discursive silencing that death and
institutional colonisation entail: ‘I don’t want to witness the silencing of my own
body’ (CK, 230). For although Wojnarowicz is reluctant at times to acknowledge his
diagnosis because he ‘do[esn’t] want the burden of acceptance of the idea of death,
departure, or becoming fly food’, he is equally certain that continuing to be visible in
the public eye is essential for legitimating the lives and rights of PWAs: ‘I don’t want
to be polite and crawl into the media grave of “AIDS” and disappear quietly’ (CK,
230). Consequently, by witnessing and testifying to the struggles, experiences, and
conflicts he and other PWAs endured as a result of systemic homophobia, ensure that
Close to the Knives and Memories That Smell Like Gasoline have a firm political
valence; Wojnarowicz aims not only to combat negative portraits of PWAs but also
engage in the direct activist struggle to improve their living conditions and treatment
options by putting on trial the chief proponents of the ONE-TRIBE NATION.

Fundamentally, Wojnarowicz regarded both mourning and recalcitrance as
equally productive modes of activism. Whilst he worried that his friends were
‘s slowly becom[ing] professional pallbearers… perfecting their rituals of death rather
than [adopting] a relatively simple ritual of life such as screaming in the streets’, he
also added that any gesture, if made in public, ‘carries a reverberation that is
meaningful in its diversity’ (CK, 122). Consequently, Close to the Knives and
Memories That Smell Like Gasoline show how representing ‘the most intimate,

29 Emily Apter, ‘Fantom Images: Hervé Guibert and the Writing of “sida” in France,’ in Writing AIDS, 86.
personal experience of the epidemic on the part of those in its midst, above all the experience of *loss*’ was a deeply political act that revealed the extent of public hostility towards the PWA. As Timothy Murphy writes, Wojnarowicz proves that testimonies are vital in the context of collective political activism, since he put ‘a face on the epidemic and offer[ed] a counterliterature to the discourse both of medical journals, in which PWAs are described as patients or cases, and of the media where PWAs are still described and represented as victims or predators.” What I have attempted to impress upon the reader then in my first section is that in ‘facing up’ to his diagnosis, Wojnarowicz came to a greater awareness of his capacity to incite positive social changes through the acts of witnessing and testimony. To write of such experiences worked powerfully to destigmatise PWAs and authorise their lives and conflicts in a way that saw no distinction between personal and political modes of accountability. As Chambers has written, writing functions as rhetorical prophylaxis, since it ‘signifies the choice to *live one’s death* and to write it, as an alternative to throwing in the towel’ and thereby caving into homophobic pressure for PWAs to ‘play the role of *victim* that is marked out for [them]’.

Like other PWAs, Wojnarowicz was met with the proverbial options of facing squarely in the eye his diagnosis or ‘throwing in the towel’ as such. He ultimately chose the former, seeing writing as a means to politicise his dying and stimulate collective action against the ONE-TRIBE NATION: ‘to make something and leave it in public… acts as a magnet and draws others with a similar frame of reference out of silence or invisibility’ *(CK, 156).*

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31 Murphy, ‘Testimony,’ 310.
32 Chambers, *Facing It*, 16.
Writing, as a means of reaching out to and expanding one’s audience, is fundamentally for Wojnarowicz about the challenge of survival within a context where the overwhelming preference was for PWAs to die quietly and disappear shortly thereafter. As a prophylactic gesture, writing becomes all about the ways in which Wojnarowicz and his readers ‘face up’ to the reality of death; ‘facing it [death]’, amounts to an ethical response to the AIDS crisis in which silence and disassociation from discrimination against PWAs is indefensible and irresponsible. ‘Facing it’, as a trope, therefore, is to witness the AIDS crisis as an event that is of human rather than divine making: ‘what’s going on here but public and social murder on a daily basis’ (CK, 107).

I end this section with a comment Wojnarowicz made in an interview with Barry Blinderman: ‘If I’m heading towards a rendezvous with death, then I want to experience it in as real a state as it can get. … I want to look it square in the eye.’

To engage with death head on, or, in the tropic language of Chambers, to ‘face it’, means to resist doggedly the discursive cancellation that such a situation implies. This task becomes even more burdensome and urgent in the context of the AIDS crisis, where gay PWAs such as Bree Scott-Harland were confronted with a terrifying diagnosis and had to choose whether to concede defeat or fight against the illness and the government: ‘I said to myself you could die from this and saw it immediately as a challenge and not as a death sentence.’

Contrary to the mythological narrative of Orpheus and the Underworld, to stare at and record the death of the other or oneself does not end in the subject’s ruination; rather, it ensures both survival through writing and the generation of a life that is politically active in combating discrimination. My

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33 Wojnarowicz, ‘The Compression of Time: An Interview with David Wojnarowicz,’ interview by Barry Blinderman, in Tongues of Flame, 49.
next section, therefore, concentrates on Wojnarowicz’s response in ‘facing up’ to the dying and deaths of his friends, Hujar, Davis, and Montanna Houston, where Wojnarowicz was forced to look at his own death ‘square in the eye’ in the same way as other PWAs. Hujar’s open eye following death haunted Wojnarowicz and marked the beginning of his ethics of witnessing and testimony: ‘I tried to say something to him staring into that enormous eye’ (CK, 103). 35 Indeed, whilst Wojnarowicz appeared both shocked and embarrassed by the power which Hujar’s ‘one half-lifted eyelid’ seemed to exude even as he lay dying in hospital – ‘the iris was the size of the room; it dwarfed the winter light filling the streets outside the window’ (CK, 85) – it became all too apparent that to testify to Hujar’s difficulties living as a PWA were crucial for both Wojnarowicz’s own salvation and to effect social and political reforms in his 1980s context: ‘all I can do is raise my hands from my sides in helplessness and say, “All I want is some sort of grace.” And then the water comes from my eyes’ (CK, 103).

‘Alive and Witnessing’

Wojnarowicz’s Close to the Knives is a testament to the myriad experiences of hardship, suffering, perseverance and resilience of PWAs within his immediate community. It is through his narrativisation of such experiences that ‘new collective identities are produced and concretized’, 36 thereby legitimating the political status of PWAs whose existences had so far within the AIDS crisis been silenced by the imposing presence of dominant public scripts relating to their deviancy and danger to

35 Chambers makes a similar comment in Facing It on pages 70 and 71.
the body politic. Witnessing and testimony are complementary modes of writing that serve an ethical and political dimension in *Close to the Knives*: the recording of such experiences constitutes direct activism against the heteronormative ideologies of Reaganite America.

I have so far claimed that Wojnarowicz’s text accommodates both recalcitrance and mourning as equally effective responses to the AIDS crisis. This section explains how both are at work in *Close to the Knives* and argues that for Wojnarowicz, it was impossible to disentangle the two concepts, fuelled as he was by intense anger over what he saw as a wilful refusal of the government to take responsibility for their (homo)phobic actions against PWAs. Adopting an oppositional rhetoric was one technique Wojnarowicz developed to oppose the myth of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, through unveiling images of alternative sexualities and relations that had previously been hidden from view: ‘with enough gestures we can deafen the satellites and lift the curtains surrounding the control room’ (*CK*, 123).

In ‘De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS,’ Crimp revised his earlier view in ‘Mourning and Militancy’ that too great a focus on the loss and despair of the gay community during the crisis deflected attention from direct ways in which one could engage in the activist struggle to improve rights and services for PWAs. To become absorbed fully in the rituals of mourning was to overlook how much *life* and vibrancy there were in the gay community, which could inadvertently reinforce the rhetorical equation that homosexuality = HIV/AIDS = death.37 Wojnarowicz, as I mentioned in section one, expressed such concerns towards limiting his focus on the rituals of death pertaining to PWAs rather than on their celebrations of life (*CK*, 122). Consequently,

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37 ‘It is the linking of sex = disease, homosexuality = disease, promiscuity = disease, and, finally, homosexuality = promiscuity = disease that enchain people with AIDS and, by association, all gay men.’ John M. Clum, ‘“And One I Had It All”: AIDS Narratives and Memories on an American Dream,’ in *Writing AIDS*, 206.
Close to the Knives is always and already concerned with injecting an energy of frustration and anger into his writings so as to avoid becoming inured to loss and grief. This was, for Wojnarowicz, no easy feat, considering the sense of fatigue we notice in his final essay of Close to the Knives, ‘The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine over a Mouse Hole’:

I wondered recently if I was becoming numb to the idea of death itself. What was in the mid-eighties a recognition of loss so profound upon hearing about the first person I knew who had just died of AIDS, has slowly become so familiar that I wince upon hearing that someone new has died and then tuck it somewhere in my psyche and try to refocus my thoughts to something simple like paying the rent or buying the food for my evening meal. (CK, 166)

Counteracting this inertia and weariness, Wojnarowicz in ‘The Seven Deadly Sins Factsheet’ and ‘Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch Tall Politician’ ‘engage[d] in the activist struggle against the negligence of our governing institutions and the falsehoods perpetrated by the media’. Wojnarowicz achieved this aim through providing a checklist of offences committed by homophobic politicians and religious leaders of his time and explaining their pernicious impacts upon the everyday lives of PWAs. Wojnarowicz also used these essays as an opportunity to teach the reader safer sex information and ‘expose the lies of governments and media’ which continue to present AIDS as a moral disease.

‘The Seven Deadly Sins Factsheet’ appears immediately after two of Wojnarowicz’s most stirring tributes to friends and lovers who had died from AIDS-related complications. ‘Living Close to the Knives’ documents Hujar’s experiences of homophobia caused by misinformation about the transmission of HIV along with describing how Hujar, like other PWAs, resorted to using unscrupulous clinicians and

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homeopathic medications to halt the spread of opportunistic infections. Meanwhile, ‘Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell,’ records conversations Wojnarowicz shared with other seropositive men ‘while in the throes of agitating FEAR’ towards not only the reality of his own prospective death but ‘the sense of death in the American landscape’ (CK, 111, 113). ‘Postcards from America’ begins with a consideration of life’s ephemerality and vicissitudes through a conversation Wojnarowicz has with a friend who shares his utter bewilderment towards the disappearance of his community because of HIV/AIDS. Wojnarowicz scans the table and the reader comes to grips with the chaos and disruptions that the HIV-diagnosis has brought to this author: ‘The table is filled with piles of papers and objects; a boom box, a bottle of AZT, a jar of Advil (remember, you can’t take aspirin or Tylenol while on AZT). There’s an old smiley mug with pens and scissors and a bottle of Xanax for when the brain goes loopy’ (CK, 111-112). The diagnosis brings with it what can be perceived as an interminable cycle of doctor’s appointments, medical check-ups, and pill-taking; not only this, the PWA may also be struck with the realisation that the material objects he owns most certainly will outlast him. And so, Wojnarowicz determinedly used ‘The Seven Deadly Sins Factsheet’ as a way of rerouting his sense of uncertainty and fear – ‘The rest of my life is being unwound and seen through a frame of death’ (CK, 113) – into a politically productive mode of cultural activism against right-wing policymakers and religious leaders. As he said to his unnamed friend, ‘There’s too much work to do’ before he can go to his death with a clear conscience (CK, 117).

‘The Seven Deadly Sins Factsheet’ proves the utter value of recalcitrance and anger in the fight against HIV/AIDS. Rather than producing disconnections within the gay community and serving to alienate further disenfranchised populations,
Wojnarowicz believed that ‘Rage may be one of the few things that binds or connects me to you’ (CK, 117). Like Wojnarowicz’s enduring belief that making visible within the public eye practices and behaviours regarded as obscene or deviant created fissures in the image of the preinvented world, anger was a way of putting on trial those individuals who continue to produce a ‘tribal nation of zombies’ within America (CK, 37). Wojnarowicz focused in this essay on seven individuals who he believed were most responsible for the propagation of heterosexist policies and bigoted rhetoric against (gay) PWAs: former New York Mayor, Edward Koch; Cardinal John Joseph O’Connor; Rep. William Dannemeyer (R-CA); former New York City Commissioner of Health Stephen Joseph; Jesse Helms; Alphonse D’Amato, and Frank Young. Wojnarowicz denounced each of these individuals for their substantial role in disadvantaging PWAs in the areas of public health and housing, social interaction, cultural imagination, and jurisprudence. With its statistics and use of candid prose, Wojnarowicz’s essay condemns Koch for having ‘spent woefully little [in the fight against AIDS] and at this point in time ha[ving] left 8,000-10,000 P.W.A.’s [sic] (People with AIDS) homeless in the streets’ (CK, 124). Cardinal O’Connor Wojnarowicz brands as ‘The world’s most active liar about condoms and safer sex’ (CK, 125), as his unwavering and archaic religious beliefs meant that he refused to see contraceptives as a viable alternative to sexual abstinence. Wojnarowicz intersperses statistics with comments that, although provocative, are given credence by the burden of information which evidences the extreme bigotry of these individuals: Cardinal O’Connor ‘PREFERS COFFINS TO CONDOMS’; ‘The archdiocese, which runs Covenant House, as well as keeping these children ignorant and putting them at greater risk in order to maintain their “moral” code, will simply tell them it is their fault as they lay dying’ (CK, 125, 126).
As I explained in my introduction and first chapter, Wojnarowicz was especially critical of Jesse Helms, whose retrograde views concerning sexuality and sexual desire influenced to a large degree the trajectory of the ‘Culture Wars’ during the 1980s and specifically the debate concerning the public funding of the arts in America. Indeed, he and D’Amato were key players in the fight against the NEA using public funds to support art that challenged heteronormative standards of sexuality and desire, as well as Christian ideologies, in the public domain. Speaking about Andres Serrano, the artist behind *Piss Christ* and recipient of an NEA grant, in front of the Senate on 18 May 1989, Helms claimed ‘he is not an artist. He is a jerk. He is taunting a large segment of the American people, just as others are, about their Christian faith.’

40 Returning to Wojnarowicz’s ‘The Seven Deadly Sins Factsheet,’ Helms’ influence within Congress had deleterious consequences for PWAs and their fundamental right to be treated as citizens equal under the law to nonseropositive members of the American nation. Indeed, the Helms Amendment of July 1987 led to the adding of HIV infection on the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) list of ‘dangerous and contagious diseases’; this effectively resulted in the deportation of any traveller or immigrant who, after forcibly being tested for HIV, came back with a positive result.

41 Further contributing to Paula A. Treichler’s influential theory that ‘the very nature of AIDS is constructed through language and in particular the discourses of medicine and science’ is the fact that the primary understanding of AIDS which has infiltrated the public imaginary is as a sexually transmitted disease that specifically targets gay men and their sexual practices. Such misunderstanding


had serious repercussions in legal and educational discourses; as Wojnarowicz mentioned, Helms ‘introduced legislation that denies federal funding for any program that mentions homosexuality. … Cut out any and all AIDS education funding that relates to gays and lesbians’ (CK, 129). Wojnarowicz is here citing the Helms amendment to the fiscal year 1988 appropriations bill, which had a direct impact upon the dissemination of correct and clear information about the treatment of HIV/AIDS within so-called ‘risk groups’ and the ‘general population,’ since it prohibited funding for any educational programs and resources that would ‘promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual activities.’ Specifically the amendment to the AIDS research bill prevented the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) from allocating funding to safer sex education and AIDS prevention research and materials and anything else that would ‘encourage or condone homosexual activities or the intravenous use of illegal drugs.’ But the ramifications of the bill were profound, since ‘The bill thus outlawed risk reduction to the two groups most affected by HIV while also conflating AIDS, homosexuality, and drug use in the American consciousness; that this amendment passed by a walloping 94-2 says much about the public’s willingness at that time to quarantine these groups, whether literally or figuratively, as the unseeable “other.”’

That there persists an outrageous and intrinsic connection between homosexuality and HIV/AIDS is not surprising, given that such a rhetorical conflation is but part of a long historical lineage in which homosexuality is entangled with the discourses of abnormality and pathology. Particularly in the area of psychiatry, the

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43 According to Grover, the term “‘general population” is the repository of everything you wish to claim for yourself and deny to others.’ Grover, ‘AIDS: Keywords’: 24.
44 Quoted in Kathleen Klenetsky, ‘Congressional Closeup,’ Executive Intelligence Review (EIR) 14, no. 46 (20 November 1987): 60.
classification of homosexuality as a mental illness until changes made to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973\textsuperscript{46} helped to disseminate the view that sexual identity posed a threat to the physical body and the body politic; more than this, homosexuality was a sign that the pathological subject, in being addicted to ‘unnatural’ forms of sexual penetration, firmly lacked control over his prurient habits. As Lee Edelman explains in ‘The Mirror and the Tank: “AIDS,” Subjectivity, and the Rhetoric of Activism,’ “Addiction”… and gay male sexuality are joined together in the popular discourse on “AIDS” not only as practices through which the body suffers “improper” penetration, but also, and more significantly, as practices that signify the renunciation of active self-mastery and control.”\textsuperscript{47}

As one of the most recognisable symptoms of AIDS, Kaposi’s sarcoma (KS) has been used as an index of the gay male PWA’s deviancy and lack of self-control, since it is often codified within the public imaginary as ‘a punishment for an individual’s transgression.’\textsuperscript{48} Yet Wojnarowicz provides numerous accounts of KS that work against the view that these physical marks are an outward emanation of the gay male PWA’s interior flaws of character. In an image embedded into Memories That Smell Like Gasoline, Wojnarowicz is confronted by a man whose head and torso are covered with KS: ‘He burst into my home naked and covered in Kaposi and threw me on the bed: “You would’ve thought I was sexy if you saw me before I got sick.”’

\textsuperscript{46} ‘Facts about Homosexuality and Mental Health,’ University of California Davis Psychology, accessed 12 February 2014, \url{http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/faculty_sites/rainbow/html/facts_mental_health.html}. It was not, however, until 1986, when the diagnostic category, ego-dystonic homosexuality, was removed from the DSM-III. Site last modified 5 February 2012.


kissed them then pushed him off and ran from the apartment’ (MS, 45). Although a dream, Wojnarowicz’s image and text are effective in destigmatising this individual for the reader; rather than seeing the degeneration of his physical body as an outward indication of his abnormality and deviance, we recognise the man’s difficulty in having to live not only with painful symptoms of AIDS, but also a society where homosexuality still ‘feels like a trespass; worse, like the violation of a taboo’.

The second example of KS comes from ‘The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine over a Mouse Hole.’ In the essay, Wojnarowicz is relieved to see a ‘homely queen’ displaying remarkable health in the midst of the AIDS crisis (CK, 167). For Wojnarowicz, this queen with the ‘coke bottle thick glasses and long straggly hair’ was enough to counteract the overwhelming sense of emotional fatigue that he felt on a daily basis due to the inestimable losses occurring within his community (CK, 167). As I mentioned, Wojnarowicz felt it necessary to mourn and commemorate PWAs as a means of making the public accountable for their deaths and hardships. Not only this, it became crucial to perform the work of mourning in the public domain when PWAs were abandoned by their families and thus turned to the gay community for support and care. Indeed, the subject of Wojnarowicz’s final essay, the identity and posthumous legacy of Montanna Houston, was, as Wojnarowicz explains in his ‘Author’s Note,’ effectively ‘murdered by his folks,’ who after his death, destroyed his belongings and estate, including countless screenplays, drawings, photographs, and recordings (CK, 163-164). As Wojnarowicz was not given permission by Montanna’s estate to publish letters Montanna wrote to him, Wojnarowicz must piece together from tape recordings, journal entries, and

49 A very similar dream is recounted in ‘The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine over a Mouse Hole’ on page 226 of Close to the Knives.
50 Sontag, Illness as Metaphor, 6.
interviews recollections of this man to guarantee the survival of his memory through writing.

Wojnarowicz also created a psychic repository to preserve his connections and intimate relations with deceased PWAs, as a way to challenge the evisceration of their lives and political identification as gay men: ‘Piece by piece the landscape is eroding and in its place I am building a monument made of fragments of love and hate, sadness and feelings of murder’ (CK, 166). Consequently, seeing this queen helped to reaffirm for Wojnarowicz a sense of stability when he mostly ‘felt the landscape shifting beneath my feet’ (CK, 227). However, this hope is quickly obliterated when Wojnarowicz meets the queen for the last time; having walked down First Avenue and crossing the street, he sees the queen:

just as our bodies passed among turning cars and the first thing I recognized were his eyes, only now they were wild with misery and panic and it was only then that I realized his face and neck were blurred with Kaposi lesions like a school of burgundy-colored fish upturning around the contours of his jaw. (CK, 167)

Wojnarowicz is understandably shocked and deeply saddened by the decline of this queen, and like Crimp, was only able to acknowledge the true severity of the AIDS crisis through identifying the dissolution of the periphery, rather than centre, of his community. Writing about viewing the AIDS Quilt in 1987 on the Mall in Washington as part of the 1987 National March for Lesbian and Gay Rights, Crimp was not so much emotionally struck by seeing a panel for Michel Foucault, ‘who was an intellectual idol… and who had agreed to be a reader of my dissertation less than a year before he died’, but ‘a name I recognized as that of someone I’d only dimly
known, or know about. It was those moments that most brought to me the full extent of my own loss’.\textsuperscript{51}

Chambers has keenly observed that the success of an AIDS diary hinges upon making visible to the reader what homophobia and heterosexism have occluded within the AIDS crisis, namely, the importance of community in countering isolation and incomprehension when witnessing unprecedented losses of family, friends, and lovers. To increase public visibility of personal hardship is a vital strategy whose aim is to convert the ‘phobic look (simultaneously homophobic and AIDS-phobic) into an ability to see, the ability to face it’.\textsuperscript{52} As a consequence, the rhetorical practice of showing the reader the interpersonal difficulties associated with being a PWA ‘is an education in seeing that targets overt homophobia but also the less easily recognized and acknowledged homophobes that sleep within us all.’\textsuperscript{53} In ‘Living Close to the Knives,’ Wojnarowicz can barely contain his anger at the mistreatment of Hujar by the owner of Bruno’s Restaurant on Second Avenue and Twelfth Street. Labouring under the misguided belief that HIV is transmitted through casual contact,\textsuperscript{54} Hujar is ordered by Bruno to pay for his meal by placing money in a paper bag: ‘“You know why… just put your money in here.” Peter put five dollars in the bag and Bruno went behind the counter and brought back in his change in another paper bag and tossed it onto the table’ (\textit{CK}, 106). The appalling customer service Hujar received at Bruno’s is a testament to the rhetorical force of moralising explanations of HIV/AIDS within the ultraconservative religious climate of 1980s America. For instance, Jerry Falwell has claimed that ‘AIDS is God’s judgment of a society that does not live by His

\textsuperscript{51} Crimp, ‘The Spectacle of Mourning,’ in \textit{Melancholia and Moralism}, 196.
\textsuperscript{52} Chambers, \textit{Facing It}, 62.
\textsuperscript{53} Chambers, \textit{Facing It}, 62.
\textsuperscript{54} ‘Confusion about transmission now causes approximately half the U.S. population to refuse to give blood. Many believe that you can “catch” AIDS through casual contact, such as sitting beside an infected person on a bus.’ Treichler, \textit{How to Have Theory in an Epidemic}, 13.
rules’, thereby gesturing towards the psychoanalytic contention that illness is a psychosomatic dramatisation of the dangerous yet compulsive behaviours of the patient. Watney has also noted that AIDS has been interpreted as a so-called ‘spectacle’ of ‘corporal punishment’ against homosexuals for their violations of God’s laws, along with the ‘unquestionable governance of marriage, parenthood, and property’.

Upon hearing about Hujar’s embarrassing and hurtful encounter with Bruno, Wojnarowicz concocts a plan that will play upon Bruno’s worst fears about homosexuality and contagion:

I wanted to go into Bruno’s at rush hour and pour ten gallons of cow’s blood onto the grill and simply say, “You know why.” But that was something I might have done ten years ago. Instead I went in during a crowded lunch hour and screamed at Bruno demanding an explanation and every time a waitress or Bruno asked me to lower my voice I got louder and angrier until Bruno was cowering in back of the kitchen and every knife and fork in the place stopped moving. But even that wasn’t enough to erase this rage. (CK, 106)

Despite pleas for Bruno and a waitress for Wojnarowicz to control himself within this public space, Wojnarowicz’s refusal to speak softly is a refusal to submit to the homophobic pressure of remaining silent in the face of routine injustice and stigmatisation. Although a shocking and darkly comic image of wish-fulfilment, in which Wojnarowicz’s cow’s blood is visually indistinguishable to the supposedly ‘infected’ blood of the PWA, such a demonstration proves to be less effective as a political gesture than speaking out ‘in clear and loud tones’ (CK, 153) against this

56 As per Karl Menninger, ‘Illness is in part what the world has done to a victim, but in larger part it is what… the victim has done with his world, and with himself.’ Menninger, quoted in Sontag, Illness as Metaphor, 48.
bigot. The centrality of Wojnarowicz’s voice here cannot be understated; Wojnarowicz is loud, belligerent and persistent, to the point where no one in the restaurant can ignore him or his grievances: ‘every knife and fork in the place stopped moving’. This extract exemplifies the absolute necessity in verbalising both the presence of systemic homophobia and the strength of one’s alternative beliefs and desires in a context where President Reagan remained wilfully silent about the magnitude of the AIDS crisis and its devastating impact upon the gay male population. Maintaining a belligerent and recalcitrant voice and displaying the strength of one’s physical body in spite of illness and disease helped to dispel phobic assumptions about the gay male PWA as pitiful, weakened, and deviant. Responding to the social injunction against the politicisation of mourning and remembrance, Wojnarowicz devised a way to memorialise the deaths of PWAs as well as calling attention to the inescapable and substantial contribution of the Reagan government made to the mounting death toll of gay men:

I imagine what it would be like if, each time a lover, friend, or stranger died of this disease, their friends, lover or neighbors would take the dead body and drive with it in a car a hundred miles an hour to Washington D.C. and blast through the gates of the white house and come to a screeching halt before the entrance and dump their lifeless form on the front steps. It would be comforting to see those friends, neighbors, lovers and strangers mark time and place and history in such a public way. (CK, 122)

In imagining that he can throw the body of a PWA onto the steps of Washington, Wojnarowicz proves how entangled within the act of witnessing are tensions between the public and the private, and the political and the personal as they relate to social

58 ‘Consider this: as a society we had to endure the media spectacle surrounding the polyps in Ronald Reagan’s asshole found during a routine examination and subsequently removed, and yet for the eight years during his presidency, he was completely silent about the AIDS epidemic. In those eight years we were denied access to any real information concerning our bodies in the midst of this crisis. We still are.’ Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives, 144-145.
resistance and activism. This is neatly summarised by Simon Watney, who states that ‘the cultural challenge of adequately memorializing the dead is always intimately connected to the widely shared yet generally private, individual experience of grief and cumulative multiple loss.’ Yet Wojnarowicz also struggled to rationalise his anger towards the histrionic ignorance of American culture towards the transmission of AIDS and the experiences of the PWA. His oppositional rhetoric and recalcitrant voice at times led to flights of imagined violence and disturbing fantasies where Wojnarowicz takes on the role of the ‘avenging angel’ in eliminating the most bigoted homophobes of his society. For instance, his essay, ‘Close to the Knives,’ inflected as it is with his own inestimable grief towards Hujar’s death, also involves disturbing moments in which Wojnarowicz daydreams of ‘tipping Amazonian blowdarts in “infected blood” and spitting them at the exposed necklines of certain politicians’ (CK, 104). It is impossible to separate Wojnarowicz’s ‘individual experience of grief’ with the ‘cumulative multiple loss’ which he sees as resulting from arguments entrenched in the American legal and political systems to protect rather than prevent homophobia and hate-related crimes. His prose moves fluidly from a retrospective account of the homosexual panic defence, where a defendant can be freed from the charge of homicide if claiming ‘self-defense because this queer tried to touch him’, to his present situation lying on Hujar’s bed ‘that was the scene of an intense illness’ (CK, 105). Wojnarowicz notices the television turned to a channel with a documentary on the cost of AIDS. Recording the quoted speech of ‘some fella in the healthcare system’ (CK, 105) is used by Wojnarowicz as an opportunity to authenticate prior claims about the blatant prejudices dually held by lay and

59 Watney, ‘These Waves of Dying Friends,’ in Imagine Hope, 225.
government groups towards homosexual male PWAs, particularly on the issue of ‘responsibility’ towards the transmission and contraction of the syndrome:

I can’t even remember what he [healthcare worker] looks like because I reached through the television screen and ripped his face in half – he’s saying, ‘If I had a dollar to spend for health care I’d rather spend it on a baby or an innocent person with some illness or defect not of their own responsibility; not some person with AIDS…’ (CK, 105)

However, there are other points in Close to the Knives where Wojnarowicz seems better able to use his voice and body as a blistering indictment against the social invalidation of PWAs by the homophobic discourses of his 1980s American context. I will end this chapter by quoting at length an incredible passage from ‘Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch-Tall Politician,’ which firmly supports the contention that Wojnarowicz employed a rhetoric of oppositionality and recalcitrance as part of his armature against the biomedical, media, political, and religious discourses of the Reagan era. This rhetoric places Wojnarowicz decisively in an activist tradition, where resistance in the form of belligerence and a refusal to be silenced were tantamount to a refusal for the public to ignore the deaths of PWAs and their inextricable connection with widespread homophobia and heterosexism. Leaving my chapter at this point pays due notice to the problematics of responsibility and survivorhood which mark the AIDS diary and any text in which the death of the author, following Chambers, is the condition for the production of his/her narrative. Infused with anger, a profound sense of injustice, and self-assurance of both his physical and mental strength in the wake of ‘murder on a daily basis for nine count then nine long years’ in this ‘killing machine called america [sic]’, Wojnarowicz chooses to use every ounce of his body in his fight against AIDS and the obliteration of the political rights and memory of gay male PWAs. In mobilising his own body to
fight the crisis – ‘all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release’ – Wojnarowicz is also probing his audience to do the same thing through the act of reading, which ensures that his death has not been forgotten. His extreme defiance and the promise of violence are marked, therefore, with a sense of futurity and optimism, in which the power of his discourse ‘survive[s] as an act of social provocation capable of unsettling’ the reader, that is, his survivor.60

I wake up every morning in this killing machine called america and there’s a thin line between thought and action and that line is simply made up of blood and muscle and bone... and as each T-cell disappears from my body it’s replaced by ten pounds of pressure ten pounds of rage and I focus that rage into nonviolent resistance but that focus is starting to slip my hands are beginning to move independent of self-restraint and the egg is starting to crack america america america seems to understand and accept murder as a self-defense against those who would murder other people and it’s been murder on a daily basis for nine count then [sic] nine long years and we’re expected to pay taxes to support this public and social murder and we’re expected to quietly and politely make house in this windstorm of murder but I say there’s certain politicians that had better increase their security forces and there’s religious leaders and health-care officials that had better get bigger fucking dogs and higher fucking fences and more complex security alarms for their homes and queer-bashers better start doing their work from inside howitzer tanks because the thin line between the inside and the outside is beginning to erode and at the moment I’m a thirty-seven-foot-tall one-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-two-pound man inside this body and all I can feel is the pressure all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release. (CK, 161-162)

With this provocation, Wojnarowicz stamps his emphasis on the dilemma of the artist with AIDS in America, a condition that was for him both vital and insoluble in the social context of the 1980s. As can be seen, it was for Wojnarowicz impossible to disentangle anger from the work of mourning, and thus how the act of witnessing

60 Chambers, Facing It, 85.
entailed both the responsibility to memorialise and engage his readers with the urgent need for action.
CHAPTER THREE

‘All I Can Feel Is the Pressure and the Need for Release’: The Figures of the Outlaw and Open Road in *The Waterfront Journals* and *Close to the Knives*

I ended my last chapter with the claim that Wojnarowicz’s rhetoric of recalcitrance and oppositionality were essential in his battle against the homophobic and moralising discourses circulating within and around the first decade of the AIDS crisis. My introduction and second chapter have also made clear that for Wojnarowicz, the Reagan administration was an exemplary model of the ONE-TRIBE NATION due to its pernicious injunction against diversity and the attendant pressure the administration exerted over individuals to conform to its heteronormative logics of family, law, and religion. This chapter follows on from these concerns by locating other strategies Wojnarowicz employed to challenge the ‘preinvented existence’ (*CK*, 37) the ONE-TRIBE NATION imposes upon its members. Following on from Wojnarowicz’s claim that there are ‘literally millions of tribes’ (*CK*, 121) in America that are obscured when falsely perpetuating the normative and ideal citizen as white, heterosexual, able-bodied and upper-middle class, I argue that his essay, ‘In the Shadow of the American Dream: Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins’ in *Close to the Knives* and *The Waterfront Journals* disclose the social variety of the American nation through the metaphoric vehicle of the open road. I have chosen to focus on *The Waterfront Journals* rather than *Sounds in the Distance*, the text upon which it is based, for two reasons. First, as a text which was predominantly composed well before Wojnarowicz’s post-diagnosis period in the mid-late 1980s yet posthumously reorganised by Amy Scholder and published by Vintage, *The Waterfront Journals*
embodies the underlying tension which we see in the critic’s summation of this artist’s oeuvre. The monologues in The Waterfront Journals are in fact the same ones which we find in Sounds in the Distance, however they invariably take on a number of interpretations that make it difficult to separate Wojnarowicz’s more general political statements about poverty and sexual discrimination in America and his direct condemnation of homosexual PWAs by the Reagan government in the first decade of the AIDS crisis. This oscillation between the before- and after- is a rhetorical movement that informs the core problematic of this doctoral thesis, in which I advocate Wojnarowicz’s value as a spokesperson for many political agendas, even if it is impossible to ignore his profound contribution to anti-establishment politics during the AIDS crisis. Second, focusing on The Waterfront Journals rather than Sounds in the Distance will allow me to assess the degree to which Scholder and Tony Kushner’s introduction has attempted to corral the various monologues into a tightly controlled space of signification, and whether their tendency too is to re-envision these monologues within the context of his later AIDS writings.

Within the literature and films of the open road, the automotive journey is presented as crystallising the subject’s ontological awakening through instigating a decisive break from his/her context of origin. Consequently, representations of the open road and automotive travel in Wojnarowicz’s texts invite attention towards how his insights into the social landscape of America changed in accordance with his transcontinental movements. Indeed, Wojnarowicz’s road trips catalysed the rediscovery of America as a culturally, economically, and socially diverse nation, thereby combating the ONE-TRIBE NATION and its production of a ‘tribal nation of
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As Brian Butterick noted in his foreword to Wojnarowicz’s collection of ‘monologues’, *Sounds in the Distance*, Wojnarowicz ‘share[d] that feeling of peace and freedom as we disappear down a road, and we both hear singing in the squeal of tires over rain slicked roads and the drone of a diesel. And the tongues of people.’

At the same time, Wojnarowicz reflected upon the restorative qualities of the open road in lending clarity and direction to his existence. In his graphic novel, *7 Miles a Second* (2012), a collaborative effort involving illustrator James Romberger and colourist Marguerite Van Cook, an image of Wojnarowicz from the interior of his car as he drives through the desert has superimposed text reading ‘I am empty of all things but deep in my own body I want for something, some flood of purpose and information and desire for living to sweep back at me.’

This rallying moment in *7 Miles a Second*, which David A. Beronä calls an illustrative ‘autofictional’ biography of Wojnarowicz’s life, follows immediately the revelation of his HIV-positive status and witnessing Hujar’s death from AIDS-related complications. Given the proximity of his road trip to these traumatic events as they are depicted in *7 Miles*, the reader may infer temporal, psychic, and generic connections between automotive travel and a sense of social disempowerment and rejection. Indeed, Wojnarowicz embarked on one of his most significant cross-country trips following his HIV-diagnosis, thereby demonstrating how this artist utilised a numerous aesthetic strategies in order to make sense of his changing body

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2 Monologues from the Road, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 3, Manuscripts, Subseries E, Box 6, Folder 242, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.

3 Wojnarowicz, *7 Miles a Second*, illustrations by James Romberger, colour by Marguerite Van Cook (Seattle, Fantagraphics, 2012), 54. All subsequent references to this text will be cited as *SM*.


5 See the following audio recordings: Cross Country/Great Dreams – 1989, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0479, 092.0481, and 092.0483. All items are listed in David Wojnarowicz Papers with the same title, but a different media number.
ethics, as well as the entanglement of homophobic and biomedical discourses which denigrated the rights and personhood of PWAs in the 1980s. Nevertheless, Wojnarowicz had always and already sought the open road as a way to escape the frighteningly violent and homogeneous structure of the ‘Universe of the Neatly Clipped Lawn’ (CK, 151). As a child, Wojnarowicz escaped the oppression of suburbia, with its pretence of idyllic family life, by walking to the countryside in order to reconnect with nature. Wojnarowicz regarded nature as possessing a spirituality that was primordial and ultimately mystifying in its apparent lawlessness and rejection of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. The ‘universe of the forests and lakes’ offered a brief repose for Wojnarowicz from the ‘Universe of the Neatly Clipped Lawn’, where he and his siblings lived in absolute terror of their father who brutalised them in the plain sight of dispassionate neighbours: ‘I didn’t think of my father picking up my sister and slamming her down on a sidewalk in front of our home… and I didn’t think of the neighbors mowing their lawns and watering their flower gardens without missing a beat when my father did these things’ (CK, 152). The open road, therefore, acted as a conduit between the city and suburbia – which were for Wojnarowicz in the firm grasp of the ideologies of the ONE-TRIBE NATION – and the apparent lawlessness and freedom that the rural landscape of America entailed. For Wojnarowicz, there were still parts of America’s physical and social geography that were yet to be conquered by the ONE-TRIBE NATION.

We will soon see how Wojnarowicz’s journeys on the open road play on both the tropes of rebellion and metamorphosis in his deliberate embodiment of the figure of the (social) outlaw. Indeed, within a heteronormative context, Wojnarowicz always and already was regarded as (to use one of his figures of speech) ‘living close to the knives,’ that is to say he occupied both a subject position of marginality and
social deviance as well as existed on the geographical fringes of his society due to his homelessness and poverty. Wojnarowicz, whether a teen hustler in Times Square or a seropositive gay man, embodied the figure of the outlaw in his society for failing to conform to its heteronormative scripts. Furthermore, The Waterfront Journals conveys Wojnarowicz’s affinity with down-and-out figures and his determination to record their voices in order to present to his reader a variegated social tableau of the American nation. As he said in ‘The Compression of Time,’ an interview with Barry Blinderman, despite his relative economic stability and public notoriety in later life, Wojnarowicz nonetheless felt that his true allies and kinfolk were the men and women living and working on the streets of New York City:

I spent years and years going back to the street in my free time and I would hang around with the people that inhabited those areas – hooked, runaway kids and others. Even after I came off the streets, for a long time the streets were still the only place that I felt comfortable; those people were like a tribe I had left.

Wojnarowicz, in The Waterfront Journals, invoked the laissez-faire attitude of the outlaw and the gritty post-realistic tenor of down-and-out fiction in order to create a humanising portrait of these individuals, often misunderstood or censured within a capitalist framework of productivity and financial accumulation. Tony Kushner confirms the unambiguous political purpose in relaying these figures of vagabondage and itinerancy to the reader of comparative socio-economic privilege: ‘Wojnarowicz offers and provokes anger over brutality, degradation, exploitation, and oppression,

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6 Despite having an affinity with these individuals, Wojnarowicz was profoundly fearful of ending up on the streets even after achieving financial success in the art world. As Cynthia Carr relates, ‘In the seventeenth-page epistle to Ensslin written in ’76 at the San Francisco Y, he’d fantasized about withdrawing from society to hang out with social monsters, and he concluded, “It’s inevitable – I’ll end up there.”’ Cynthia Carr, Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 99.

and he decries the complicity of our social order in creating and perpetuating such conditions.”

Fran Lebowitz has remarked upon the aesthetic similarities between Wojnarowicz’s representations of the open road and the galería of social voices encountered during these journeys, and Jack Kerouac’s own democratisation of the American populace. Lebowitz’s willingness to trace a genealogical line from Kerouac to Wojnarowicz is a conclusion also made by Elizabeth Young, who writes that Wojnarowicz’s language ‘has its roots in Kerouac’s attempts at transcribing thought and speech and in Charles Olson’s idea of the natural “projective” verse’. That may well be so, but as I argue within this chapter, Kerouac is but one literary intersection which we can make with Wojnarowicz’s depictions of the open road and outlaw: these tropes are not under the sole ownership of disaffected avant-garde writers such as Kerouac but are part of a longer trend in American fiction in which road journeys have served as ‘vehicles for America’s sense of self as autonomous and mobile’. As I will show, Wojnarowicz’s literature also pays an aesthetic debt to the democratic humanist pulse of Walt Whitman’s Leaves of Grass; indeed, his poems, including ‘Song of the Open Road,’ attempt to catalogue with compassion and equanimity the variegated social landscape of America. Wojnarowicz’s writings share Whitman’s aim, as he adopts the role of an amanuensis in The Waterfront Journals in order to transcribe with authenticity and believability a number of narratives which have been silenced by the monologic apparatus of the ONE-TRIBE

NATION. By the same token, Wojnarowicz’s texts may be said to draw from the conventions of the picaresque genre, for although *The Waterfront Journals* does catalogue the ‘voices of men and women you will encounter as you travel the highways and backroads of this land’,\(^\text{12}\) he nonetheless turns his explicit attention towards figures on the discursive periphery of society. Although far from a bravura display of the hero/ine’s wit and cunning in escaping situations by the skin of his/her teeth, Wojnarowicz’s subjects must often resort to subterfuge and criminal acts to survive at the same time as evading the law. Nonetheless, Wojnarowicz neither condemns nor valorises such figures, but merely acts as a mediator between them and the ‘preinvented world’.

Wojnarowicz certainly held a fascination towards criminality and social transgression from a young age, as he mentioned to Keith Davis in an audio interview:

> After I came to New York my feelings about criminals and things were really strong. … They were feelings that I could associate with images that I experienced in New Jersey like when I was little there were — I remember some guy getting arrested at his house… I remember seeing a cop car like pass through the neighbourhood… and I remember this car come screaming by… from what I remember when I think about that image he [the assailant] was like extremely handsome and there was just something, I guess like whether it was a kind of power that he held in the sense of creating all that disturbance and all those cops and all that activity… like the taboo of it and everything else… it was he same sort of feelings that I used to get from reading… Hardy Boys stories… like these criminal types were always… there was like this whole secret world that had nothing to do with [your own].\(^\text{13}\)

As a collection of ‘monologues,’ Wojnarowicz’s *The Waterfront Journals* seamlessly

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\(^{12}\) Monologues from the Road, Wojnarowicz Papers.

\(^{13}\) David Wojnarowicz Interviewed by Keith Davis – Part 2 of 3, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0487.
blends personal biography and mythology; the reader is never entirely sure whether the anonymous narrators and the events they recount are a composite of Wojnarowicz and others’ experiences, or are in fact pure fabrication. But perhaps this is beside the point; as Carlo McCormick wrote in ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man’, Wojnarowicz possessed an ‘uncanny ability to convey the outlaw with such seemingly candid honesty, directness and human compassion [that however]… fantastic his stories and imagery may be, they are consistently believable.’

Furthermore, as the editors of Wojnarowicz’s Brush Fires in the Social Landscape have stated, ‘It is impossible to separate Wojnarowicz’s life from his art; they intertwine synergistically and serendipitously, contesting hypocrisy and oppressive forms of authority.’ Consequently, the first section of my chapter considers the personal allure of the open road for Wojnarowicz, which was often encountered during pivotal moments of his life that necessitated either interruption or complete abstraction from his immediate context, along with his later cultivation of an outlaw aesthetic to lend further veracity and pathos to his autobiographical narrative. In other words, Wojnarowicz understood both the appeal and marketability of presenting himself to his audiences as a self-trained artist whose idiosyncratic and ‘gritty’ style resulted from his own experiences of suffering, poverty, and sexual exploitation on the streets.

Moreover, Wojnarowicz’s fascination with automotive travel and its (re)calibration as a journey of erotic experimentation follow on from the work of contemporary gay American filmmakers during the post-Stonewall era. Distributed in 1992, the year of Wojnarowicz’s death, The Living End, directed by the New Queer...

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14 Carlo McCormick, ‘Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,’ in Wojnarowicz, 7 Miles a Second, quoted in Beronà, ‘A Renegade of Expression.’
Cinema filmmaker Gregg Araki, is an interesting counterpoint to Wojnarowicz’s open road journeys. Indeed, their temporal proximity suggests that there was considerable interest circulating within (sub)artistic circles of the 1980s and early 1990s in America towards the transformative and enthralling possibilities of automotive travel. Both these texts exploit the double valence of cruising by queering the equivalence of masculinity with automobility. Indeed, the road trip has traditionally been perceived as the rightful domain of the hyper-masculine and heterosexual man; that Wojnarowicz triangulates ‘that marriage of body-machine and space’ (CK, 41) with the figure of the gay and promiscuous man demonstrates how the open road journey in his oeuvre involves the transgression of both sexual and social norms. I therefore agree with Ben Gove’s appraisal that embarking on road trips enabled Wojnarowicz a ‘greater diversity [in] erotic fantasies and encounters’ through the intersection of psychic and physical mobility. As the artist contended, ‘all my work sprang out of travel’.

Although having stressed a connection between Wojnarowicz’s HIV-diagnosis and the cultivation of an outlaw aesthetic in his writings, I nonetheless wish to state that Wojnarowicz had since his youth perceived himself as a marginal and dispossessed individual. Understanding at a young age that his erotic desires were not containable within the category of heterosexuality and that ‘Some of us are born with the cross hairs of a rifle scope printed on our backs or skulls’ (CK, 58), Wojnarowicz sought comfort both from the morally ambiguous denizens of urban nightlife and the wide expanses of the countryside in order to entertain alternative possibilities to the ‘preinvented existence’ of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. This explains to the reader the curious structure and presentation of The Waterfront Journals: having been composed

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17 Wojnarowicz, quoted in Gove, *Cruising Culture*, 134.
over the course of numerous road trips – as indicated by the episodic and discrete structure of the ‘monologues’ – and containing few spatio-temporal coordinates by which to contextualise its speakers, *The Waterfront Journals* presupposes a certain performativity and orientation when conjuring an ‘authentic’ voice of the streets.

Rather than having to pay a debt to the open road narrative through a tireless adherence to the ‘sequence of a journey from preparation to departure, routing, decisions about goals and modes of transport, the arrival, return and re-entry, and finally, the recording or reconstructing of events in the telling of the story’,¹⁸ *The Waterfront Journals* and *Close to the Knives* are nonetheless infused with a spirit of vagabondage and a digressive temporality that speak to the outlaw’s sense of homelessness and on-the-hop decision making. At certain points in *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz reflects upon how his own status as a gay seropositive man is enough to make him feel as if he is ‘on the run’ from the lawmakers of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. As Dianne Chisholm writes, ‘Wojnarowicz shares a fugitive’s paranoia of law and order’ that neatly dovetails with the archetypal character of the outlaw in open road literature.¹⁹ Wojnarowicz certainly depicted himself as such in *Close to the Knives*, wherein he claimed that his status as an outlaw and outsider to the normative economic, social, and sexual impulses of the ONE-TRIBE NATION had a definite political consequence in enabling him to challenge its restrictions and limits:

> Since my existence is essentially outlawed before I even come into knowledge of what my desires are or what my sensibility is… then I can… unfurl a screen that creates a horizon and landscape that is

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uninfected by the letters and words of ‘law’ and pull out my weapon and defend myself from intrusive and disruptive actions. (CK, 59-60)

As I demonstrated in chapter two, Wojnarowicz defended himself and other PWAs ‘from intrusive and disruptive actions’ by making visible within the public sphere the extreme forms of discrimination his community was made to endure. In this chapter, however, I show how Wojnarowicz armed himself against the ONE-TRIBE NATION by simultaneously disclosing the illusion of the ‘preinvented world’ and ‘unfurl[ing] a screen that creates a horizon and landscape’ accurately demonstrating the sheer amount of diversity and variation within the American nation. Whether in terms of presenting the gay subculture of cruising that attends the stereotypical settings of rest stops and parking lots in open road journeys or acting as an amanuensis for the most dispossessed and vagrant members of his society, Wojnarowicz’s *The Waterfront Journals* and *Close to the Knives* achieve with equanimity their purpose as a form of social stocktaking.

‘My Existence Is Essentially Outlawed’: Wojnarowicz and Self-Mythology

Reviewing Wojnarowicz’s biography and concentrating in particular on the numerous transcontinental road trips he undertook are vital for this chapter, since together they illustrate Wojnarowicz’s propensity to embellish with narrative tension and drama his lived experience as an ‘outlaw’ of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. As I have demonstrated in earlier chapters, Wojnarowicz’s literature, politics, and aesthetics were intricately connected with his subjectivity as a gay man and later as a gay PWA. Consequently, Wojnarowicz’s emphasis on the open road in the essay, ‘In the Shadow of the America Dream’ simultaneously converges with and diverges from the generic
conceits of automotive travel, since it examines the unparalleled opportunities for self-revelation in travelling along the many highways and deserted plains of America.

Wojnarowicz remarks that ‘I was making like the first man on the moon walking the deep creviced surfaces of the flintstones landscape. I was hoping to spot a rattler or a scorpion – after almost a decade of wandering through the southern and western states I’d never come across a rattler in the wild’ (CK, 49). Here we identify how Wojnarowicz’s transcontinental journey involved moments where freedom was equated with spatial mobility, and how witnessing for the first time the ‘deep creviced surfaces of the flintstones landscape’ became for him as significant as discovering an entirely new world that so far remains outside the reach of the ONE-TRIBE NATION: ‘I was making like the first man on the moon’. Yet ‘In the Shadow of the American Dream’ departs from the open road and picaresque convention where geographical travel can restore in full one’s psychic health and wholeness. In Rowland A. Sherrill’s Road-book America: Contemporary Culture and the New Picaresque, he argues that there is a promise in the American road tradition ‘of health or wholeness attach[ed] to the actions of taking to the road’, for example ‘for Peter Jenkins in A Walk Across America as he seeks to get past his youthful disaffection for his country, [and] for William Least Heat Moon in Blue Highways… as he rolls across the landscape in “Ghost Dancing” after suffering deep disintegrations of personal life’.20 Whilst Sherrill is quick to note that ‘personal “health” or “recovery” by way of the road is an idea clearly without warrantee in every case,’21 we might say that the rationale underpinning Wojnarowicz’s journeys is in fact the consolidation of his theoretical arguments against the ONE-TRIBE NATION in full awareness of his

21 Sherrill, Road-Book America, 215.
declining physical health. Indeed, we can infer from the frequent tone of hopelessness in the essay (‘the barren landscape becomes a pocket of death because of its emptiness’ [CK, 41]), the documentation of nightmares involving claustral and asphyxiating imagery (CK, 61-62), as well as an explicit reference to one of Wojnarowicz’s friends dying from AIDS-related complications (CK, 44), that ‘In the Shadow of the American Dream’ is an amalgamation of thoughts collected and organised around and during his 1988/89 cross-country road trip. Wojnarowicz exploits the conventions of the open road genre to offer a searing critique of the gross economic imbalances between social groups in America.

Wojnarowicz took particular interest in the country’s indigenous populations as a way to criticise the cultural imperialism of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. For instance, Wojnarowicz becomes outraged by the moral decrepitude of the tourist industry on display at Meteor Crater; he finds little to celebrate in discovering that a landmark produced by an ancient collision between the Earth and ‘a half-billion-ton chunk of iron… [with] the force of a multimegaton bomb’ is only available to those who will pay to view it: ‘some enterprising jerks charge you seven bucks to look at the hole’ (CK, 47). He later goes on to express the injurious state of America in its worship of commerce and indicates the alarming privation experienced by minority groups such as Native Americans. A Native American family must resort to trickery in order to survive in a brutal economic environment where commercial gain prevails over human contact and compassion. Wojnarowicz writes, ‘a Native American family was seated before two blankets filled with cheap turquoise trinkets and hunger. The turquoise was actually blue plastic with mineral veins printed on it’ (CK, 48).

22 This is also supported by Wojnarowicz’s recollection of a motorcycling fantasy on pages 40 and 41 of Close to the Knives, which also features in his audio recordings circa 1988/9. Cross Country/Great Dreams – 1989, Side 1, David Wojnarowicz Papers.
Such an example demonstrates how Wojnarowicz’s road trips served to ‘expose the hypocrisy and soullessness of what he perceived to be an intolerant, homophobic, and militaristic nation.’

As we can see, Wojnarowicz’s travels across America are a challenge to the interior workings of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, and with their focus on representing dispossessed and marginal groups within society they enact an ‘X-ray of Civilization’ for the reader (CK, 38). Wojnarowicz indeed intersperses this essay with theoretical postulations concerning the ONE-TRIBE NATION (CK, 37-38), as well as a growing sense of disaffection and dehumanisation in witnessing how this construct infiltrates every level of existence by destroying an individual’s agency and self-control:

I’m the robotic kid with caucasian kid programming trying to short-circuit the sensory disks. I’m the robotic kid looking through digital eyes past the windshield into the preinvented world. I’m the robotic kid gone haywire in the sudden mounds and coils of krazy-kat landscapes. I’m the robotic kid lost for a fraction of evolutionary time in the outskirts of tribal boundaries; I’ve slipped through the keyhole of an enormous psychic erector set of a child civilization. I’m the robotic kid lost from the blind eye of government and wandering the edges of a computerized landscape; all civilization is turning like one huge gear in my forehead. (CK, 63)

The above remarks demonstrate that the open road for Wojnarowicz provided a temporary reprieve from the ‘preinvented world’ yet also signalled its imminent destruction through the necessary unveiling of its ‘tribal boundaries’ and ‘computerized landscape’. As the subtitle of the essay confirms, ‘Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins’; the reader is made to understand that Wojnarowicz’s apocalypticism refers to the destruction of the monolithic structure of the ONE-TRIBE NATION and its compulsorily normative logics of family, religion, law, and

community. Living ‘in the shadow of the American Dream’ is in fact a crepuscular rather than eclipsing metaphor: Wojnarowicz is determined, following this road trip, to fight against the illusions which the ONE-TRIBE NATION perpetuates to its members. He is the ‘robotic kid’ who, drawing strength from his experiences of discrimination and hardship, will ‘short-circuit the sensory disks’ of the ‘preinvented world’ in asking himself, ‘What can these feet level? What can these feet pound and flatten? What can these hands raise?’ (CK, 63).

Another issue that is at stake in this essay and The Waterfront Journals is how Wojnarowicz, in representing the variegated experiences of individuals living on the margins of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, legitimised their struggles and accorded positive value to the logics of indeterminacy and impermanence that can often attend homelessness and privation. Yet Wojnarowicz oscillated between his documentation of the social galería of the American nation with his own reflexive process of un- and self-becoming (CK, 39). Moreover, by inserting autobiographical content into The Waterfront Journals, making him both the narrator and subject of the text, Wojnarowicz engaged in a process of self-mythologisation in which he exploited the allure and fascination with danger that the outlaw figure holds in both the picaresque tradition and the fiction of down-and-out figures. Indeed, in both its thematic and generic content, The Waterfront Journals could be categorised as part of what Rowland A. Sherrill calls ‘the new American picaresque’. Sherrill’s Road-book America: Contemporary Culture and the New Picaresque, traces a genealogical influence from the earliest picaresque fiction of La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades and Aleman’s Guzman de Alfareche to the emergence of the American ‘road books’ in the nineteenth century. The phenomenon of the

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24 See pages 99 and 100 in Carr’s Fire in the Belly.
narrative figure ‘on the roads’, who catalogues his/her self-becoming ‘whether within narrow confines or in far-flung ways’ is in direct response to contemporary American culture, at the same time as it ‘represent[s] a powerful appearance and significant transformation of the old literary form of the picaresque narrative’. Like all literary genres and modes, which wax and wane in popularity and political efficacy depending on the distinctive social forces operating in a given historical context, the picaresque is regarded by Sherrill as the de facto form during moments of ‘cultural transition, disorder, and ambiguity.’ Thinking about the genre in this way, it is no surprise that the open road journey would feature heavily in both Wojnarowicz’s Close to the Knives and Araki’s The Living End, both completed at the turn of the second decade of the AIDS crisis. Indeed, the central protagonists of The Living End are two HIV-positive young men who embark on a cross-country trip following a string of run-ins with the law in New York City.

Moreover, with its representation of figures typically excluded from normative and mainstream representation, The Waterfront Journals is imbued with a profound humanism that is central to the social project of the picaro/a; the comprehensive itemisation of different social types in the text presents an empathetic portrait of the most vulnerable and stigmatised members of Wojnarowicz’s society. Wojnarowicz was deeply compassionate towards such individuals, despite coming from what he perceived as a comparatively stable socioeconomic position. He once said to Keith Davis,

“When I was growing up like when I was travelling around the country when I was living on the West Coast relationships that I started having with guys at the time were mostly with the most down and out sort of guys that you can imagine, I mean they were semi-psychopaths and,

25 Sherrill, Road-Book America, 2, 3.
26 Sherrill, Road-Book America, 32.
you know, ex-cons, and stuff like that… whatever they were it’s like they didn’t have to prove anything… the view of the country or the view of their surroundings was real similar to what I felt even though I was [in a] much more secure – position… They made more sense to me in the way they saw things and in the way they spoke about things and in the way they related to things… I was mostly attracted to any kind of outcast whatsoever.27

This explains in part Wojnarowicz’s captivation by the writings of Arthur Rimbaud, Jean Genet, and William Burroughs: their writings typified the pleasurable admixture of eroticism, violence, and crime which he saw as emblematic of contemporary street life. Wojnarowicz was especially enamoured of Rimbaud; as Cynthia Carr explains, Rimbaud ‘was a kind of lodestar for David… Both were deserted by their fathers and unhappy with their mothers. Both ran away as teenagers. Both were impoverished and unwilling to live by the rules. Both were queer. Both tried to wring visionary work out of suffering.’28 Indeed, the instability and often misery of Wojnarowicz’s childhood had a lasting impact upon his desire to escape the tightly controlled apparatus of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, whether that be in travelling along the open highways or shifting his allegiances to the men and women whose poverty, sexuality, and lack of family ties meant they were regarded as little more than social refuse. Wojnarowicz wrote, ‘I’ve always loved being anonymous and moving around, traveling. … that’s the most important state for me to be in. Away from references. … That’s where my life makes sense.’29 The allegiance he had with these individuals, and particularly with Rimbaud, would lead this artist to create the photographic series, *Rimbaud in New York*. The series depicted Wojnarowicz, along with other friends, wearing a face mask in the image of Rimbaud in various quotidian situations in the

27 David Wojnarowicz Interviewed by Keith Davis – Part 1 of 3, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0485.
28 Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 133.
city, such as on the subway, in a diner, and in the waterfront piers (Figures 13, 14, and 15). According to the artist, photographing Rimbaud in places that he had frequented offered ‘a vague biographical outline of what my past had been – the places I had hung out in as a kid, the places I starved in or haunted on some level.’


Figure 13: Arthur Rimbaud in New York [On the Subway], 1979
Gelatin-silver print, 11 x 14 inches

Figure 14: Arthur Rimbaud in New York [Diner], 1979
Gelatin-silver print, 11 x 14 inches
Wojnarowicz's *The Waterfront Journals* is similar in aesthetic and intention to *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*: the reader is offered a privileged glimpse into the life of figures whose differences—sexual, cultural, economic, and otherwise—often make them both intensely appealing and frightening for those whose existences adhere to the edicts of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Regarding the composition of the text, Wojnarowicz’s process of social stocktaking never relied upon the use of a recording device such as a tape recorder or camera. As he mentioned in a letter to Christian Bourgois Editeur on 16 October, 1978,

> These monologues… were the bare sections of one way-conversations that I retained in memory till minutes, days, or weeks later when I would write them down in journals and scraps of paper and in letter[s] to friends around the US. They contain bits of road philosophies, accounts of street life & road life, anxieties of America’s young who live outside of society, and sections of wordflights from the lips of characters who needed to articulate for themselves and me what their lives had been composed of. I merely serviced as a filter for all of this.31

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Wojnarowicz’s role as a ‘filter’ or amanuensis for ‘America’s young who live outside of society’ had a specifically democratic orientation, ultimately serving to humanise these often marginalised figures and thereby helping to expand the definition of the American citizen through his writings.\(^32\) As Cynthia Carr confirms, Wojnarowicz was not interested in replicating the portrait of the normative and ideal citizen of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, who never rebelled against or exceeded the limits of their ‘preinvented existence’. Instead, ‘David wanted stories from those who’d opted out of society or had never gotten in… David treated these (usually) marginal people as if their positions on the margin gave them access to secret truths.’\(^33\) Yet Wojnarowicz also recognised that he was one of these ‘marginal people’ who could betoken the reader with ‘secret truths’ concerning life on the streets, such that ‘Young Guy Hanging Out on Market Street San Francisco,’ ‘Young Boy in Times Square 4:00 A.M. NYC,’ and ‘A Kid on the Piers near the West Side Highway,’ all draw upon his experiences as a young hustler, whose facility with the language and semiotic codes of the street belie his young age.\(^34\) Wojnarowicz vis-à-vis the narrator of ‘Young Guy Hanging Out on Market Street,’ relays to the reader the intense attraction which the open road holds for those disenchanted with the daily grind of urban life:

> Sometimes I think I’m gonna hang out here long enough to save some money and buy a truck and split into the desert… I figure I culd [sic] give this up and head out to Arizona – they say they got these ghost towns out in the desert that you can live in for free… that’s what I’d like man… you know – the sky as your roof and all the shit… the desert’s really got somethin – they got tar road that run through it and at night the rattlesnakes come out on the road to sleep cause it’s

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\(^{32}\) Bill Rice comments how ‘David had traveled across the country and interviewed bums and whores and down-and-outers. He never taped them though: he would keep these monologues in his mind, go back to his room, and try to write them down as accurately as possible. I thought they were stunning, just wonderful.’ Bill Rice, ‘Bill Rice,’ interview by Sylvère Lotringer, in David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side, ed. Giancarlo Ambrosino (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 57.

\(^{33}\) Carr, Fire in the Belly, 70.

\(^{34}\) Carr, Fire in the Belly, 90.
warm... the road gets heated up by the sun in the daytime and stores up the heat.\textsuperscript{35}

Wojnarowicz displays the sense of freedom that comes from perceiving the rural landscape of America as a place of lawlessness and possibility. For Sherrill, the possibility of limitless travel is part and parcel of the picaresque tradition, in which the fundamental aimlessness of the picaro/a is what allows him/her ‘to roam unfettered in spatial terms’.\textsuperscript{36} Certainly, the above extract demonstrates what Gove has called ‘the “romance of the open road”,’\textsuperscript{37} by suggesting the unrealistic possibility in which the outlaw figure is only answerable to him/herself – ‘I figure I culd [sic] give this up and head out to Arizona’ – and sees within the lonely expanse of the desert a place to settle after an eternity of indigence and restlessness: ‘that’s what I’d like man… you know – the sky as your roof and all the shit.’

We can locate in the narrator’s devil-may-care attitude and longing for the unknown possibilities of the open road Wojnarowicz’s later tendency to enhance his autobiographical experiences so as to increase his social capital in the artistic world. According to Steve Doughton, Wojnarowicz was a self-mythologiser for this reason: he was prescient of how the story of an impoverished teenager who reached the pinnacle of the artistic world in his twenties was a clever marketing ploy,\textsuperscript{38} and one which would endear him to an audience determined to hear salacious narratives

\textsuperscript{35} Young Guy on Market Street, in Sounds in the Distance-Ed. by Rinaldi, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 3, Manuscripts, Subseries E, Box 6, Folder 249. Wojnarowicz’s Sounds in the Distance was posthumously reissued, with minor changes to the number and order of monologues, as The Waterfront Journals by Grove in 1997.
\textsuperscript{36} Sherrill, Road-Book America, 37.
\textsuperscript{37} Gove, Cruising Culture, 154.
\textsuperscript{38} Wojnarowicz would often revise the age when he became a hustler. In part one of an audio recording in which he is being interviewed by Keith Davis, he jokily claims he started hustling ‘in [the third grade. … yeah there was this bunch of farmers at a club down at the end of this wheat field near my block… so they used to pay me to jump out of the birthday cakes’. David Wojnarowicz Interviewed by Keith Davis – Part 1 of 3, Wojnarowicz Papers.
involving the rejection of urban life and the call of automotive adventure. In an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, Doughton asserts:

David was an excellent promoter of his work. He constructed this myth about himself. That was no accident. He knew the story of a nine-year-old runaway was a very romantic notion to critics, collectors, and people in general. And although these stories were basically true, he also knew their value. His work was easily marketed as the pure expression of this ex-street hustler who got his education suffering, fighting, and surviving on the mean streets of the big city and not at art school. ‘This is the real stuff here, folks.’ People ate it up…

He was no fool about his career. David came to really understand the power of myth. And once he had achieved some notoriety due to the perpetuation of the myth of David Wojnarowicz, he used this notoriety to say some very crucial things.39

‘Young Guy Hanging Out on Market Street’ is essentially Wojnarowicz’s own experience of hustling with his street buddy, Keenan.40 Wojnarowicz pays attention to oral vernacular in order to create a voice that is recognisable as one we would hear on the street: it is littered with abbreviations including ‘wantin’, ‘watchin’, and ‘gettin’; slang (‘some spade’); idioms (‘I almost kicked the shit out of him’), and ellipses to denote pauses and breaks in thought and speech. What is striking about the monologues is the air of neutrality in which the social motley of beggars, prostitutes, and teen runaways recount their narratives of crime, sex, and poverty to the reader. Wojnarowicz consequently pays homage to the temperament of the picaro, whose ‘narrative missions of broad social inventory’ necessitate equanimity and open-mindedness.41 For Sherrill, the trait of equanimity is what makes the picaro or outlaw

39 Steve Doughton, ‘Steve Doughton,’ interview by Lotringer, in A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side, 53.
40 Carr, Fire in the Belly, 99.
41 Sherrill, Road-Book America, 117.
‘slow to cut distinctions between high and low, tasteful and seedy, noteworthy and mundane.’

Nonetheless, the tone of the narrator and his lexical and idiomatic choices are indistinguishable from other monologues in *The Waterfront Journals*. This creates continuity across all the monologues, as well as preserving the anonymity of the narrator. Perhaps the preservation of Wojnarowicz’s anonymity is due in part to the disturbing representations of hustling in the monologue, particularly in terms of the question of consent and exploitation: a member of the Mafia propositions both Wojnarowicz and Keenan and invites them back to his apartment for sex. The second part of the monologue involves the duo nearly stealing money off a homeless man. Wojnarowicz, in reality, is horrified, but in the monologue he has a different reaction: ‘we saw that he was just an old bum wearing some suit that was too big for him and we burst out laughin right there…’ This revision of his lived experience transforms him into a street youth whose personal hardships have necessitated his callous and morally ambivalent relation to others.

The monologue, ‘Young Boy in Times Square 4:00 A.M. NYC’, relates three incidents that occurred during Wojnarowicz’s adolescence. The first is where, as a young hustler, Wojnarowicz developed a friendship with local prostitutes, so that they would give him money when he was not making business and in return he would watch out for police vans and the vice squad. The second part explains how he and a

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42 Sherrill, *Road-Book America*, 117.
43 ‘Young Guy Hanging Out on Market Street – San Francisco” is the story of David and Keenan getting picked up by the Mafia guy on Seventh Avenue, followed by a somewhat fictionalized account of the night he and Willy spotted a man in a business suit and ran up to mug him, armed with stolen meat cleavers, and saw that he was a terrified old bum. In the real-life account, David almost burst into tears. In the monologue, the street kid bursts out laughing.’ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 99.
44 Wojnarowicz, *The Waterfront Journals*, 23. All subsequent references to this text will be cited as WJ.
street buddy travelled to Coney Island and engaged in a game of pants-kicking on the beach in order to steal money from the wallets of other visitors:

"ya just keep shouting and laughin and kickin the fuckin pants down the beach till ya get a ways away [...] I finally stopped doin I though cause the last time I did it [...] there was this fuckin gold detective badge hooked inside it [the wallet]. (WJ, 27)"

The narrator and street buddy also stole money from apartment blocks, ingeniously using dumbwaiters to do so: ‘We’d ride dumbwriters up and down old buildings in Brooklyn from the roof and kick in doors and pick up some cash’ (WJ, 27). Further showing the conflation of fact and fiction in his self-mythology, Wojnarowicz relayed in a biographical note to the years 1968-69 how he ‘Kicked pants on [the] beach in summer to rob wallets; stopped when I opened a wallet and found a gold detective badge’, as well as how he ‘Rode dumbwaiters down to apartment in tenement buildings to raid refrigerators.’

Repetition as a strategy of Wojnarowicz’s self-mythologisation is also evident in the last section of ‘Young Boy in Times Square’. After being picked up by a john, the narrator follows him to a cheap hotel. He is paid to watch, through a keyhole, a man having sex with a female prostitute in the adjacent room. In the monologue, the prostitute is described as having scars across her body. This is visually repeated in 7 Miles, the effect of which is truly shocking, for on the woman’s torso are two large gashes that diagonally bisect the other, which are still red and bruised around the stitching. The adolescent Wojnarowicz of 7 Miles, despite having been initiated into the world of sex at the age of nine, is understandably uncomfortable being a voyeur to this heterosexual sex scene; it was for him the first time ‘I’d seen how men’s and

[46] ‘Another member of the gang took me in the woods and showed me how to put my dick in his mouth. Then he did the same to me. I asked him if we were allowed to do that; he said, yeah.’ Wojnarowicz, ‘Biographical Dateline,’ in Tongues of Flame, 114.
women’s bodies interact having only had sex with older men since I was nine’ (SM, 15). He quickly becomes horrified, however, when the prostitute turns towards the keyhole: ‘how that guy could fuck that woman with those fresh wounds staring him in the face! Like he couldn’t conceive of pain attached to the body he was fucking’ (SM, 15). In his article, ‘A Renegade of Expression,’ Beronä comments upon Wojnarowicz’s myopic focus on two aspects of his life in 7 Miles: his days as a hustler in New York City, and the period immediately preceding his death from AIDS-related complications. For Beronä, that Wojnarowicz chose to make reference to his later years as a successful and thriving artist of the East Village scene further suggests the cultivation of an outlaw aesthetic and the autofictional status of the graphic novel. As he writes, ‘The fact that this information is suppressed from this comic [7 Miles a Second] highlights the focus of this autofiction clearly on his life as a homosexual who felt marginalized and angry at the political indifference to the AIDS epidemic in America.’

I would add that this anger is also directed at the social ambivalence, if not outright hostility towards, individuals who exist on the ideological and physical borders of society. Wojnarowicz lived as an outlaw and narrativised his experiences through this trope because he was always and already perceived as such within the hegemonic and monocultural construct of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. At the same time, we see in The Waterfront Journals how Wojnarowicz was able to capture the voices of an array of social outcasts, thereby operating as ‘a kind of megaphone through which various aspects of muted America shout themselves into objective existence’.

It was for him a fundamental ethical act to give the ‘speaking floor… to people who seldom have the chance to speak to a listening audience’.

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47 Beronä, ‘A Renegade of Expression.’
48 Sherrill, Road-Book America, 52.
Rather than effacing their identities and further stigmatising them within the public domain, Wojnarowicz’s monologues present their hardships to the audience in a way which humanises and encourages understanding across social and cultural divides. Fundamentally, Wojnarowicz launches an accusation against the ONE-TRIBE NATION for the misfortunes of his speakers and advocates for justice on their behalf.

**Boredom, Stasis, and Inactivity on the Open Road**

In open road narratives where the primary subject takes to the highways with the intention of regaining a connection to a mythic American past, there is often a romanticisation of his/her journey, in which the ‘never-ending rhythm of the tarmac and the sublime joy of motion’ lures the subject into a false sense that travelling will involve ceaseless movement and adventure. More than this, the traveller is convinced that he/she will immediately encounter the multitude of inimitable voices that together form the social fabric of the American nation. Certainly, Sal Paradise, of *On the Road*, witnesses in Dean Moriarty’s narratives of automotive travel the call of both unforgettable adventure and a return to an America where people have an intrinsic bond with the land they live and work off:

> And in his excited way of speaking I heard again the voices of old companions and brothers under the bridge, among the motorcycles, along the wash-lined neighborhood and drowsy doorsteps of afternoon where boys played guitars while their older brothers worked in the mills.  

Particularly at the turn of the twentieth century, automobility was equated with freedom, where autonomy over travel and destination was tantamount to having

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control over one’s life and destiny. Empowerment through automotive freedom is exemplified also in the panegyric tones of Walt Whitman’s ‘Song of the Open Road’:

From this hour, freedom!  
From this hour I ordain myself loos’ of limits and imaginary lines,  
Going where I list, my own master, total and absolute,  
Listening to others, considering well what they say,  
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,  
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the hold that would hold me.  
I inhale great draughts of space,  
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.  

Whitman is triumphant in his poem, claiming his total conquest of America through traversing with ease and surety its considerable geography; he claims the east and west, and north and south, ‘are mine,’ asserting therefore his proprietary right to ownership of the land in answering the ‘song’ of the open road. He is a force unto himself, working under the misconception of being ‘my own master, total and absolute,’ and relinquishes all responsibilities towards others in taking to the highway. No longer a slave to the monotonous rhythms of labour and work, he takes his time now to listen and absorb the galería of voices across the ‘great draughts of space’ that comprise the American nation. Once again, we see the traveller intoxicated by the possibilities of self-actualisation and adventure which the open road promises to the dejected city dweller. Like Sal who arrives in Tracy, California, after hitchhiking with a mad man, the traveller is enticed by the mystery surrounding the names of unknown towns and lands: ‘All the magic names of the valley unrolled – Manteca, Madera, all the rest.’  

53 Kerouac, On the Road, 72.
writing about the open road are the periodic bouts of boredom, inaction, stasis, and visual monotony that can attend what is a protracted or unplanned journey.

Following on from the picaresque tradition of ‘celebrat[ing] the ordinary and mundane’, Wojnarowicz’s monologues are technically structured to communicate the centrality of inaction and stasis to the road journey. Some of Wojnarowicz’s narrators share Sal and Dean’s seduction with the ‘so-longed-for-west’ and the formation of a new life following transcontinental migration; others, however, are not so lucky. In its focus on loiterers, idlers, truckers, and prostitutes, The Waterfront Journals keenly translates their feeling of ‘living close to the knives’, a phrase embodying both aimlessness and deprivation. For instance, the narrator of the monologue, ‘Guy in Waterfront Hotel,’ is a quintessential American drifter, a Vietnam War veteran who returns from military service only to be greeted by unemployment and homelessness. The monologue darts from one geographical setting to another: no sooner than we are told the narrator was born in Austin, Texas, that we then hear how he moved to Colorado and Salt Lake City as a result of his father’s death. The narrator’s physical mobility, prompted less by a romantic association of the open road with adventure and hope, is as a result of financial instability. The father ‘was sent over to Pennsylvania in order to work’ and the narrator is then forced to move to Utah for the same reason (WJ, 8). This sets in stark relief how mobility is socially, ethnically, and politically inflected, where the choice to abandon one’s original context is in contradistinction to the ‘unsanctioned motion

54 Primeau, Romance of the Road, 12.
55 Kerouac, On the Road, 11.
56 ‘Guy in Waterfront Hotel’ therefore strays from the four subgenres of the open road, outlined by Primeau in Romance of the Road. These subgenres are summarised as such: 1) the decision is triggered by a desire for change; 2) American authors take to the road because they ‘feel strongly that their country’s history is short by many world standards’; (3) they aspire to redefine themselves through deliberately exiling themselves from their place of origin, and (4) ‘Deviating from standard road formats are the experimental narratives that stretch conventions into the radically discontinuous, the futuristic, or the parodic.’ Primeau, Romance of the Road, 14-15.
of vagrants or tramps… the coerced mobility of the nomad, undocumented worker, and refugee… and the circumscribed mobility of the disabled, racial others..., the poor, and women.\textsuperscript{57} Economic hardship and military conscription necessitate the relocation of Wojnarowicz’s idler: ‘so now the line moves from North America all the half way around the world to Southeast Asia and then they send me back home’. When he arrives back in the USA, however, unemployment and subsequent poverty trigger another journey on the highways. His tenuous position living on food stamps ‘not a penny to my name’ (\textit{WJ}, 9) means that he will need to relocate once again, perhaps to Portland, Oregon, in order to find work at a logging mill.

\textit{The Waterfront Journals} also considers the various motivations that trigger an individual’s decision to embark on the road and thereby leave behind painful memories and associations. The narrator of ‘Twenty-Year-Old Woman in Times Square’ is a female prostitute who loiters on Eighth Avenue. This woman regards the open road as a symbol of hope for a better life, relaying to the reader years of exploitation and violence committed against her. In open road films, highways and the automobile have historically been depicted as the provinces of men – masculinity is filtered through the equivalence of automobility and autonomy. However, as Katie Mills in \textit{The Road Story and the Rebel} relates, films such as \textit{Thelma & Louise} challenged the heterosexual and masculine matrixes of open road films, in literally placing the female subject in the driver’s seat, thus signalling control over her physical journey \textit{and} destiny. Mills quotes screenwriter Callie Jouri as saying ‘I just got fed up with the passive role of women [in road movies]. They were never driving the story, because they were never driving the car.’\textsuperscript{58} Relocating the female from the

\textsuperscript{58} Sharon Willis, ‘Hardware and Hardbodies, What Do Women Want?: A Reading of \textit{Thelma and Louise},’ 120-128, quoted in Mills, \textit{The Road Story and the Rebel}, 193.}
role of passenger to driver symbolically transformed her into an active subject in the shaping of her existence. Female automobility became a topic of interest following *Thelma & Louise* because it triggered a move away from the function of women road travellers as ‘catalytic converters – they get the men of the narrative into action, but their automobility does not represent social change.’

Returning to ‘Twenty-Year Old Woman in Times Square,’ the female narrator recalls being picked up by a trick, only for him to assault her horrifically in a nearby hotel: ‘my fuckin arms were just slit up… I fuckin wrapped them up but they haven’t stopped bleedin…’ (*WJ*, 10) This frightening encounter with a trick, rather than prompting her to file a police report, leads to her decision to leave town for good. Her assault is the necessary trigger for her self-imposed exile from New York City and decision to travel the country in search of a mythical ‘south’, that is to say, a location filled with promise and fortune: ‘I ain’t workin [in] this fucking city no more… I’m gonna take a bus down south… away from all these fucking pimps and screwballs… fuck this man, I’m going down south…’ (*WJ*, 11).

We can also see how the open road narrative invites detour, deferral, and stasis in the monologue, ‘Kentucky Driver in Rocky Mountains.’ Indeed, the structure of the Interstate Highway, in having multiple exists and arterial roads branching off from its central path, invites a multitude of erotic, epistemological, and economic transactions within and along its architecture. Freedom and liberty have always been elements of the open road narrative, but Wojnarowicz in this monologue plays up the

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59 Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel*, 192. ‘We can see *Thelma and Louise* as turning the inevitable cycle of commodification of the road film one more rotation, bringing it back to innovation by means of gender. Even more important is the fact that discussions about film genre and identity politics were not confined to the ivory towers, where people use terms like “sexual difference” and “male gaze.” Feminists in the academy were still contending with Laura Mulvey’s strict ideas about the gaze of film spectators being necessarily and only male. Along comes *Thelma and Louise* to suggest that through as basic a gesture as deconstructing the male outlaw role by casting women – women who literally appropriate the discourse of male outlaws, as Thelma did by using J.D.’s robbery speech – we can literate women from their narrative prisons and imagine new identificatory pleasures for film audiences.’ Mills, *The Road Story and the Rebel*, 195.
erotic possibilities that occur when one drifter encounters another. Working as a trucker gives the narrator certain geographical freedoms despite being restricted to a specific time in which goods need to be delivered. Driving in Colorado, ‘I can pretty much choose my route as far as direction.’ (WJ, 12) Such choice, along with the reality of unemployment (‘I’m in between jobs right now’) allow him to ‘lay off for a couple of weeks’ with some women and booze. ‘Laying off,’ rather than a purely monadic activity, incites the trucker to socialise with other dispossessed individuals. He ends up picking up a female hitchhiker who expresses interest in robbing him, and another who will cry rape if he doesn’t give her money (WJ, 11, 12). In ‘Kentucky Driver in Rocky Mountains,’ we are far from the romantic connotations of the open road, which seduces the traveller in its promise of the American landscape as a limitless and untamed geographical expanse. Instead, we have something closer to what Remi Boncoeur in On the Road calls ‘the human-interest things of life.’ Speaking to Sal during a day trip to San Francisco to write about the (in)famous Banana King, he claims that ‘When you write about the Banana King you write about the human-interest things of life.’ Wojnarowicz inarguably does the same thing in The Waterfront Journals: by transcribing the narratives of drifters, loiterers, pickpockets, beggars, prostitutes, and hustlers, his text becomes a social document which comprehensively records the range of experiences both unique and absolutely quotidian to human nature.

\footnote{That being said, the existential freedom the trucker experiences whilst on the highway belies the increasing reality of congestion, pollution, and limited space per automobile in urban hubs. As of 1986, when Driving Passion: The Psychology of the Car was published, in the United States there are two automobiles per three and a half people. With 3.8 million miles of streets, the number of yards per automobile is equivalent to 40. Not only this, Peter E. Marsh and Peter Collett question the conflation of the automobile and the social expectation of increased levels of mobility. ‘Cars are used primarily for quite short journeys, and, because of increasing congestion, our real mobility is actually declining.’ Peter E. Marsh and Peter Collett, Driving Passion: The Psychology of the Car (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), 5.}

\footnote{Kerouac, On the Road, 65.}
Within the open road genre, Primeau finds that ‘Travel has been seen as the social glue that binds society together, a way to discover one’s real self in a release from everyday constraints’. But rather than consolidating existing images of society held by the subject, travel can assist in making certain normative cultural myths come unstuck. As Wojnarowicz slowly makes his way from the East to West Coast of America, he witnesses poverty, starvation, and the exploitation of society’s most vulnerable members. By presenting the suffering of everyday individuals and those whom the ‘preinvented world’ has chosen to forget, Wojnarowicz begins to untie ‘the psychic ropes that bind the ONE-TRIBE NATION’ (CK, 143). Indeed, visualising the ‘desperation of whole families sitting in lethargy on the curbsides’ in small towns and ‘the swollen slit-eyed heads of drunks bobbing in the blue air’ (CK, 31) dismantles the pretence of middle-class domesticity and economic stability that the ONE-TRIBE NATION continuously advertises as the raison d’être for its restrictions upon individual autonomy.

One of the prevailing intentions of picaresque fiction involves negotiating a multitude of social territories in a way that neither glosses over nor stigmatises the picaro/a’s subjects for their non-normative or sometimes morally indefensible behaviour. The resulting project for Sherrill is hence one of social ‘stock-taking, with the picaresque narrative all the while acknowledging and compiling that intractable diversity, the virtually whelming pluralism, in the human inventory of American life.’ That being said, representations of America’s ‘intractable diversity’ in Close

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62 Primeau, Romance of the Road, 5. Primeau goes further to state that the highway or open road narrative extends ‘this long tradition of travel literature and added its own unique merging of the frontier spirit and the worship of the machine as a complex icon.’

63 Sherrill, Road-Book America, 109.
to the Knives will require Wojnarowicz to scrutinise the exemplary figure of the American citizen that not only forms the backbone of the American Dream but is also the chief delusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. He achieved his aim by focusing upon alternative associations and activities undertaken by minority figures in order to demonstrate the exceptional variations in culture, gender, sexuality, and race that are outlawed by the ONE-TRIBE NATION’s principle of uniformity.

This final section of my third chapter will emphasise the emancipatory possibilities of the open road, specifically for gay men like Wojnarowicz. Wojnarowicz’s automotive travels allowed him to engage in the sexual subculture of cruising, as a way to establish intimacy and trust at a time when his seropositivity and homosexuality made it increasingly difficult to find acceptance and support within a heteronormative public space. For Wojnarowicz in ‘In the Shadow of the American Dream,’ the speed of the moving automobile alters his visual faculties as well as enhances the erotic qualities of the landscape: ‘Driving a machine through the days and nights of the empty and pressured landscape eroticizes the whole world flitting in through the twin apertures of the eyes’ (CK, 26). Indeed, automobility is here equated with eroticism, since the increased speed of the vehicle on a rural highway attenuates his scopophilic gaze, such that he locates potential lovers in an otherwise deserted landscape. Figuring his eyes as ‘twin apertures’, speed alters his vision by sharpening it; his eyes become telephoto lenses that zoom in and eroticise highway workers on the side of the road. Rather than facilitating continuous linear propulsion to a destination, the automobile overcomes it practical application as a utilitarian object to adopt a symbolic position as a vehicle of self-expression and symbiosis through sexual contact. The symbolism of the automobile is both expansive and enclosing: ‘It conjures up images of speed, excitement and vitality. At the same time it also
communicates a sense of cosy seclusion – a womb-like refuge. Its potential deadliness gives it an air of aggression while its power and shape endow it with a sense of sexual potency.  

The ‘bend in the highway’, like the curvilinear shape of a periscope, allows Wojnarowicz’s vision to pinpoint the erotogenic zones of nearby road workers, thus instigating a break from the monotony and isolation of the highway:

Turning the bend in the highway suddenly reveals, a quarter mile away, a highway crew standing in a jumble of broken earth and enormous machines. In that instance I see the browned flesh of a shirtless man in shorts; I see the bare arms and ribs of a man buried in the shadows of a tractor’s cab; I see the bent-over back of a man swinging a pickax[e] with all his might. … In a moment the vehicle I’m steering passes by the scene and I’m left populating the dry plains the buttes and the cloudless sky with the touch and taste of flesh. I fill the gullies with small but heated fictions. (CK, 26)

Whereas the relative speed at which an automobile drives on a highway would typically blur the objects on either side of it, Wojnarowicz’s vision fixes upon the sensual curves of these masculine figures. The automobile simultaneously expands and contracts the temporal moment – Wojnarowicz’s vision is catapulted a quarter of a mile ahead to the highway crew, as time becomes elastic enough for his vision to absorb not only the ‘browned flesh’ of one worker, but the ‘bare arms and ribs’ of another. The physical mobility facilitated by the moving vehicle allows Wojnarowicz to imprint comprehensively his erotic desire onto the gullies that surround him.

According to Gove,

For Wojnarowicz, the magnified experience of transition while driving mirrors, and triggers, the psychical flow of fantasy. The defamiliarisation of vision and perspective in travel causes his erotic fantasies to proliferate all the more.

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64 Marsh and Collett, Driving Passion, 26.
65 Gove, Cruising Culture, 153.
The landscape, both its physical shape and its symbolic image in the psychic imaginary, are enhanced by his ‘heated fictions’ of sexually encountering these highway workers – ‘the touch and taste of flesh’. Consequently, the ‘heated fictions’ of cruising are another ‘narrative’ that contributes to the vitality of the rural ecology, and one that offers a countercultural representation to the myth of a heteronormative America. Cruising offers a countercultural representation to heteronormative scripts by avowing the emotional and psychic value in establishing modes of intimacy that challenge the primacy of kinship relations and monogamous sex.

The visual monotony of the highway gives Wojnarowicz an opportunity to engage in erotic fantasy, at the same time as facilitating the interplay of vision, memory, and sight in the production of real and imagined cruising encounters. For Wojnarowicz, ‘it doesn’t matter that they are all actually receding miles behind me on the side of the road’ (CK, 26), because he is now travelling with one of the workers into the ‘tree-filled hillsides’. They stop and have sex ‘at the edge of a lake cast into shadows by the surrounding mountainsides’ (CK, 27). Wojnarowicz returns suddenly to the here and now, as he realises this fantasy is unreeeling parallel to the ‘unraveling landscape of dry scrub plains through the front windshield and the rearview mirror.’ His thoughts return to the physical insignificance of his automobile in comparison to the immense vista that circumscribes him. Not only this, Wojnarowicz’s moment of inaction allows him to see the open road narrative as a journey involving extended moments of solitude and personal introspection:

And here is the solitary form of my body leaning back in the sunburned interior of my car, foot pressing on the gas pedal sending me forward toward the gray veils of rain drifting across the white a hundred miles away. (CK, 27)
As a narrative of (re)discovery and one that is often triggered by misfortune as a result of ill health, the open road signified for many writers a chance to reinvigorate both the body and spirit. In removing themselves spatially and experientially from one space and placing themselves in an unknown territory, the road trip certainly promised new beginnings and an escape from the past. Certainly, Wojnarowicz embarked on this road trip because of his continuing disenchantment with the state of the American nation; he wrote with desperation, ‘I feel that I’m caught in the invisible arms of government in a country slowly dying beyond our grasp’ (CK, 28). But a variety of difficult personal circumstances meant that the transcontinental journey was a necessary undertaking at that particular moment. Shortly after the death of his long-time friend and mentor, Hujar, Wojnarowicz was diagnosed with HIV.

Wojnarowicz felt strongly the intersection of erotic adventure and risk in undertaking automotive journeys. For him, driving was a way to test the limits of the body, to feel simultaneously control and its release in placing his foot on the accelerator. Experiencing driver’s fatigue, potentially as a result of the monotony of the prairies in the Midwest, Wojnarowicz starts to ‘play games with the road to shake myself up, at times squeezing my eyelids closed so that I drive quarter-mile stretches without sight and it becomes a fight to open my eyes before the side of the road overtakes me’ (CK, 28). In these moments of visual homogeneity and desultory movement, his consciousness splits off from his body, as the latter tenses at the prospect of a possible collision, whilst the former hovers over him like a ghost, exhilarated by the sensation of risk. If the open road narrative hinges on personal revelation, Wojnarowicz is stunned in the very absence of it when his eyes finally open:
they reveal nothing new about the world except a slight shift in landscape proving that increased mortality teaches me nothing. There’s no enlarged or glittering new view of the nature of things or existence. No god or angels brushing my eyelids with their wings. Hell is a place on earth. Heaven is a place in your head. (\textit{CK}, 28-29)

The emptiness of the landscape in combination with Wojnarowicz’s sense of malaise set in motion a reflection on his disillusionment towards an American society that is inexplicably bereft of guilt about the death of American civilians in times of peace. As he walks through a war museum filled with nuclear armaments, he issues a proclamation to the reader, ‘Americans can’t deal with death unless they own it’ (\textit{CK}, 35). Whereas it is entirely acceptable, even laudable, to memorialise the deaths of American soldiers to ‘whole families of camera-toting tourists’, the invisibility of PWAs and others who exceed the limits of the official agenda of a political administration diminishes even further their socio-political value in society. Wojnarowicz obliquely questions the politics of vision and posterity in this section of the chapter: death becomes valorised in its pictorial representation, often failing to account for personal losses and the sheer extent of suffering inflicted upon persons in wartime: ‘enlarged photographs of death and incineration are seen from a discreet distance. The distance is far enough so you can’t see the bodies, only the architecture’ (\textit{CK}, 35). But the symbolic violence inflicted on deceased persons is minimal compared to the persistent and interminable persecution of individuals who dare to challenge their ‘preinvented existence within a tribal nation of zombies’ (\textit{CK}, 37). Wojnarowicz was one of those individuals who saw through the ‘illusion of a one-tribe nation’ in America (\textit{CK}, 37), and through his portrayal of non-normative sexuality, corporeality, and erotic desires, was able to ‘break through the illusion and examine the structures of… [his] world’ (\textit{CK}, 38). Yet many remain trapped and disempowered within the hetero-reproductive matrix, or fail to connect with others.
who refuse to capitulate to the normative ideals of family and kinship relations. Juxtaposed against the ‘three generations of a family’ gathered for a photograph at the war museum – ‘so clean and abstract that I’m feeling dizzy’ (CK, 36) – is the image of the individual who implodes under the weight of businesses ‘sucker-punching peoples [sic] psyches’ and the government ‘offering slices of meat in the form of doubletalk’ (CK, 37). The isolation and inability for the individual to harness his/her outrage in a politically reformative manner are ultimately the root causes of self-destruction or unfathomable violence:

But when the volume of that war reaches epic dimensions, and when the person hearing it fails to connect with another member of the same tribe who can acknowledge the sound, that person can one day find themselves at the top of a water tower in suburbia armed with a high-powered rifle firing indiscriminately at the ants crawling around below. That person can one day find himself running amok in the streets with a handgun; that person can one day find himself lobbing a grenade at the forty-car motorcade of the president; or that person can end up on a street corner, homeless hungry and wild-eyed, punching himself in the face or sticking wires through the flesh of his arms or chest. (CK, 38)

It becomes apparent at this point in the chapter how vital interpersonal relations are to the formation of communities that dispel the myth of America as a cultural monolith. We see in this passage the potentially catastrophic consequences of being an already socially disreputable figure who is further alienated through failing to establish empathic bonds with other likeminded individuals: ‘That person can one day find themselves… armed with a high-powered rifle firing indiscriminately’ or ‘find himself running amok in the streets with a handgun’, or potentially ending up ‘homeless hungry and wild-eyed’. Yet this need for connection was something which Wojnarowicz grappled with, both in his artistic and personal lives; regarded by many as a loner, Wojnarowicz became even more withdrawn and isolated from his friends
after Hujar’s death and following his HIV-positive diagnosis. One way to address this isolation and social demonisation of homosexuality was to promote alternative textualities of the gay male body, where such textualities ran counter to the biomedicalising discourses of Western culture. Drawing on Lee Edelman’s *Homographs: Essays in Gay Literary and Cultural Theory*, Eric Waggoner claims that a preponderance of images in *Close to the Knives* focusing on the anatomy of gay men *in coitus* critique how the sexual deviance of homosexuals was ‘written on the body’, insofar as homosexuals were and are ‘subjected to a cultural imperative that viewed them as inherently textual – as bodies that might bear a “hallmark” that could, and must, be read’.  

66 Thus, to engage in a project that dares to make the unspeakable speakable, is to ‘contribute to the growing literature of an historically devalued erotics’ and thereby introduce into the singular image of the ONE-TRIBE NATION a multiplicity of tribes with differing desires, affects, and socialities. I would suggest that Wojnarowicz’s textual focus on the homosexual body as erotic, desirous, and dynamically engaged with others certainly assists in challenging a biomedicalised and socially constructed image of the gay male PWA or seropositive figure as emotionally (and sometimes physically) isolated, de-eroticised and weakened. Perhaps Waggoner would also consider how Wojnarowicz’s narrative treatment of the open road might also work to resist the (imposed) inertia of such bodies in space and ultimately history.

It has been established that the open road granted Wojnarowicz opportunities for interpersonal connections whilst offering him vast stretches of time where he had only himself for company. Yet this isolation is rendered as pleasurable and an

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67 Waggoner, “‘This Killing Machine Called America’”: 176.
inevitability of long-distance travel, even though it necessitates at times a desire for community and intimacy through sex. Boredom is an affect that many drivers on the open road have had to contend with; loneliness is another. With the open road narrative, there is a tension between the centripetal pull towards and centrifugal push away from sociability and (erotic) intimacy. Wojnarowicz, in the essay, is often content with the isolation imposed on him when he is without the company of fellow passengers. For isolation often leads to anonymity, and anonymity is itself predicated upon the (self-imposed) exile of an individual from all geographical, social, and cultural markers that help to identify an individual and his/her primary context of reference. Returning to Wojnarowicz’s biographical experiences, we know that the 1970s was a decade of considerable restlessness and itinerancy; he had in fact hitchhiked, freight-hopped, biked, and driven across the American continent, as well as travelled to Mexico, France, and Canada. What Wojnarowicz found most appealing about undertaking long journeys by himself was their capacity to free both his movements and sense of being tied down by biographical circumstance:

I’ve always loved being anonymous and moving around traveling: In fact, that’s the most powerful state for me to be in, away from any references. I love that moment. That’s where my life makes sense. … I came to understand that to give up one’s environment, was to also give up biography and all the encoded daily movements: the false reassurances of the railing outside the door.

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68 Sometimes this loneliness is heightened or longed-for by the driver, since life on the margins ‘inspires an even fuller, more anticipatory conviviality.’ As William Least Heat Moon says, ‘It isn’t traveling to cross the country and talk to your pug instead of people along the way. Besides, being alone on the road makes you ready to meet someone when you stop. You get sociable traveling alone’. William Least Heat Moon, Blue Highways: A Journey into America, 31, quoted in Sherrill, Road-Book America, 145.

Such isolation was indeed the necessary antidote for disastrous road trips he undertook with friends, such as a particularly explosive journey recounted in *A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side* with Steve Brown and Steve Doughton. But after travelling alone for some time, he is overcome by his physical and emotional isolation: ‘I felt unbelievably sad and sometimes it happens that way: a sensation comes out across the landscape into the cities and further into the window of the car as I’m coasting the labyrinths of the canyon streets’ (*CK*, 39).

To break this isolation, so palpable as to cause him physical distress – ‘I’m gasping from a sense of loss and desire’ – he utilises the visual code of the highway, with its architectural mainstays such as rest stops and public toilets, to seek out the affective and physiological comforts of sex. A homoerotic undercurrent is apparent in many open road narratives, most notably that of Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Written during the Cold War, *On the Road* saw driving ‘as an antidote to an alleged “crisis of the individual” – which was also a crisis of patriarchy – and an illustration of the superiority of the “American way of life.”’ Yet the overt narrative of masculine individuation in *On the Road* is nonetheless undermined by a homoerotic subtext, in particular the triangulation of Dean Moriarty’s heterosexual relationship with Marylou by Sal. Dean hatches a plan to watch Sal sleep with Marylou, but Sal dismisses him and refuses to do so until they arrive in San Francisco; it is as if their achievement in travelling across the country warrants the sexual prize of ‘making it’ with Marylou: ‘Wait until we be lovers in San Francisco; my heart isn’t in it [yet].’

Yet the open road narrative has for the most part reinforced the image of heteronormative masculinity since the inception of the genre, with the automobile

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signifying stereotypical masculine traits such as dominance, power, and virility. Wojnarowicz effectively queers this genre in unveiling the architectural backdrop of the open road as a hotbed for cruising and other promiscuous sexual relations, rather than offering the heteromasculine driver a brief repose from his onward journey. Yet Wojnarowicz quickly abandons his pessimism and disdain towards the tourism industry when he enters the public toilet at the Meteor Crater and is propositioned by another man. The commercialisation of this natural phenomenon – ‘some enterprising jerks charge you seven bucks to look at the hole’ (CK, 47) – is contrasted with the purely consensual transaction and reciprocal (sexual) exchange that occur between him and an unknown man. As Wojnarowicz enters the public restroom at the site of the Crater, he witnesses through a glory hole a clear indication of sexual interest from his soon-to-be lover. Wojnarowicz replies to him using the language of cruising with the display of his naked penis. The meaning is blatantly obvious, and the two quickly exit the rest room to find a more private space in which to explore each other’s bodies.

Locating privacy in the visual and geographical remoteness of the Arizona landscape, with its scrub brush and boulders, is a challenge for these men; despite there being countless miles of flat terrain, and ‘maybe the beginnings of mountains far away in purple tones looking like goofy cartoon hats or sideways faces’ (CK, 51), there is still an anxiety that hangs over Wojnarowicz, with the moderate risk of being arrested by highway patrollers for his sexual activities. The alternating attention Wojnarowicz pays to the conspicuously empty road in the front and back of his car, along with an arduous description of his passenger jerking off next to him, indicate

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73 This is in reference to Gila Bend, Arizona. A journal entry dated June 4 1989, states that Wojnarowicz ‘Drove from Tucson to Gila Bend a couple of hours before dusk and stopped at the crest of some mountain watching the light fade over the curve of the earth with silhouettes of goofy cactus and desert scrub’. Wojnarowicz, In the Shadow of the American Dream, 224.
how ‘Wojnarowicz often use[d] sexually explicit narratives as a counter-narrative to legal proscription of homosexual activity – sex under (and outside) the law.’ Gregg Araki’s New Queer Cinema film, *The Living End*, also undermines the taboo against homosexuality during the first two decades of the AIDS crisis by focusing on the intense relationship forged, both out of necessity and chance, between the central characters. These two seropositive and gay male lovers take to the highways and travel to San Francisco in order to avoid being arrested for a string of crimes committed by Luke, a young hustler whose HIV status has transformed him into an outlaw (at least in his own eyes): ‘fuck the system, fuck everything’. Filled with rage and a simultaneous sense of entitlement and apathy towards the world, Luke finds that with his life now quickly coming to an end, he has nothing left to lose. He no longer feels that he must live by the rules of his society and as he urges Jon, ‘We don’t have much time, so we gotta grab life by the balls and go for it.’ There are striking parallels between Wojnarowicz and Jon of *The Living End*: both are prolific recorders of their everyday observations, and in fact we first see Jon reflecting upon his HIV-diagnosis in his car only moments after being told of this news. Jon, like Wojnarowicz, is well aware that his diagnosis signals a turning point in the way he perceives his own body and mortality; as he says to himself, ‘April 13th [is] the first day of the rest of my life.’ What we effectively see in *The Living End* is how Jon’s road journey is inextricably connected with two moments of dramatic rupture in his existence: the first is finding out he is HIV-positive, the second is meeting Luke as he literally flies onto the bonnet of Jon’s car. The timeliness of these events do not escape Jon, who says ‘forty-eight hours ago I was just another bummed out HIV-positive homo minding my own business. Now I’m a fugitive facing an accessory to

74 Waggoner, ““This Killing Machine””: 177.
75 *The Living End*, dir. Gregg Araki (Strand Releasing/Desperate Pictures, 1992), DVD.
murder wrap.’ Despite the urgency of taking to the road, Jon nevertheless forms an
indissoluble bond with Luke because they see in each other the desperation of their
own situation as social outlaws. In being gay, seropositive, and having committed
serious crimes, the two are forced to lend support to one another at the same time as
offering sexual and emotional comforts as they make their way to an unknown
destination.

One should not underplay the importance of Wojnarowicz’s interweaving of a
cruising narrative in his essay about the open road journey. Certainly, Wojnarowicz
worked in full knowledge of the heterosexual trajectory of road journeys, as well as
the assumption that the individual positioned in the driver’s seat embodied the ideals
of normative masculinity and heterosexuality. That Wojnarowicz is a homosexual
young man recently diagnosed with HIV is significant, since he critiqued through his
experiences on the road the traditional images of Americans and Americana. A
minority figure both on the open road and within a context where gay men were
vilified for their erotic desires and sexual practices, Wojnarowicz undertook the work
of cultural criticism in revealing to the ‘average American’ those figures formerly
denied a voice, presence, or subject position within the traditional imaginary of the
nation. Consequently, as much as African American writers ‘add their different
angles of the “stuff” of America’, leading to a revision of the hegemonic culture and
by extension produce ““actions” in the politics of cultural difference”,’76 so too do
writers from other minority groups like Wojnarowicz.

The automobile as a space of containment and transparency enhances the
erotic appeal of cruising for Wojnarowicz. With its sturdy and durable body, the
automobile encases and thereby protects Wojnarowicz and his partner from the

76 Cornel West, Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America, cited in Sherrill, Road-Book America, 326.
harshness of the elements outside, as well as making highly visible any sexual act that takes place to a passing car. The permeability and bidirectional visibility of the windscreen, in turn making any sexual act between Wojnarowicz and his passenger immediately apparent to any passing car, is in contradistinction to the psychic belief that ‘The car provides us with a shield and a feeling of invulnerability, a shelter for all manner of activities.’\(^7\) As such, the erotics of the automobile are intertwined with visibility, risk, speed, and with the visual permeability of the windshield, a confusion of the boundaries separating the inside/outside, and the private/public. Earlier in the chapter, the dyadic assemblage of the individual and his automobile, ‘that marriage of body-machine and space’ (CK, 41) is perceived as the catalyst for the self’s bodily- and ego- dissolution. For Wojnarowicz, the void wherein he ‘wishe[d] to disappear’ was the point where his car reached a speed at which it remained simultaneously stationary and in dynamic motion; this would be a near perfect fusion of the material and immaterial, a state of nothingness akin to la petite mort following orgasm (CK, 41). Now, however, Wojnarowicz arrives at an epiphany through the convergence of the machine, the body of the self and that of his lover. This personal epiphany, however, relates to his unique sense of embodiment, where his containment within the vehicle initiates both self- and interpersonal- reflection: ‘here we are, here I am, some fugitive soul having passed through the void of the cities’ (CK, 54). As a ‘fugitive soul’, Wojnarowicz, the lone driver, becomes emblematic of the outlaw ‘on the run’ from responsibility, law enforcement, and other repressive forces. Where there once was pessimism in travelling alone on the highway – ‘the barren landscape becomes a pocket of death because of this emptiness’ (CK, 41) – what Wojnarowicz now finds is a calm in which consciousness approaches bodily transcendence. Cruising is a way to

\(^7\) Marsh and Collett, *Driving Passion*, 11.
disentangle death from its association with eroticism and speed, and introduce community and sociability as viable options for challenging the ‘strange and dangerous times’ (CK, 58) that Wojnarowicz found he was living in. The physical environment, with its stillness, heat, and flatness, becomes a perfect backdrop for Wojnarowicz’s cruising; it is almost as if the diminution of its sensorial immediacy by the windshield enhances the visceral pleasure and sexually exploratory movements of him and his lover within the vehicle. The passages are rife with images of disembodied consciousness and the seamless, almost mechanical movements of scanning the other’s body through sight, touch and taste. He remarks during their foreplay that ‘It’s as if one of my eyes were hovering a few feet over the car and slowly revolving to take in the landscape and the small car with two humans inside slowly licking each other’s bodies into a state of free-floating space’ (CK, 55). The gradual fragmentation of the body, leading to a Dalí-esque displacement of an eyeball in the sky and another embedded in the interior of an automobile, might be a necessary tactic challenging the unity and bounded integrity of the current body politic. Chisholm refers to this image, in conjunction with an earlier example in ‘Self-Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds’ where Wojnarowicz’s eyeball is spliced by a sliver of marble (an image that would not go astray in Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí’s An Andalusian Dog) as a ‘contortionist eyballing’ or ‘split-eye view’, suggesting that the homosexual man as sexual other must always be on the lookout for the ““gaze” of the law’ 78. Yet to have one’s eyeball hovering over you whilst engaging in sex is to impose a level of self-surveillance that gay men might adopt (unwittingly or otherwise) in full knowledge of their status as sexual ‘deviants’ or, to use the metaphor of the open road, social outlaws. Hence, the eye is as much a surveilling

78 Chisholm, quoted in Waggoner, ““This Killing Machine”’: 181.
tool keeping watch for passing tourists or police cars, as it is a device for recording for future posterity the exhilaration of cruising. Consequently, it is through the mechanics of cruising, with its emphasis on vision, that Wojnarowicz is able to formulate a theory that ‘There is really no difference between memory and sight, fantasy and actual vision’, since ‘Fantasized images are actually made up of millions of disjointed observations collected and collated into the forms and textures of thought’ (CK, 26).

With the prospect of cruising and with cruising having been fulfilled, Wojnarowicz engages in a theoretical discussion concerning the human eye and its relationship to technological apparatuses such as the automobile and the camera. Intoxicated by how sex dissolves one’s corporeal wholeness and sense of ontological monadicity through physically merging the self and other, Wojnarowicz gives the reader an autochthonous image wherein he and his lover become one within the interior of the automobile. The automobile is morphologically proximate to a ‘metallic skull’, and Wojnarowicz and his lover a pair of eyes which are embedded within it:

The hallucinatory sensation I recall from the depths of fever is the idea that this guy and I are part of the same vascular system; he and I are two eyeballs sitting in the dark recesses of a metallic skull viewing the world through the windshield the way one’s eyes would if they could proportion and transmit information independent of each other as well as recall separate private histories. The automobile is a vehicle of motion just like the human body, its motor, the brain, claiming or recalling distance and motion and passage. (CK, 56)

Taking the metaphor further, the motor of the automobile, like the animal brain, is the control centre of consciousness, cognition, and intellection; the windshield becomes a set of eyelids that filter, frame, and parse the outside world. This moment of intercorporeality drives home to the reader Wojnarowicz’s perspective on identity and
subjectivity, where each are shaped and reshaped through the self’s encounters with both sentient and inanimate others. Wojnarowicz found travelling on the open road as providing an inestimable opportunity for self-transformation along with offering a place to negotiate and redefine the normative and ideal form of the ‘American citizen’. Whether he did so by unveiling his own position as an outlaw through communicating his experiences of sexual adventure and hardship to the reader, or by acting as an amanuensis for the myriad social voices formally silenced by the ONE-TRIBE NATION, he did so with the express intention to eliminate hostility and fear towards diversity in its many guises. As he said in *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*, ‘If you are a member of a minority it’s a simple thing to be aware that laws are not meant as a reflection of the true society one lives in but rather as devices to control diversity and silence it.’79 We will soon see in chapter four how Wojnarowicz chose not to limit his political task to the category of the human, but sought to overturn taxonomic and hierarchical boundaries across a number of ecologies, some of which were non-human.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Politics of Vision in Wojnarowicz’s Close to the Knives, Earth, and Sex Series

One of Wojnarowicz’s primary goals was to make visible sexualities and relations that the ONE-TRIBE NATION forcibly concealed from the public sphere. His emphasis upon the visual was a crucial aspect of his politics, since to unveil these practices was to challenge their codification as ‘obscene,’ ‘taboo,’ or ‘abnormal’ in a heteronormative context. Displaying alternative possibilities to the ‘preinvented existence’ prescribed by the ONE-TRIBE NATION had a powerful effect in mobilising opposition against this monolithic construct. In drawing attention to what is actively hidden from public view, Wojnarowicz ‘lifts the curtains for a brief peek and reveals the probable existence of literally millions of tribes’ within America. From this, Wojnarowicz encouraged himself and his audience to perform an ‘X-ray of Civilization, an examination of its foundations’.¹

This chapter frames Wojnarowicz’s ‘X-ray of Civilization’ according to two aesthetic procedures utilised in his writings and visual artworks. Having recognised at a young age that he ‘was looking into society from a[n] outer edge’ because he ‘embodied so many things that were supposedly reprehensible’,² Wojnarowicz sought confirmation and validation from other groups located on the discursive periphery of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. The two groups figuring prominently in Wojnarowicz’s

¹ David Wojnarowicz, Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration (New York: Vintage, 1991), 121. All subsequent references will appear in the text as CK.
were non-human animals and gay men. As a gay man and later gay PWA, Wojnarowicz felt compelled to depict homosexuality in order to remove its social stigma and urge the ‘general public’ to accept minority groups. Moreover, he did this in response to his mounting frustration over the dogged suppression of any sexuality or relation that deviated from the heterosexual norm. When asked by Lucy Lippard how he responded to individuals who say his sexuality is ‘better left to the bedroom,’ he fired back with the following retort: ‘I’m completely surrounded by one form of sexuality; it’s represented in every ad – whether it’s cigarettes or beer or whatever, there’s always one prescribed sexuality that makes me feel invisible’. To redress this representational imbalance, Wojnarowicz disseminated countless portrayals of homosexuality and homoerotic desire across his visual artworks so as to legitimise his experiences and advocate on behalf of one of numerous ‘tribes’ with which he was associated. To make homosexuality visible within the public sphere was tantamount to dismantling the compulsory heterosexuality of the ONE-TRIBE NATION and the infiltration of its logics in the areas of Family, Religion, Law, and Politics. Wojnarowicz’s politics of vision required him to deconstruct the boundary separating the public and the private, particularly in terms of sexual propriety and decorum. Indeed, this artist took aim at society’s double standard in accepting, and even promoting, heterosexual images and activities, whilst their homosexual complements were perceived as ‘better left to the bedroom’. Thus, it became crucial for Wojnarowicz to lift ‘the curtains for a brief peek’ on homosexuality in order to dispel myths concerning its deviance and abnormality, at the same time as critiquing the

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3 This chapter’s attention to non-human animals within Wojnarowicz’s art works and writings has been inspired by the impressive scholarship of Mysoon Rizk. For more details, see the following: ‘Looking at “Animals in Pants”: The Case of David Wojnarowicz,’ TOPIA 21 (Spring 2009): 137-159, and ‘Taking the “S” Out of “Pest”.’ Antennae 11 (Autumn 2009): 37-50.

separation of the public and private when dealing with fundamental expressions of human experience.

When considering Wojnarowicz’s *Sex Series* it is apparent that the artist took literally the necessity of exposing what had been concealed, occluded, hidden, and/or obfuscated by the heteronormative constructs of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. The black-and-white photomontage series consists of a number of landscape images, each of which includes smaller superimposed photographs featuring graphic depictions of sex between male and female subjects. The sex acts are depicted in a way that obscures the gender and sexuality of these individuals, in favour of demonstrating how both non-penetrative and penetrative acts exist on a spectrum of sexual possibilities open both to heterosexual and homosexual individuals. From these photographs, one can infer an array of dialectical movements between the public and private, civilisation and nature, and the inside and outside. For example, the still below from *Sex Series* (Figure 16), with its inversion of negative film, produces an unsettling mood for the viewer when appraising the work, as the visual inversion coupled with the use of two perspectival layers create ambiguity in focus and viewer orientation. The undefined borders of the house in the right background contrast dramatically with the clearly delineated circumference of the superimposed disc at the top and centre of the frame. The grainy quality leant to the base image instils an aspect of fantasy or unreality to the photograph, whilst the solarisation of the superimposed disc simultaneously illuminates and obscures its most explicit feature: oral sex. The viewer finds him/herself having trespassed unexpectedly on a private sexual moment between these two male figures. At the same time, Wojnarowicz plays with degrees of visibility and concealment in his exclusive use of monochromatic colours. Yet, in placing these figures within the context of a rural
location rather than urban centre, Wojnarowicz made a powerful statement about the ubiquity of male-to-male sex in his 1980s American context, without inferring any insidious quality to this identity and choice of lifestyle. Whilst Wojnarowicz would also depict sexual acts performed by presumably heterosexual couples in other prints of the *Sex Series*, his deliberate choice in contextualising activities associated with homosexual men in a rural setting functions to disassociate them from charges of abnormality and deviancy. It was, for this artist, important to connect ‘the naturalness of… these acts to the naturalness of… the environments in order to resist and dispell [sic] the idea of perversity.’

Figure 16: *Untitled*, from *Sex Series*, 1988-89
A series of eight gelatin-silver print, 15 x 18 inches

Wojnarowicz, in experimenting with scale, perspective, and visual inversion in *Sex Series*, effectively bestowed upon his viewer ‘X-ray vision’ into one of society’s most protected and private of spaces: the bedroom. I regard this experimentation of

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5 ‘Sex Series’, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 3, Manuscripts, Subseries A, Box 4, Folder 103, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.
scale and size to be the first of two strategies that Wojnarowicz employed in order to
draw his audience’s attention to the forced concealment of non-normative relations.
The second crucial and recurring technique of Wojnarowicz’s politics of vision was
his representation of animals from a number of species including, but not limited to,
bovines, primates, insects, and amphibians. As my first chapter, a filmographic
analysis of the extant versions of A Fire in My Belly showed, Wojnarowicz employed
insects of the social hymenoptera as a primordial example of the ONE-TRIBE
NATION, where like individuals born into a ‘preinvented existence,’ each member of
a colony has a preordained role to perform in order to ensure the system’s vitality and
stability. Insects, like members of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, have little choice but
to live their ‘preinvented existences,’ inured to the limitations and restrictions
imposed upon them by their biology or social environment.

Wojnarowicz was preoccupied and often disturbed by what he perceived as
the automatic and instinctual traits of insects; he compared the complexity of his own
emotional reaction in witnessing the mounting death toll of the AIDS crisis with that
of an ant colony unexpectedly assaulted by an invading force: ‘In the Insect World,
after the attack, the slaughter, and the massive loss of life… life simply goes on. Each
insect goes back about its job without any thought towards fortification’ (CK, 241).
But by the same token, Wojnarowicz’s compassion for animals emerged from a
variety of factors: although the final chapter of Close to the Knives narrates the
evolution of an empathic bond between this artist and a dying bull in their shared
capacity to feel pain and suffer, Wojnarowicz also appreciated animals because of
their significant physiological and cognitive differences to human beings.
Consequently, the alterity of the animal was a thematic mainstay of Wojnarowicz’s
oeuvre, which we see at work in his gelatin-silver print, What Is this Little Guy’s Job in the World (Figure 17).

Figure 17: What’s This Little Guy’s Job in the World, 1990
Gelatin-silver print, 13 ½ x 19 inches

Once again, Wojnarowicz is highly selective in his choice of viewer orientation and proximity to this ‘little guy,’ an amphibian. With his attention to the miniscule size and fragile body of this frog, Wojnarowicz demands that his audience apprehend visually species and ecologies that are often eclipsed by the imposing shadow that is cast by the ONE-TRIBE NATION. The artist conveyed his considerable appreciation and sense of wonder towards his subject through a couple of means, the most obvious being the positioning of the frog in the front and centre of the image, resting gently in his comparatively large palm. The second strategy Wojnarowicz utilised was to embed in the top right hand corner of the print a series of speculations upon the life and selfhood of his tiny and enigmatic subject:

What is this little guy’s job in the world. If this little guy dies does the world know? Does the world feel this? Does something get displaced? If this little guy dies does the world get a little lighter? Does the planet rotate a little faster? If this little guys dies, without his body to shift the currents of air, does the air flow perceptibly faster? What shifts if this little guy dies? Do people speak language a little bit differently? If this little guy dies does some little kid
somewhere wake up with a bad dream? Does an almost imperceptible link in the chain snap? Will civilization stumble?

The fundamentally unanswerable nature of these questions – ‘If this little guys dies… does the world feel this? Does something get displaced? – is in no small part a result of Wojnarowicz’s inability to communicate linguistically with this miniature amphibian. Although historically the basis for denying animals selfhood and moral consideration, as attested in Cary Wolfe’s pithy equation, ‘no language, no subjectivity’;⁶ Wojnarowicz’s attraction to this creature is fundamentally enhanced by the incommunicability of its thoughts and feelings. The text suggests an alternative cosmology in which the microscopic and macroscopic are interconnected, such that the death of this ‘little guy’ has a resonance which exceeds its tiny frame. This ‘little guy’ therefore resists the anthropocentric imperatives of the ONE-TRIBE NATION in demonstrating the inescapable connections between human and animal worlds: a ‘little kid somewhere [might] wake up with a bad dream’ or civilisation may ‘stumble’ at the same moment this creature dies.

What I am suggesting in my reference to What Is This Little Guy’s Job in the World is that Wojnarowicz’s appreciation for the miscellany and multiplicity of fauna sprang from his recognition of their status as outsiders to the calendric turnings of the ‘preinvented world’ and the linguistic machinations of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Whilst often being the reason behind their exploitation and consumption by humans, Wojnarowicz saw the inability for animals to communicate linguistically as an advantage with respect to the ONE-TRIBE NATION. For Wojnarowicz, animals could conceivably resist the ‘corrupted and false history as well as corrupted and false future’ propagated by the ONE-TRIBE NATION in occupying a position external to

language and subjectivity (CK, 37).⁷ Indeed, the absolute alterity of animals fascinated Wojnarowicz and led him to speculate upon the creation of worlds that could not be accessed or destroyed by human civilisation. In his biographical dateline for 1961 he wrote, ‘Spent all my time in the woods looking at snakes and insects and other animals. Thought of giant birdnests for humans.’⁸ Tom Rauffenbart, Wojnarowicz’s surviving companion and executor of his estate, also recognised the artist’s deep respect for and allegiance with non-human animals.⁹ Rauffenbart recalls one instance in Mexico where he, Anita Vitale, and Wojnarowicz were driving towards the ruins at Coba and Wojnarowicz:

thought nothing of putting us in danger in order to avoid squashing some creature appearing out of nowhere in front of us when we drove…. On one stretch of road he insisted that I drive at a snail’s pace so as not to smash into any of the thousands of butterflies swirling through the air around our car. I tried, but no matter how slowly I drove, there were casualties, and as each body hit the windshield he would groan and flinch in sympathy.¹⁰

Such examples demonstrate that the emotional and rhetorical force of animality was for Wojnarowicz undeniable. At the same time, any comprehensive study of this artist’s oeuvre must take into account how representations of animals extended far beyond a cursory interest in their behaviours and habits. We can identify both

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⁷ According to Cary Wolfe, the subordinate position of non-human animals in comparison to their human counterparts hinges on their alleged incapacity for higher order cognition and thought. The non-human animal is seen as the ‘repressed Other of the subject, identity, [and] logos’ in Western culture, since the absence of linguistic communication evidences an absence of rationality and therefore the criterion that discounts them as rational beings. Wolfe, Zoontologies, x.


⁹ Alternatively, Kiki Smith, another of Wojnarowicz’s close friends, explains Wojnarowicz’s fondness for and almost childlike fascination with animals. Their companionship, according to Smith, offered Wojnarowicz a romanticised vision of ‘being a wild boy’ when living on the streets of New York as a homeless teenager: ‘He would talk of all his adventures… like going into zoos at night or stealing frogs from pet shops to free them in the park. All these things that were totally a boyhood romance.’ Kiki Smith, ‘Kiki Smith,’ interview by Sylvère Lotringer, in David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side, ed. Giancarlo Ambrosino (New York: Semiotext(e), 2006), 88.

traumatic and cathartic experiences in Wojnarowicz’s childhood centred on the human-animal encounter. Animality was from an early age negatively associated with family violence, death, and pain, as well as being connected to alterity, emancipation, and world making. This tension is best understood through two anecdotes relating to Wojnarowicz’s relationship with animals: one from his childhood, and one during his period of artistic maturity. Wojnarowicz noted in Close to the Knives that one of his most disturbing childhood memories involved being served ‘new york steaks’ by his father, Ed Wojnarowicz; the source of the meat was not beef but in fact Wojnarowicz’s pet rabbit. Wojnarowicz later replicated this horrifying tableau of the family meal in You Killed Me First. There are deliberate similarities drawn between Wojnarowicz and the fate of the young female protagonist, played by Lung Leg. Yet despite these similarities, Wojnarowicz’s primary weapon against the toxic nature of the heteronormative nuclear family was not a gun, but his writings. In this short super8mm film directed by Richard Kern, Leg played a highly distressed and misunderstood teenager who eventually murders her entire family, claiming that their stifling normativity and rules were the root cause of their collective demise: ‘you killed me first’. Wojnarowicz, in a role reversal, played the family patriarch, who, like Ed Wojnarowicz, kills his family’s pet rabbit. As Kern relates in David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side,

The father comes to the table and starts complaining about the rabbit and then pulls the rabbit out of this bag. It’s dead and he starts chopping it, chopping it to shreds… That was something that David told me happened to him, too. He told me something like they had this pet rabbit, and they were eating dinner one night and the father says, ‘How do you like the food?’ And it was this rabbit!\(^\text{11}\)

\(^{11}\) Richard Kern, ‘Richard Kern,’ interview by Lotringer, in A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side, 67. Whereas Kern describes Ed Wojnarowicz as serving the family’s pet rabbit for dinner, Wojnarowicz in You Killed Me First carves with notable aggression a turkey for Thanksgiving dinner.
Ultimately, the complex entanglements of violence, death, freedom, pain, and intimacy with the figures of the animal in Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre will constitute the core focus of my first section. Like Mysoon Rizk, I argue that Wojnarowicz ‘convey[ed] the globe’s fundamental – if fragile – diversity’ through his depictions of non-human life, the intention being therefore to ‘challeng[e] the purported homogeneity of America’s so-called “ONE-TRIBE NATION”.’

Focusing on animals’ vibrancy and variation can work to produce ‘interference… in the dynamics of Western civilization’s oppressive and codified reality’, for to undermine the simplistic distinction between the human and animal works equally to challenge the singular model of humanity constructed by the ONE-TRIBE NATION. In other words, animals function metonymically to display variety and difference within the human species, thereby encouraging co-habitation between and across social boundaries.

I will focus in particular on Wojnarowicz’s final essay in Close to the Knives, ‘The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine over a Mouse Hole’. Interlaced with Wojnarowicz’s account of a bullfight in Merida, Mexico, are autobiographical recollections of his father, sexually intimate moments with Rauffenbart, and elegiac pronouncements concerning the death of Montanna Houston (‘I can’t let go of Dakota’s suicide; he follows me on the flight to Miami’ [CK, 254]). Wojnarowicz alternates between the present, past, and a projected future through his refrain, ‘Smell the flowers while you can’. This idiom, explaining the inevitability of death and the importance of enjoying the present moment, becomes ironic when the pleasant olfactory image that it conjures is contrasted with the foul odours emanating

from the slaughtered bull in front of Wojnarowicz. Moreover, the registration of the bull’s pain and torment is utilised by Wojnarowicz as an analogue for the marginal position of the PWA during the first decade of the AIDS crisis. Indeed, the considerable amount of autobiographical information in this last section of Close to the Knives leads me to conclude that the bull is in fact an emblem of Wojnarowicz himself; like the bull who is subjected to the verbal taunts and physical attacks of the crowd and matador respectively, Wojnarowicz was a continual target of homophobic rhetoric and violence because of his alternative desires, sexuality, and seropositive status. This explains Wojnarowicz’s choice to include details of his first homosexual encounter in the essay (CK, 266), along with polemical sections where he condemns the Church for its refusal to disseminate safer-sex information to the public: ‘Back in the states [sic], the archdiocese, with the blessings of the vatican [sic], says that condoms and clean needles are lies in the face of the AIDS epidemic’ (CK, 256).

That Wojnarowicz chooses to end Close to the Knives with uncertainty concerning his future is perhaps the most powerful indictment of both the Reagan and Bush administrations’ failure to provide a viable future for PWAs by refusing to invest both money and time into the treatment of HIV/AIDS. Moreover, these administrations failed Wojnarowicz and other PWAs in continuing to bolster the homophobic rhetoric of conservative Christian groups and block access to clinical drug trials, effective treatment plans, and safer sex education. What pervades ‘The Suicide of a Guy’ is an overwhelming sense of uncertainty towards the future: ‘I don’t know what is ahead of me in the course of my life and this civilization’ (CK, 261). This uncertainty is for Wojnarowicz exacerbated by the construction of HIV/AIDS as a moral disease and PWAs as dispensable members of American society. As Wojnarowicz wrote, ‘I know I’m not going to die merely because I got fucked in the
ass without a condom or because I swallowed a stranger’s semen. If I die it is because a handful of people in power, in organized religions and political institutions, believe I am expendable’ (CK, 230).

My second section will function as the hinge upon which my first and third sections are connected. In *Earth* (Figure 18), a mixed media artwork, Wojnarowicz brings together the two aesthetic strategies which I regard as fundamental to his politics of vision: representations of animal life and experimentations with size and scale. In this artwork, Wojnarowicz captures both subterranean and terranean viewpoints, thereby bestowing upon his viewer ‘X-ray vision’ into the various geophysical strata comprising our world. It is here that we see what Rizk called ‘the globe’s fundamental – if fragile – diversity’, for *Earth* features elements ranging from a disproportionately large ant traversing over coal-like ground to a bottomless cavern that breaks through the centre of the image. I will focus on this artwork in further
detail later in my chapter, but for the moment I will reinforce my argument that Wojnarowicz presents in *Earth* the undeniable interconnectedness of animal, human, and plant ecologies in order to communicate their contribution both to the evolution and potential destruction of civilisation.

My third section will explore further Wojnarowicz’s politics of vision as they relate to homosexuality and homoerotic desire. I will examine how Wojnarowicz challenged the ONE-TRIBE NATION’s narrow categorisation of the normative and ideal American citizen as white, heterosexual, and able-bodied. Following Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s claim that ‘heterosexual privilege [is the]… tacit but central organizing index of social membership’, ¹⁴ I argue Wojnarowicz offers in the *Sex Series* a firm critique of heteronormativity and its restrictions upon desire and erotic intimacy.

‘Smell the Flowers While You Can’

Of keen interest to any study of animality and animals in Wojnarowicz’s *oeuvre* is the last chapter of *Close to the Knives*, ‘The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine over a Mouse Hole.’ In this essay’s final section, ‘postscript,’ Wojnarowicz delivers a shockingly graphic and attenuated account of a bullfight in Merida, Mexico, which he witnessed with his long-term partner, Tom Rauffenbart, in the late 1980s. Wojnarowicz’s representation of the bullfight in the ‘postscript’ follows a long literary tradition in which the confrontation between the male human and male bovine instigates either a crisis or an apotheosis of masculinity. ¹⁵ On initial

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glance, Wojnarowicz’s bullfight appears conventional in its use of this event as a way to negotiate his own sexuality. However, as Wojnarowicz begins to make associations between the corrida de toros and autobiographical moments of extreme trauma, a more compassionate account of the bull’s suffering begins to take shape, albeit one that remains firmly anthropocentric in its orientation.

Wojnarowicz explained in an interview with the photographer, Nan Goldin, on 13 September 1990, that he identified a strong sexual component to the corrida, particularly in the choreographic movements between the bullfighters and the bull. He explained to Goldin his homoerotic urges as he watched the matadors dodge and weave their way around the animal, their litheness and agility producing mesmerising shapes in the air:

I’d seen a bullfight before on TV in Mexico City, and there was one guy who killed the bull – I suddenly understood what the sport was. Because it was one of the most unbelievable moments of the male body through space, so extraordinarily beautiful that the death was like a climax. And it made perfect sense in a very profound way.  

Wojnarowicz’s description of the admixture of physical strength and elegance typified by the male bullfighter’s body bear a strong resemblance to Jake Barnes’ evaluation of the young matador, Pedro Romero, in Ernest Hemingway’s novel, Fiesta. In the novel, Jake, an American expatriate living in Paris and an avid fan of bullfighting, travels with a number of friends to take part in the Festival of San Fermín in Lawrence’s opening to The Plumed Serpent. D.H. Lawrence, The Plumed Serpent, ed. L.D. Clark and intro. Melvyn Bragg (London: Grafton, 1989). Consider also visual depictions of bullfighting in the oeuvres of Édouard Manet and Pablo Picasso.


17 Hemingway’s novel was first released in 1926 under the title, The Sun Also Rises, by the American publishing house, Scribner’s. It was released under the title, Fiesta, a year later by the London publishing House, Jonathan Cape.
Pamplona, Spain. He, along with Montoya, the innkeeper, marvel at the ‘aficion’ of the young bullfighter, Romero, each claiming him to be ‘a real one’ whose mastery of the sport and impeccable technique outshone the other matadors: ‘one was very fair and the other was passable. But there was no comparison with Romero’. For Montoya and Jake, ‘Aficion means passion. An aficionado is one who is passionate about the bull-fights’; but aficion also involves the bullfighter facing the possibility of his death every time he enters the arena. An aficionado is one whose spirit, vitality, and masculinity are reinforced at the same point at which they are rendered most vulnerable, that is, when confronted by a fierce and honourable adversary in the bull. Romero’s indubitable masculinity and sexual potency are at their most apparent when he performs with precision and grace the dance of the bullfight:

Romero was the whole show. I do not think Brett saw any other bullfighter. No one else did either… It was all Romero. … Romero never made any contortions, always it was straight and pure and natural in line. The others twisted themselves like corkscrews, their elbows raised, and leaned against the flanks of the bull after his horns had passed, to give a faked look of danger. Afterward, all that was faked turned bad and gave an unpleasant feeling. Romero’s bull-fighting gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time…. Romero had the old thing, the holding of his purity of line through the maximum of exposition, while he dominated the bull by making him realise he was unattainable, while he prepared him for the killing.

As Jake explains, ‘Romero was the whole show’; he is an exemplar of masculine strength and sexuality, whose almost instinctual movements bespeak a calmness in the arena when confronted with danger: ‘he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time’. In

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19 Hemingway, *Fiesta*, 152.
this respect, Romero serves as not only a foil to the other matadors – their bodies contorted ‘like corkscrews’ in comparison to his ‘pure and natural’ line – but also to Jake. Indeed, Jake’s sexual impotency and the manner in which this was acquired undermine his masculinity, as well as assist in explaining the sublimation of his frustrations through the excessively violent displays of virility in bullfighting. Unlike Pedro, who develops a sexual relationship with Brett, Jake fails to consummate his love for this same woman because of his physical disability. Moreover, Jake deliberately avoids naming in explicit terms his disability, yet attempts to mitigate his sense of emasculation through referencing the event that led to this ‘wound’: ‘Well, it was a rotten way to be wounded and flying on a joke front like the Italian.’

What are absent in ‘The Suicide of a Guy’ are passages such as the ones we find in Hemingway’s *Fiesta*; instead, Wojnarowicz refuses to valorise the bullfighter and his rituals of killing. Whilst never overtly outraged by or condemning of the bullfight, Wojnarowicz nevertheless acknowledges the suffering of the bull and reveals the *corrida* to be a perverse spectacle of bloodletting: ‘Blood is streaming in sheets down its broad shoulders into the dust and heat’; ‘The incessant flow of blood makes the bull gleam like a black mirror’ (*CK*, 267, 270). Furthermore, that the bull is ignorant of its fate when entering the arena suffuses Wojnarowicz’s descriptions of the animal with pathos and hopelessness. The bull’s torment in the ring is a continuation of its forced incarceration and lack of contact with humans, such that ‘Its stance and sudden erratic movements are purely motions of survival’ (*CK*, 266).

Wojnarowicz’s dispassionate account of the *corrida* and his observation of the crowd’s reactions only serve to enhance his veiled, yet nonetheless strong, feelings of distress towards the unnecessary torment endured by the bull. Rather than presenting

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the bull as a worthy adversary of the matador and *bandilleros*, Wojnarowicz emphasises its helplessness and confusion. The indignity of its demise is difficult to read, as Wojnarowicz explains how ‘There is a gasp and cry from the crowd. … When the bull is confronted with the matador’s cape, it drops its head low and paws at the ground, its leg goes floppy and obscenely doubles back on itself’ (*CK*, 271). Wojnarowicz’s sympathy for the bull is further reinforced by what he said to Goldin in their interview: whilst he admitted being mesmerised when watching bullfights on television, he was horrified when confronted by the real thing. Indeed, Wojnarowicz associated the death of the bull with the sadistic violence of his father, Ed Wojnarowicz, and the carnality of his first sexual encounter as a young child:

But *these* guys were like horrendous bullfighters, and they were totally carving up these bulls in the ring. So while I was there I started writing this piece, and it jumps between all the events of my childhood, from my first sexual experience as a six-or seven-year old kid to the experience of my father, who was like, completely brutal and sadistic, to all these images of violence that I remembered as a child.²²

Rizk, in her doctoral thesis, ‘Nature, Death, and Spirituality in the Work of David Wojnarowicz,’ regarded the bull as a personification of Ed Wojnarowicz, where the latter was ultimately locked in a cycle of destruction fuelled by self-loathing and internalised homophobia (*CK*, 267). Like the bull trapped within the arena, Ed ‘depended on the motions of the sea to escape’ his sense of claustrophobia on land (*CK*, 267). Yet in witnessing the protracted and orchestrated killing of the bull, Wojnarowicz draws a connection between this furious and miserable animal and his own father, ‘who was buffeted by and ultimately succumbed to greater, or at least

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more relentless, forces (than he could bear). Wojnarowicz learns to forgive his father by acknowledging that he too was a victim of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, having been the target of both its physical and psychic forms of violence.

Yet ‘The Suicide of a Guy’ also seeks to mourn the loss of Montanna Houston and restore value to his life and artistic career. Wojnarowicz explained in the ‘Author’s Note’ preceding the essay that he had hoped to include segments of letters ‘received over the years from the guy named Dakota’ (CK, 163). Wojnarowicz was required to use a pseudonym for Montanna in ‘The Suicide of a Guy,’ since he was denied permission by the owners of Montanna’s estate to include his letters in Close to the Knives. He also changed Montanna’s name to ‘Dakota’ and created ‘composite identities’ in order to protect them (and himself) from any future harassment. Upon contacting Dakota’s brother, he was told that his parents had destroyed all of his letters, artworks, and personal effects; for Wojnarowicz, it was as if ‘his identity entire identity has been murdered by his folks’ (CK, 164). Wojnarowicz saw this as an alarming example of the ‘hysterical nature of the times we live in’ (CK, 164), in which the life of an individual who refused to live by the social and economic expectations of the ONE-TRIBE NATION could simply be erased from history.

Wojnarowicz saw the actions of Montanna’s estate as reflecting a wider and more frightening trend, in which the ‘whitewash[ing] of personal histories’ (CK, 164) was a common feature of the ONE-TRIBE NATION; for him, the personal histories that were removed from the public record were those that represented alternative sexualities, embodiments, cultures, and lifestyles. Destroying all of Montanna’s belongings and refusing to allow Wojnarowicz to commemorate his life publicly are actions that parallel the refusal of many families to mourn publicly the death of PWAs

during the first decade of the AIDS crisis. Given that the ‘Author’s Note’ was written by Wojnarowicz in 1991 and that ‘The Suicide of a Guy’ mentions a number of PWAs in its pages, the reader is nudged in the direction of drawing connections between the struggles of Montanna and that of many PWAs.

‘The Suicide of a Guy’, however, is an essay which is also autobiographical, where Wojnarowicz’s musings on Montanna, friends living in relative states of poverty, and drug addiction, lead both to Wojnarowicz’s reflection on his time living on the streets and his later acceptance of his father’s and mother’s parental failings. He remarks that ‘Everything… I have written to this point was leading me into an indistinct memory of the day my father killed himself’ (CK, 269). Following the bull’s death, Wojnarowicz narrates a vision of forgiveness and peace where ‘Dakota’ (Montanna Houston) speaks to both Wojnarowicz’s mother and father. Wojnarowicz concludes at this point in saying, ‘I give my parents humanity, in deference to their victimization at the hands of their parents. Heads of Family; Heads of State’ (CK, 273).

Upon further reading of the essay, we begin to draw a line of continuity between Wojnarowicz’s earlier and more explicit demonstrations of activism in Close to the Knives and his politicisation of dying in ‘The Suicide of a Guy.’ Wojnarowicz mentions a partial reconciliation that took place between the family members of Keith Davis and a former lover as Davis lay dying in hospital. Davis had a long and toxic dispute over property following his breakup with this unnamed individual, and his family ‘continued that [venomous] relationship for him at his wish’ (CK, 263). Consequently, it comes as no surprise that Wojnarowicz’s presence at the bullfight triggers a flurry of movements between the past and the present, where witnessing the bull’s suffering leads him to ruminate upon the comparable experiences of Davis in his
death throes: ‘I can only remember the waxen color of Keith’s flesh and the slitted eyelids and the fluctuating movements of his eyes beneath them’ (CK, 263). However, as with earlier essays in *Close to the Knives* that testify to and mourn the death of Peter Hujar, ‘The Suicide of a Guy’ can be classified as both auto- and bio-thanatography. As Wojnarowicz claimed earlier in the essay shortly after taking his flight to Mexico with Rauffenbart, ‘I’m in danger of losing my life and what gesture can convey or stop this possibility? … Nothing. And that saddens me’ (CK, 254).

Wojnarowicz, however, eventually abandons this initial pessimism and futility as the bullfight advances towards its conclusion. Indeed, he regains hope and resolves to continue fighting for his rights and life, as the demise of the bull becomes an inevitable outcome of the *corrida*. Resultantly, I find that the bull is utilised by Wojnarowicz both as a symbol of his sense of incarceration and victimisation as a PWA in his 1980s American context, as well as functioning as a ‘sacrificial animal’ whose death gave him the necessary impetus to fight against the ONE-TRIBE NATION: ‘Meat. Blood. Memory. War. We rise to greet the State, to confront the State. Smell the flowers while you can’ (CK, 276). Wojnarowicz’s bull takes on a symbolic function in this essay, in which its pain is analogous to the difficulties that the PWA experiences because of hostility towards HIV/AIDS and the gay community.

At this point, however, it would be disingenuous to argue that Wojnarowicz established an ethical relation between himself and the bull that genuinely attended to its suffering and alterity. And although Rizk is correct when stating that in some instances Wojnarowicz ‘appear[ed] to count non-human animals as more valuable than human life,’24 this incident in *Close to the Knives* cannot be counted among them. Instead, we see what Rizk identifies elsewhere in ‘Taking the “S” Out of “Pest”’ as

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Wojnarowicz’s deployment of animals as “underdog surrogates” for the PWA during the AIDS crisis. Thus, Wojnarowicz used the bull in ‘The Suicide of the Guy’ as a trope to reflect upon his own confusion and sense of hopelessness after being diagnosed with HIV. Therefore, the bull’s pain is never treated with ethical consideration on its own terms, since evidence of such sensations are always the fulcrum upon which Wojnarowicz returns to a consideration of his own crises of embodiment and existence.

The bull is thus an icon for the PWA in Close to the Knives, as indicated in Wojnarowicz’s change of focus from animal pain to human dread and anticipatory distress: ‘The pain I feel is to see my own death in the bull’s death; a projection of my own body’s nerve endings and nervous system onto the body of that exhausted and enraged animal’ (CK, 270). Perhaps labouring the metaphor, Wojnarowicz elsewhere in the essay provides excruciatingly detailed descriptions of the rituals inherent in the corrida de toros, where the bull is ‘tested’ in three stages or tercios:

The neck muscles of the bull are pierced and may be severed by the sharp steel of the tip of the picador’s pole. This causes the animal’s head to drop low to the ground and allows clearer aim of the matador’s sword into the area of the neck and shoulders, making a truer path into the bull’s heart. The primary energy with which the bull ran into the ring gives way in a short period of time to an exhausted display of the animal pawing at the earth, expelling volumes of blood from its body and caught forever in a frozen stream of information so it remains from that point on in the waves of understanding that its own death is encircling its own pure desire for living. Smell the flowers while you can. (CK, 268-269)

Not content to expedite the bull’s death, since to do so would terminate the highly ritualised ‘dance’ between the matador and his opponent, the spectacle of the corrida is predicated upon testing the limits of the animal’s ferocity and endurance for pain.

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The visceral image of the bull ‘expelling volumes of blood from its body’ would be hyperbolic if not for the fact that this early moment in the fight connotes the animal’s entrance into physical maturity and its preparedness for death. As we can see from the above, the passage begins diagnostically, yet Wojnarowicz’s descriptions are nonetheless coloured by the artist’s sense of unease at watching this display of violence. Wojnarowicz gives a succinct account in this passage of the entrance of the picador during the first stage of the corrida, the tercio de varas, where the aim of the picador is to stab the bull behind the morillo, the muscle on the bull’s neck, in order to weaken the animal and thus create the matador ‘a truer path into the bull’s heart’. Nonetheless, the account swiftly devolves into anthropomorphic sentimentality: the bull is ‘caught forever in a frozen stream of information so it remains from that point on in the waves of understanding that its own death is encircling its pure desire for living.’ The reader here is reminded of Elaine Scarry’s study of pain, where this sensation is regarded by the author as both world-shattering and privatizing in its non-referentiality. In The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World, Scarry writes, ‘physical pain – unlike any other states of consciousness – has no referential content. It is not of or for anything. It is precisely because it takes no object that it, more than any other phenomenon, resists objectification in language.’ On the face of it, since pain ‘resists objectification in language,’ this phenomenon could conceivably facilitate an intersubjective moment between the human-animal and non-speaking animal. Yet we know this is not the case for Wojnarowicz, for in ‘The Suicide of a Guy,’ he appropriates the pain of the bull in order to put pressure on his own heightened sense of mortality, with the corollary being an intensification of the present moment and the ‘pure desire for living’.

Another reason why Wojnarowicz is unable to sustain an ethical relation with his animal subject is due to his position as an onlooker to the spectacle of the bullfight, thereby making him complicit in the symbolic and physical violence experienced by the bull. Despite the arrestingly abject voiding of the bull’s material fluids once it has been killed – ‘the bull’s legs jerk spasmodically, blood issues from its nose and mouth and it is dead. It excretes a stream of shit from its behind into the pale dust’ (CK, 273) – Wojnarowicz chooses to convey his bewilderment rather than explicit outrage towards this awful sight. As one of the workers shovels the remains of the bull, its fecal matter, and coagulated blood into a wheelbarrow, Wojnarowicz displays what I would consider to be a remarkable display of somatic discipline: ‘My body gives a gentle burp and stomach acids well up into my throat’ (CK, 273). His ability, along with that of the crowd, to endure this spectacle of extreme violence resonates suggestively with the ACT UP slogan, ‘Silence = Death,’ in which the wilful refusal of the public to discuss the AIDS crisis as having a disproportionate effect upon gay men led to what can be regarded as a mass slaughter of individuals by the Reagan government. That Wojnarowicz refused to intervene on behalf of the bull is perhaps an inadvertent gesture towards the ethical problems surrounding spectatorship, particularly in an event where there is a clear imbalance of power between different parties. Taking the analogy one step further, we can thus see how the bull, fighters, and crowd are used by Wojnarowicz to dramatise the AIDS crisis. The relationship between the bull and fighters is analogous to the pitting of the gay community against a formidable set of ultraconservative and heteronormative politicians and clerics. The relationship between the bull and crowd, however, is used to convey the apathy of the ‘general public’ towards PWAs and their refusal to advocate for better health conditions and financial support for these individuals.
If we think of the arena as a microcosm of the ONE-TRIBE NATION whose boundaries are clearly delineated and unable to be breached, the bull cannot escape from its ‘preinvented existence’ and fate. However, Wojnarowicz does have the capacity to fight against the ‘preinvented world’ through forming alternative relations and possibilities outside of the heteronormative ideologies of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Following the bull’s death in ‘The Suicide of a Guy,’ Wojnarowicz demonstrates one of his most powerful weapons against the phobic images of the PWA circulating within media, medical, and cultural discourses during the 1980s. Instead of portraying himself as alone, weakened, and abstinent because of his diagnosis, Wojnarowicz shows the strength of his relationship with Rauffenbart by focusing on a moment of sexual intimacy between them:

He places the bent disk of a rubber on the head of his dick and with the same jerking motion he unrolls it down the length of his desire. … There is a clear joy in his eyes as I lean forward and slowly crawl over the surface of the cool sheets with my destination firmly in mind. Smell the flowers while you can.’ (CK, 275)

The above passage is powerful in dismantling negative stereotypes of the PWA and his sexuality, by focusing upon the continuation of a sexual relationship with Rauffenbart, albeit one that requires some forward thinking in the acquisition of prophylactics. Wojnarowicz presents this moment as being full of tenderness and affirmative anticipation between the two lovers: ‘There is a clear joy in his eyes as I lean forward and slowly crawl… with my destination firmly in mind.’ Yet this narrative passage is also careful to focus upon the value of safer sex in allowing (gay) PWAs to continue to engage in (non-)penetrative sex with their partners. Wojnarowicz therefore introduces a tacit discussion about the injunction against sex following the advent of the AIDS crisis and its biomedical construction as a sexually transmitted illness. As one of the
most visible groups affected by the AIDS crisis, gay men have been the target of extreme discrimination by ultraconservative groups, who often perceive their diagnosis as ‘proof’ of the deviancy of homosexuality and anal sex. However, to promote abstinence as the only means to prevent the spread of HIV is not only nonsensical but also cruel and destructive, given that cruising and promiscuous sex have been at the heart of homosexual identity and culture since the Stonewall era. Wojnarowicz makes this clear in ‘The Suicide of a Guy’ by indicating the centrality of sexual intimacy to combating the loneliness and segregation that can attend diagnosis once an individual is ‘outed’ as a gay PWA. Wojnarowicz’s sentiments therefore mirror those of Douglas Crimp, who in ‘How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic’ praises The Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC) for helping to educate the gay community on safer sex practices and promoting the use of condoms as pleasurable and fun. Their comic books (‘Safer Sex Comix’) ‘made it possible to meet the epidemic’s most urgent requirement: the development of safe sex practices’. Yet GMHC’s ‘Safer Sex Comix’ were highly successful because they recognised that both monogamy and abstinence would prove unpopular in the gay community, despite being the overriding policy advocated by mainstream and conservative political groups. GMHC’s safer sex practices assisted gay people, and especially PWAs, in renegotiating their sexuality without having to compromise on intimacy and pleasure. As Crimp notes, ‘We [gay people] knew that the alternatives – monogamy and abstinence – were unsafe, unsafe in the latter case because people do not abstain from sex, and if you only tell them “just say no,” they will have unsafe sex [again].’

Accordingly, we can now see that Wojnarowicz’s use of the refrain, ‘Smell the flower while you can,’ is a celebratory cry rather than a fatalistic sign of defeat in this

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essay. To ‘Smell the flowers while you can,’ is not an indication of Wojnarowicz’s acceptance of his death in the wake of the AIDS crisis and the ignorance of the American public towards the experiences of the PWA. Rather, ‘Smell the flowers while you can’ is taken up by Wojnarowicz as a motto of resistance against the inevitability of his death, and more importantly, his defeat by the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Whilst the bull must and does die terribly in the arena, Wojnarowicz’s fight continues, buffered by countless friends who also refuse to be cast as anonymous ‘victims’ of state-sanctioned homophobia and violence:

What cheers me is seeing these friends as fighters who have fallen to their knees but who are up again and returning to fighting condition before my eyes. I am glad I am alive to witness these things; giving words to this life of sensations is a relief. Smell the flowers while you can. (CK 272-273)

*Earth*

As we saw in ‘The Suicide of a Guy,’ Wojnarowicz used the suffering of the bull as an analogue for the negative experiences of the PWA during the first decade of the AIDS crisis. In *Earth*, however, insects are featured for an entirely different effect. Fascinated by the eusociality of the hymenoptera, that is, the order of insects whose social systems are organised through the strict division of labour between reproductive and non-reproductive members, Wojnarowicz found in ants the perfect analogue for his theory of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. But by the same token, Wojnarowicz’s interest in insects is entirely conventional in the context of art history, since they have
‘been a source of inspiration to artists through the centuries’ for reasons including their physiological differences to humans and great variety in colour and shape.  

In the first chapter of my doctoral thesis, I located aesthetic convergences between the Surrealist procedures of Dalí and Buñuel and Wojnarowicz’s collage-like construction of A Fire in My Belly. Surrealist influences are also at work in Earth, via its juxtaposition of different material substrates, deracinated bodily forms, distortions of scale, and references to oral civilisations. Wojnarowicz, like the Surrealists, also did not intend to depict his images in a way that was naturalistic or mimetic; instead, as is seen with the Hopi Kachina dolls of Earth, Wojnarowicz depicted them as cheap, plastic, and mass-produced imitations of their material counterparts. But perhaps the most obvious reference to Surrealism in the collage is in fact its employment of insects to navigate the antitheses of earth and sky, human and non-human, nature and technology, and ancient and modern civilisations. Therefore, I will divert our attention briefly to the significance of insects for the Surrealists, focusing in particular on the praying mantis and its connotations of danger, feminine sexuality, and erotic excess.

In ‘From Venice to Fabre: Insects in Western Art,’ Marcel Dicke notes the confluence of Surrealism’s interest in the Freudian unconscious, eroticism, and the oneiric, and their representation of insects of the social hymenoptera. Kathleen Hill also confirms this notion in her article, ‘The Depiction of Women as Praying Mantis in Male Surrealist Art: An Examination of the Male Fear of Castration, Impotence, and Sexual Ineptness.’ In this article, she observes how the Surrealists used art as a means of liberating themselves from rationality and normative sexual impulses by allowing them to ‘explore their fantasies and fears – especially those concerning women and

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sex.’ As she explains, the *sine qua non* of the Surrealists was their focus on contradiction and paradox, rather than mimesis, as the basis of aesthetic representation. In René Magritte’s *The Rape* (Figure 19), for instance, the sexual objectification of woman has as its pictorial counterpart the truncation of all ‘superfluous’ elements of her body apart from its erotogenic zones.

![Figure 19: The Rape, 1934](image)

Oil on canvas, 73.3 x 54.6 cm

The disfiguration of the nude female body in Surrealist artworks was often a way to ward off apotropaically any perceived threats to masculine virility, for as John Loughery claims, this disfiguration was ‘an energetic, quasi-pornographic projection of a socially validated adolescent need to degrade’. Paranoia concerning male castration, unbridled feminine sexual power, and an enduring interest towards the morphological differences between the human body and the class *insecta*, promptly

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came to a head in the Surrealists’ use of the praying mantis in their artistic works. Indeed, the praying mantis depicted in André Masson’s oil painting, *Landscape with Praying Mantis*, has been noted by Martin Ries as bearing raptorial legs that visually approximate *vagina dentata*, whilst its long, thin posterior limbs, advance ‘toward us over a non-spatial landscape of hills with *mons veneris* curves.’ As we can identify in the works of Masson, Dalí, Alberto Giacometti, and Félix Labisse, the equivalence of the praying mantis and sexual predation resulted in the former being used as a symbol of feminine sexuality. Particularly, the image of the female praying mantis as a sexual predator emerges from observing her cannibalistic consumption of the male following coitus, a fitting substitute for the Surrealists’ dedicated attention to Freud’s theories of sexual repression and castration anxiety.

Dalí was particularly fearful of the praying mantis, noting the disturbing discrepancy in size between the female and male forms of the species. In *The Tragic Myth of Millet’s Angelus*, Dalí found in the ‘expectant attitude of the woman’ a ‘prelude to imminent violence,’ where the semantic conflation of the female insect and her human counterpart becomes clear in observing his reference to the insect as a ‘woman’. Dalí was in particular troubled by the perforated body of the male mantis following coitus, ‘entirely pierced by holes,’ which seemed to him a perfect illustration of ‘my own case when faced with the act of love.’

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32 As Hill states, the mantis has had a long cultural association with teeth, having been used as a cure for toothache. The praying mantis has also been regarded as a symbol of digestion. Ruth Markus makes a useful point, however, that ‘Because the mantis eats her sex-partner, the teeth have come to symbolize both cannibalism and castration. Represented by a mouth filled with threatening fangs or with a toothed vagina designed to castrate any predator, she becomes Surrealism’s other main trope, the vagina dentata’. Ruth Markus, ‘Surrealism’s Praying Mantis and Castrating Woman,’ *Woman’s Art Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2000): 33-39, quoted in Hill, ‘The Depiction of Women as Praying Mantis in Male Surrealist Art’: 91.


identifies insects such as the grasshopper being used in Dalí’s *Illumined Pleasures*.

This oil painting, which plays on the sexual connotations of containment and release, consists of a number of boxes placed within a spare desert context. One such box (the largest and most central of them) includes a horizontal image of a grasshopper resting on top of what appears to be a self-portrait of Dalí. A man standing to the right of this blue box, naked from the torso upward, is presumably masturbating, his head placed on the box and right arm extended to offer support. Quoting Kathleen Hill, *Illumined Pleasures* references Freud’s claim that the phantasmatic fear of the *vagina dentata* could be warded off through masturbation, ‘as it provides an escape from sexual intercourse and protects him from possible castration.’

Hill writes further that the inevitability of the male insect being devoured during intercourse by the female and the insertion of an image of a male masturbating ‘suggests there is safety in masturbation, [but] that he is hiding his face symbolizes the fear of castration.’ Although I cannot locate the praying mantis which Hills claims is between the horizontal self-portrait of Dalí and the grasshopper, I nonetheless agree with William L. Pressly’s appraisal that Dalí’s own dread of the grasshopper cannot be separated from his disturbing association of the praying mantis with dangerous feminine sexuality. The grasshopper was ‘heavily dependent for its poetic and iconographic associations on [Dalí’s]… fascination with its lethal cousin.’

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35 Dalí was intensely fearful of grasshoppers. See *The Secret Life of Salvador Dalí*, trans., Haakon M. Chevalier (New York: Dover, 1993), 128. In Ruth Markus’ excellent article, ‘Surrealism’s Praying Mantis and Castrating Woman,’ she connects the image of the grasshopper in Dalí’s *The Great Masturbator* with his own unresolved childhood fear of the order orthoptera. She writes, ‘It brought back the fear of being swallowed up, born from a deep-rooted fear of his father, a strict notary whom Dalí feared as a Saturn devouring his children.’ Ruth Markus, ‘Surrealism’s Praying Mantis and Castrating Woman,’ *Woman’s Art Journal* 21, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2000): 36.

36 Hill, ‘The Depiction of Women as Praying Mantis in Male Surrealist Art’: 91

37 Hill, ‘The Depiction of Women as Praying Mantis in Male Surrealist Art’: 91.

Returning to Wojnarowicz’s *Earth*, we can certainly identify how he drew upon the cultural entomology of the Surrealists at the same time as distancing himself from their sexual politics. What we see in this mixed media artwork is how Wojnarowicz employed ants to critique the anthropocentric thrust of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, by drawing our attention to the complexities inherent in non-human ecologies. Moreover, Wojnarowicz urged his viewer to appreciate these creatures for their remarkable capacity for industry, even if an intersubjective relation was impossible due to their radical morphological differences to human beings. In this respect, Wojnarowicz’s mature artistic works mirror the experiments of his earlier days. I am thinking specifically here of the ‘cock-a-bunny’ project, where Wojnarowicz would attach miniature ears and cottontails onto cockroaches, thereby lending a comical and somewhat endearing nature to these creatures. Wojnarowicz’s irreverent project subverted the general depiction of the cockroach by humans as the most odious and sickening of insects into something faintly sweet, in taking on the soft and gentle connotations of a pet rabbit. Wojnarowicz delighted in the overturning of audience expectations and the transgression of taxonomic boundaries. These creatures originally appeared in a home video directed by Sophie S. Breer called *Waje’s Cockabunnies* (1981), but they are better known for their impromptu ‘performance’ as part of P.S. I’s *Beast* exhibition in 1982. Wojnarowicz and his actors appeared at the show uninvited, and he proceeded to let his ‘cock-a-bunnies’ loose onto the gallery floor. Wojnarowicz took great pleasure in the chaos which

40 But Wojnarowicz also conveyed a surprising amount of compassion towards his use of the cockroaches in this manner. He mentioned this in an audio interview with Keith Davis: ‘I’m sure I embarrassed the little buggers to death, and that I – I felt terrible for embarrassing them, because I mean, you know, even though they are roaches to have a room full of people laughing at them it can’t be an easy matter they must sense it. So yeah, I’ve had guilt about that. I’m serious… I don’t know which is worse, being stepped on or being ridiculed for the remainder of your life.’ David Wojnarowicz
ensued; his ‘cock-a-bunnies’ were successful in mocking the institutionalisation and pomp of the art world which the artist observed as a disturbing trend during the 1980s.

In Wojnarowicz’s ‘collaboration’ with the cockroaches, we see how the artist found value in a life form which many would regard as having little or no claims to moral personhood. With his use of ants, too, Wojnarowicz used an animal that is typically regarded as a ‘lower-order’ creature in order to demonstrate its similarities in occupation and activity to human beings. In so doing, Wojnarowicz conferred upon animal life dignity and compassion, as well as reinforced his belief that insect colonies were a primordial example of human civilisation. Yet the contradictory and polysemous signification of ants is noted in Earth and other paintings, in which they are used to comment upon the victimisation of certain human beings regarded as having lesser value or status within his society. Ants therefore functioned for Wojnarowicz as a metaphor for the inferior moral position of PWAs in the eyes of right-wing conservative Christian groups. Playing on the concept of insects as ‘pests’, whose sole purpose of existence is to ‘annoy’ or ‘aggravate’ humans, Wojnarowicz blatantly demonstrated how PWAs were considered a ‘moral pest’ in light of the vernacular term for the AIDS crisis – the ‘gay plague’ – with this term suggesting an uncontrollable swarm. Rizk observes how the categorisation of animals into either ‘pet’ or ‘pest’ is predicated on whether the boundary separating the outside and inside has been maintained. The reader might be reminded here of scenes from Wojnarowicz’s unfinished super8mm black-and-white film, Plain Ants…, where these creatures appear as a swarm which gradually invades the interior of a suburban home. According to Erica Fudge, pests are those unwelcome animals who have ‘crossed over from outside to inside’; they are ‘uninvited’ guests and thus ‘we label them

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Interviewed by Keith Davis – Part 3 of 3, Track 2, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0491.
In the written text that is embedded within one of the prints comprising *Sex Series* (Figure 20), Wojnarowicz laments that

The man on the tv who looks like he has a potatoe [sic] for a head is telling me and the rest of the country that I must suppress my sexuality – he talks about me in words that make me sound like an insect: ‘carrier,’ ‘infected’ and when he shows me pictures of me I am always bedridden alone and on the edge of death.

![Figure 20: Untitled, from the Sex Series, 1988-89](image)

A series of eight gelatin-silver prints, 15 x 18 inches

The nominalisation of the PWA as a ‘carrier’ who is ‘infected’ by HIV/AIDS recalls the rhetoric of biomedical discourse at the same time as associating Wojnarowicz with the abject status of ‘disease-ridden’ insects, perhaps the reviled cockroach or mosquito. Whilst the cockroach conjures images of pestilence, disease, and waste – connotations which Wojnarowicz attempted to discard in his charmingly ugly ‘cock-a-bunnies’ – Marion Copeland has also argued that the creature is often used as a symbol of ‘the weak and downtrodden, the outsiders, those forced to survive on the

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41 Erica Fudge, *Pests*, 17, quoted in Rizk, ‘Taking the “S” Out of “Pest”’: 40.
underside and on the margins of dominant human cultures. I will return to the Sex Series in the final section of this chapter, but what I aim to make clear now is that representations of insects, and more specifically, ants, in Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre are complex and contradictory in their signification. For example, the cibachrome, Subspecies Helms Senatoris (Figure 21), on initial glance, is a comical and rather heavy-handed depiction of Senator Jesse Helms as a spider, in which his face is superimposed onto that of an arachnid.

A more attentive response to the cibachrome however identifies the transference of the cultural and literary connotations of these venomous creatures onto Helms. Wojnarowicz’s intention to portray Helms as cunning, dangerous, and potentially fatal in terms of his words and actions becomes eminently obvious in the artwork, particularly in the branding of the spider’s exoskeleton with a swastika. For Wojnarowicz, this politician’s influence over the body politic was as insidious as that of a spider staring down its prey. Helms’ words would seem, as much as the bite of a

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Figure 21: Subspecies Helms Senatorius, 1990
Colour photograph, 19 x 24 ¼ inches

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42 Marion Copeland, Cockroach, 42, quoted in Rizk, ‘Taking the “S” Out of “Pest”’: 42.
spider, to induce ‘death’ in his victim, since his homophobic vitriol and wilful obstruction of safer sex education, as seen in his amendments to the 1987 Supplemental Appropriations Act and the Appropriations Bill for the fiscal year of 1988 respectively, had direct and sinister consequences for the welfare and support of PWAs during the Reagan presidency.

Let us shift our attention back to the mixed media artwork, *Earth*, which is exemplary in its critique of the ONE-TRIBE NATION and humanity’s relationship with plant and animal ecologies. Compositionally, *Earth* is an assemblage of various items that complicate hierarchical boundaries separating the human and animal worlds, as well as the material layers that comprise the Earth’s surface and core. Wojnarowicz achieves this complication through distorting the relative size of different visual elements and overlaying images to produce a collage-like aesthetic. Thomas Lawrence Long describes Wojnarowicz’s aesthetic as an extension of postmodern art’s fixation on intertextuality, self-reflexivity, and remediation. Lawrence Long also observes how collage is a technique favoured by queer artists as a way to rework traditional forms of kinship and relationality. As Nayland Blake points out, queer artists, in traditionally being denied access to cultural modes of expression and the institutions which patronise them, ‘have been forced to trespass and poach. To be queer is to cobble together identity, to fashion provisional tactics at will, to pollute and deflate all discourses.’ Given this definition, *Earth* is decidedly ‘queer’ not only in its composition, framing, and scale, but also in its use of iconography.

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In keeping with Wojnarowicz’s determination to dispel the illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION as a culturally and racially homogenised construct, he included within the top right hand corner of *Earth* a Hopi Kachina doll. A token of Native American culture, the Hopi Kachina was one element in a larger visual inventory that Wojnarowicz developed to signify different aspects of human civilisation, such as commerce (currency), progress (trains and other locomotives), religion (Christian symbols such as the crucifix), and time (watches and clockfaces). Here, however, the Hopi Kachina simultaneously suggests the erosion of cultural specificities by the ONE-TRIBE NATION as well as allegorising the destruction of native populations through westward colonial expansion in North America. When considered alongside the superimposed figure of a cowboy, which signified for Wojnarowicz the American West, the viewer might consider the problematics associated with tokenistic displays of multiculturalism in our present day, particularly when artefacts become divorced from their spiritual and cultural connotations through their proliferation in the tourism industry. Furthermore, we see Wojnarowicz’s politics of vision at work in *Earth* through the contiguous placement of the ant, human ribcage, and locomotives in the bottom left quadrant. Wojnarowicz allows us to view the ant from a microscopic viewpoint as noted in its enlarged size; in comparing its disproportionately large size against the smaller images of a derailed train and tractor, Wojnarowicz provokes the viewer in appraising the decline of human civilisation with the incisiveness of an X-ray machine. If we consider the tractor, train, cogs, wheels, and ant as part of a single collocation, an array of meanings is generated that pivot on the complementary relationship between human and animal systems. One possible meaning drawn when looking at the tough exoskeleton of the ant alongside the train and tractor is how human technologies
mimic the physiology of insects to improve efficiency and function. Another meaning could in fact relate to the division of labour between different members of the ant colony (‘drones,’ ‘soldiers,’ and ‘queen’) and how this is replicated in social hierarchies seen in the human world.

It would be prudent to pause here and make note that although Wojnarowicz appreciated immensely the ecological polymorphousness of the planet, and often lamented the fact that humans were ‘cursed with an absence of varieties of bright feathers or radical pigment designs on our faces and bodies to delineate our psychic differences’ (CK, 194), he nevertheless drew upon the idea of ant colonies being autonomous and self-perpetuating in order to criticise the teleological and mechanical nature of the ‘preinvented world’. As Wojnarowicz stated in an interview with Blinderman, ‘I used ants as a metaphor for society because the social structure of the ant world is parallel to ours’. This is certainly true if we look closely at the organisation of an ant colony or what is sometimes referred to as a ‘superorganism’; the evolutionary survival of ant species rests upon each member fulfilling their preordained role, much like what Wojnarowicz called the ‘preinvented existences’ of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Indeed, the success of each ant colony and its ability to function as a unified entity are predicated upon each ant performing their role as either a sterile female ‘soldier,’ male ‘drone,’ or fertile female ‘queen’. The pre-programmed function of ants is hardwired into the genetics of the social hymenoptera, so much so that according to Wojnarowicz

entomologists have discovered that they could approach a moth while it was in the middle of laying its eggs and cut its head off with a scalpel, and it would continue to lay its eggs until its genetically programmed job was done. Then it would die. (CK, 194)

What we have in *Earth* is Wojnarowicz’s negative critique of the automatic propulsions of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, which leads to the production of a ‘tribal nation of zombies’ (*CK*, 37) who are stripped of their autonomy and capacity for independent thought and action. Much like the moth which ‘continue[s] to lay its eggs until its genetically programmed job was done’, members of the ONE-TRIBE NATION are forced into an endless cycle of work and industry in order to further the course of civilisation and ensure its hegemony over non-human systems. However, by juxtaposing a human rib cage and a derailed train in the bottom left hand area of the artwork, perhaps Wojnarowicz is asking the viewer whether in limiting the capacity for human freedom, the ONE-TRIBE NATION sets itself up for spectacular failures, most notably the potential destruction of civilisation *in toto*. In being reduced to mere bones, thereby transforming the endoskeleton of a human into the tough exoskeleton of an ant or loadbearing structure of a bridge, Wojnarowicz is perhaps asking the viewer, what costs are made to the individual in serving as a member of the ONE-TRIBE NATION? Is a human ultimately valued not on intrinsic terms, but for his/her ability to function as an instrumental being? The answers to these questions are ultimately unanswerable given the dense symbolism of *Earth*, but what remains certain is that visual references to non-human animals and flora in the artwork are effective in showcasing the vast number of ecologies that are either disregarded or actively eliminated by the ‘clockwork of civilization’. If we accept Karl Schoonover’s remark that Wojnarowicz’s visual aesthetic constitutes ‘a dystopic environmentalism that refuses to revel in the progressive powers of human biological environmentalism’, 46 it might be useful to add here that in *Earth*, the cynicism which

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Wojnarowicz displays towards the ONE-TRIBE NATION is matched equally with a hopeful orientation towards the possibilities opened by attending to the relative disorder and illimitable variety of the non-human world. For what Wojnarowicz chooses to show emerging from the wreckage of human locomotion – a derailed train in the bottom left quadrant of the artwork – are seedlings. Perhaps these seedlings, like the overgrown roots in the rest of the painting, will grow to engulf, and ultimately destroy, the rigid structures of the ONE-TRIBE NATION that demarcate categorical boundaries and affix limiting modes of being onto the diverse number of beings that comprise our earth.

**Sex Series**

In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz time and again asserts that in order to lift the taboos against particular sexualities and relations it is necessary to speak of them ‘in clear and loud tones’ within the public domain, for ‘to keep silent is to deny the fact that there are millions of separate tribes in this illusion called AMERICA’ (*CK*, 153). By destabilising the division of public and private matters, Wojnarowicz believed that it would be possible to ‘shake the boundaries of the illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION,’ thereby unveiling cultures, genders, and sexualities that are relegated to the private domain by heteronormative and monocultural imperatives.

As a gay male artist and later PWA, Wojnarowicz was compelled to examine the heterosexist policies of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Further to this, he scrutinised the acceptance of heterosexual expressions of desire in the public sphere whilst the ONE-TRIBE NATION outwardly condemned demonstrations of homosexual community and kinship. These concerns are apparent in Wojnarowicz’s *Sex Series*,
and I will aim in the last section of this chapter to analyse Wojnarowicz’s negotiation of the boundaries separating binary frames including heterosexuality and homosexuality, and normalcy and deviancy. Of particular interest are Wojnarowicz’s technical methods in critiquing the sexual politics of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, which include the use of circular insets, inversion of light and dark, and the incorporation of microscopic and macroscopic viewpoints.

One of the instruments which the ONE-TRIBE NATION utilises to ensure the compliance of its members is to render certain subject positions as ‘deviant’ and/or ‘abnormal’ against a mythic image of the normative and ideal American citizen as male, straight, white, and able-bodied. But, for many, as Michael Warner notes in *The Trouble with Normal*, the command to ‘be normal’ is fundamentally irresistible because of its claims to political, cultural, and social privilege. After all,

>Nearly everyone, it seems, wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative is being abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn’t seem to be a choice at all.⁴⁷

Wojnarowicz’s aim in *Sex Series* is not necessarily to undermine the category of the ‘normal,’ so much as to disassociate homosexuality from its negative connotations of abnormality and deviancy. What also becomes patently clear in the *Sex Series* is how for Wojnarowicz heterosexual sex was no more ‘normal’ or commonplace than homosexual sex. This is apparent if we consider that *Sex Series* incorporates insets in which sexual acts are presented without the markers that typically codify one’s gender and/or sexuality. He achieves his aim in providing the audience with ‘X-ray vision’ into what is typically regarded as a ‘private’ space – the bedroom – through the use of

circular insets that provide an enlarged depiction of varied sexual acts. However, Wojnarowicz is also prescient that the Sex Series would be viewed in a public space such as a gallery or an auditorium, thereby confusing categorical boundaries and leading the audience to question their own level of comfort when confronted by sexualities differing from their own:

The spherical structures embedded in the series are about examination and or surveillance. Looking through a microscope or looking through a telescope or the monitoring that takes place in looking through the lens of a set of binoculars. Its [sic] about oppression or suppression. Its [sic] about sexuality in this age of Aids [sic] and the attempted suppression of sexuality. Are you comfortable looking at these images of obvious sexual acts in a crowded room. Do you fear judgment if you pause for a long time before an image of sexual expression?48

As Robert Sember has written, Wojnarowicz’s Sex Series is one of his most important ‘post-diagnosis’ series, having been created between 1988 and 1989.49 As such, the viewer must take into consideration how Wojnarowicz’s diagnosis with HIV may have impacted upon his politics of vision in Sex Series and how they differ from those found predominantly in biomedical literature and research. I am thinking in particular of how microscopic examination of so-called ‘infected’ T-cells by the HIV-1 and HIV-2 strains are often utilised in conjunction with graphic text to make sense of what is fundamentally a complex diagnostic category with an even more complex socio-cultural signification. By incorporating circular discs that feature floating blood cells in Sex Series (Figure 20), Wojnarowicz’s inset approximates what is typically seen under a microscope. In so doing, the artist contextualises his earlier comment about vision as an instrument of control and taxonomisation. Whether thinking about

48 ‘Sex Series,’ David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 3, Manuscripts, Subseries A, Box 4, Folder 103.
technological objects such as a microscope, x-ray machine, or endoscope, biomedicine and its instruments have had an inestimable impact upon how humans see and relate to disease and their own bodies, as well as how they perceive those who disturb their sensory field through symptoms of ill health. Consequently, Wojnarowicz’s politics of vision demonstrates here that in the context of the AIDS crisis, medical instruments such as the microscope played a decisive role in differentiating and thereby interpellating subjects into the category of the ‘healthy self’ or ‘diseased other’: ‘Its [sic] about oppression and suppression.’

Moreover, when images of such cells are juxtaposed with insets featuring riot officers and text detailing anti-homosexual violence (Figure 22), the correlation between the visual symptoms of HIV/AIDS and homophobia become disturbingly clear. In this image, Wojnarowicz superimposes these insets over a landscape image of a train travelling over rugged terrain, thereby indicating the alarming presence of homophobic violence and rhetoric that has spread through the country, just as a train embarks on a transcontinental journey. Thinking further about the role of medical technologies in the identification and categorisation of subjects, we might note how Wojnarowicz offsets the circular inset of blood cells with an x-ray of a human foetus in Figure 20. Here, it is useful to consider examples of homophobic vitriol which Wojnarowicz used in Close to the Knives to convey the extreme levels of hatred towards PWAs in his 1980s American context: ‘if I had a dollar for health care I’d rather spend it on a baby or innocent person with some defect or illness not of their own responsibility; not some person with AIDS’ (CK, 160). In the context of this highly offensive statement made by a public health official which Wojnarowicz heard on television, we are led to believe that for many homophobic individuals in
Wojnarowicz’s society, the moral consideration given to an unborn child is far greater than that afforded to a gay male PWA.

What Wojnarowicz suggests in addition to the above is that his politics of vision is also concerned with the active concealment of homosexuality from the public sphere, which became even more pronounced following the advent of HIV/AIDS and the identification of gay men as the primary ‘risk group’ in terms of transmission and levels of incidence. He taunts the audience into asking themselves if they are made uncomfortable by witnessing these scenes involving penetrative and oral sex between homosexual and heterosexual couples: ‘Are you comfortable looking at these images of obvious sexual acts in a crowded room[?]… Do you fear judgment if you pause for a long time before an image of sexual expression[?]’ Nonetheless, Wojnarowicz’s clever inversion of black-and-white film works to undo pre-emptively the charge of indecency or impropriety that may result from including such images in the Sex Series. The images were supposedly taken from the private pornographic
collection of Peter Hujar following his death. The inversion of film lends a certain opacity to these insets, where it is often unclear what is taking place between the subjects and who these subjects are. This effectively produces a levelling effect between heterosexual and homosexual acts of erotic intimacy, for when viewed with an ‘X-ray vision,’ which the visual inversion mimics, each looks the same despite slight alterations in choreography and trajectory. Nevertheless, this inversion also serves to underline Wojnarowicz’s critique of the division made between the public and private by the ONE-TRIBE NATION. As Richard Meyer has explained, ‘Inset images are commonly used… to magnify otherwise illegible or insufficiently detailed fragments of a larger field. Perhaps the circular insets in Wojnarowicz’s series fulfill a similar function, serving as apertures that magnify an otherwise unseen or submerged erotics’. I agree wholeheartedly with this assessment, insofar as one of Wojnarowicz’s abiding tenets was to undo the taboos against homosexuality and non-heterosexual relations by repeatedly demonstrating their existence in public spaces. For Wojnarowicz, making visible what society deems ‘abnormal’ was a powerful way to incite acceptance between the ‘general public’ and minority groups, thereby working to dismantle the ‘preinvented world’.

Another interpretation of the circular discs emerges when focusing on those images that actively position the male body as a sexual object to be visually consumed by the audience. For instance, in Figure 20, Wojnarowicz includes in the bottom left hand corner an inset featuring a cropped image of a male torso and groin; naked but for his underwear and with his hands held behind his back, the subject appears to invite coyly the audience to appreciate and devour his body with their eyes. Closer

scrutiny of the image, however, reveals it to be a detail depicting Saint Sebastian, albeit one that is heavily eroticised and invites the desiring gaze of the viewer. The eroticism of this image, along with insets featured in Figures 16, 23, and 24, lead me to assume that Wojnarowicz was deliberate in making these insets circular, for in so doing they become visually indistinguishable to a ‘glory hole’.

Figure 23: *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series*, 1988-89
A series of eight gelatin-silver prints, 15 x 18 inches

Figure 24: *Untitled*, from the *Sex Series* [Boat], 1988-89
A series of eight gelatin-silver prints, 15 x 18 inches
I will speak more in my fifth chapter on how cruising was for Wojnarowicz a crucial subculture for consolidating gay intimacy and relationships, but for now I would like to say that his focus on this architectural feature in the *Sex Series* hinges upon the role of vision in the production of sexual fantasies. For instance, Figure 24 (*Untitled [Boat]*) indicates the compositional consistency which we see occurring across the range of photomontages comprising the *Sex Series*; we have here, like Figure 16, a landscape image in the background that is juxtaposed by the visual superimposition of the circular inset in the top right hand area. Here, Wojnarowicz has enlarged the inset considerably, such that it visually imitates the placement of a full moon in the night sky. Yet when compared to the steam ship below, the audience’s perception of the image begins to wander into the realms of fantasy and speculation: is the inset in fact an image made available by a telephoto lens, thereby catching unawares two crewmembers or travellers engaged in an illicit tryst? Turning our focus now to Figure 23, this photomontage emphasises the pervasiveness of homosexual activity and subcultures in rural along with metropolitan areas. Like an optical illusion, too, the straightened legs of the male receiving anilingus is visually analogous to the tall and spare trees around them, which offer them no means of shelter or privacy. Wojnarowicz continues in Figures 23 and 24 to experiment with audience expectations through his oscillation between concealment and revelation, and the private and public.
CHAPTER FIVE

The Ethics of Care and Intimacy in Wojnarowicz’s Oeuvre

The penultimate chapter of my thesis brings together ethical, political, and epistemological concerns relating to the care and support of PWAs during the first decade of the AIDS crisis. As such, I identify another strategy that Wojnarowicz utilised to combat the homophobic policies of the Reagan administration and the ideological primacy of heteronormative family structures during this context. By focusing on how PWAs drew upon the emotional strength and compassion of their friends and lovers, Wojnarowicz advocated the construction of social relations which can function as alternatives to the limited conceptions of being and togetherness prescribed by the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Consequently, chapter five looks back to chapter two in its consideration of writing as a form of political activism in working to stimulate positive changes to the lives and rights of PWAs. Nonetheless, the ethics of care and intimacy that I locate as a fundamental trait of Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre also relates to his opposition against the ONE-TRIBE NATION’s regimes of visibility and concealment. These regimes of visibility and concealment, as we saw in chapter four, work to suppress the expression of homosexuality in the public sphere. Thus, in this chapter I examine how Wojnarowicz turned his visual and textual attention to two aspects of the gay community which are often hidden from public view: the first is the sexual subculture of cruising,1 and the second is the changing relationship between PWAs and their carers. In depicting both of these in his writings and visual artworks,

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1 Although Wojnarowicz’s pier work did in fact precede his post-diagnostic politics, I would suggest that these representations take on further significance during the first decade of the AIDS crisis, in which public bathhouses and other spaces of homoerotic intimacy were being shut down as a result of homophobic injunctions against anonymous and often unprotected sex.
Wojnarowicz sought to remove the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS, those who bear the traces of this diagnosis, and homosexuality.

I regard these dual focuses of Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre as being exemplary of his support for and concern towards the survival of the gay community. For Wojnarowicz made clear that it was not only the AIDS crisis that changed the social landscape of the gay community, but also the gradual dilapidation of the Piers along Manhattan’s Lower West Side. For many PWAs, the onset of HIV/AIDS necessitated a recalibration of the nature of one’s (sexual) intimacy with others, along with practical aspects concerning everyday life. Jeffrey Weeks argued, for instance, that ‘the most striking feature of the response to the epidemic from the gay community was the way in which it brought out a new culture of responsibility, for the self and for others’. Wojnarowicz responded to this ‘new culture of responsibility’ by textually recording spaces such as the Piers at a time when they were at risk of being physically and epistemologically destroyed. In so doing, Wojnarowicz immortalised specific architectures that made possible the formation of alternative sexual relations and encounters. This impulse to posterity was one that Wojnarowicz shared with artists such as Frank Hallam, Stanley Stellar, Peter Hujar, and Leonard Fink, who each recognised the possible destruction of this subculture as a result of two forces: the promotion of abstinence and resultant injunction against

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casual sex during the first decade of the AIDS crisis in America, and the gradual reappropriation of the Waterfront by the restructuring projects of the mid-1970s onwards. For instance, in 1991, Roland Betts, a financier who hoped to convert the Chelsea Piers (Piers 59-62) into an ice skating rink, surveyed this portion of the Hudson River only to lament its fall from grace into utter ruin; Ann L. Buttenweiser narrates, ‘Looking upriver and down, Betts would have seen the once glorious Chelsea Piers… in a sorry state…. Pier 60 housed a graveyard of cars… Pier 61 was in complete disrepair, its old, stylish windows either missing or boarded up.’

Betts’ plan shows the historical failure of both independent contractors and mayoral administrations to subsume the Piers under ‘a homogenous public function’ with the relocation of commercial shipping sites to New Jersey and Brooklyn in the 1960s. At the same time, Betts’ remark shows how the Waterfront has played a vital role in the cultural imaginary in stirring up powerful fantasies of an erotic and social kind. Indeed, the piers below Fourteenth Street were not only appropriated sexually as cruising grounds for gay New York City men, but also became spaces of artistic experimentation and collaboration for Wojnarowicz and others. In particular, Pier 34, otherwise known as the Ward Line Pier, was adopted by Wojnarowicz, Mike Bidlo, and other artists who transformed this space into an ‘extension of the East Village scene.’

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4 Fiona Anderson, ‘“Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins”: Cruising Manhattan’s Derelict Waterfront’ (Paper, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London, United Kingdom, 2-3 June 2011).
6 Anderson, ‘“Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins”’.
sexual and textual collaborations in the West Side Piers. Nonetheless, like other writers such as Samuel R. Delany who celebrated the Piers as a Dionysian space of erotic excess and a focal point for the enactment of gay history, Wojnarowicz recognised that with the arrival of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s, certain changes needed to be made with respect to casual and semi-public sex. Consequently, what we find in Wojnarowicz’s narratives of cruising is an ambiguous blurring of the line separating reality and fantasy. Indeed, one suspects that certain descriptions of cruising in ‘Losing the Form in Darkness’ may be composed entirely of the latter category, perhaps because Wojnarowicz recognised the difficulty in accommodating safer sex measures within this existing framework of improvisation and spontaneity. But as Wojnarowicz said, ‘There is really no difference between memory and sight, fantasy and actual vision’, since ‘Fantasized images are actually made up of millions of disjointed observations collected and collated into the forms and textures of thought’. Wojnarowicz produced unexpected moments of intimacy with his partners through the fusion of fantasy and sight, and in such a way that allowed him to multiply exponentially networks of associative contact between different individuals of the ONE-TRIBE NATION.

My second section will focus on how Wojnarowicz’s relationship with Peter Hujar reconceptualised his ethics of intimacy and care. I will utilise recent scholarship in disability studies on the assumed obligations and responsibilities of the carer and cared-for in order to reassess the dynamics of seroconcordant and

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9 Samuel R. Delany observed that ‘Now AIDS has marked an area in the social market where language, desire and lived experience have all functioned in opposition. In the market of AIDS, whether it be the gay man trying to negotiate his pleasures, or the government official trying to negotiate a grant, what we say we do – or say we should do – is often hugely at odds with what we do do. Likewise, what we wish and what were compelled to do have often been in equal tension.’ Samuel R. Delany, ‘Sword and Sorcery, S&M, and the Economics of Inadequation: The Camera Obscura Interview,’ in Silent Interviews (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 159.
serodiscordant relationships. Specifically, Sarah Smith Rainey’s *Love, Sex, and Disability: The Pleasures of Care* is indispensable to this project, since she demonstrates how ‘care’ involves more than merely physical and therapeutic assistance of the cared-for. In fact, the cared-for can also offer the carer psych-emotional support, thereby presenting the carer and cared-for dynamic as a mutually beneficial partnership rather than one built upon an imbalance of power.

A discussion of Wojnarowicz’s *oeuvre* would be remiss if it overlooked the significance of his relationship with the late photographer, Peter Hujar. As chapter two started to show, Wojnarowicz’s relationship with Hujar constituted his artistic and emotional centre: ‘he [Wojnarowicz] thought it the central connection in his life.’ Although their relationship was initially sexual, it quickly developed into a relationship between an acolyte and a mentor. As Wojnarowicz wrote,

> He was like the parent I never had, like the brother I never had. He helped me drop a lot of the shit I carried from the streets – the pain, the fear, the guilt. Stuff I could barely speak to people about. I remember revealing to him that I’d been a hustler on our second night together…. I fully expected him to reject me. And I remember he just said, ‘So?’ And we got into this long conversation where I just revealed all my fears.

Hujar lent Wojnarowicz an impartial ear at a time when the young artist felt utterly disconnected from his biological family because of his sexual and ideological differences. Unsurprisingly, Hujar’s death hit Wojnarowicz particularly hard, since

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12 Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 178. Wojnarowicz was recorded to have said, rather bluntly to his surviving companion, Tom Rauffenbart, that the three most important things in his life (in descending order) were his work, Peter, and then Tom. See page 356 of Carr’s *A Fire in the Belly*.
13 In a letter to Jean-Pierre Delage on 9 January 1981, David wrote of his first meeting with Hujar. This letter reads, ‘He [Hujar] stared at me and I looked back several times. I guess I wanted him in a strong way.’ Wojnarowicz, quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 170. Wojnarowicz also said to Carr that ‘He told me that the sexual affair had been brief, but that they then began “a very complicated friendship/relationship that took time to find a track to run along.”’ Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 178.
Hujar exemplified all of the relations which he had previously found wanting in his familial environment. Indeed, he wrote in his journal after attending a memorial service for Keith Davis with the artist, Kiki Smith, that ‘Peter was a teacher of sorts for me a brother a father an emotional and spiritual connection such as I never had with my family.’ Yet as Close to the Knives also attests, the relationship between Wojnarowicz and Hujar was mutually beneficial; whilst Wojnarowicz was one of Hujar’s primary carers once the photographer was diagnosed with AIDS-related symptoms, Hujar also played a large role in the development of Wojnarowicz’s artistic skills. Wojnarowicz related that it was only after Hujar’s death and consequently moving into his home that he was able to realise fully his gift for photography: ‘I never had access to a darkroom, but after Peter’s death, living in his place, I had access to his darkroom – that was the first time I was able to go back over years and years of negatives.’ Consequently, we begin to notice that the relationship between Wojnarowicz and Hujar is more complicated than simply overlaying the carer and cared-for roles onto these individuals respectively. Instead, Wojnarowicz and Hujar’s relationship was of mutual benefit and one that sustained itself even after the latter’s death. Wojnarowicz’s unfinished and silent film dedicated to Peter Hujar, and as we will see in chapter six his adoption of Hujar’s classical modes of composition and framing, demonstrate Wojnarowicz’s sustained memorialisation and homage of his friend in his artworks and daily life.

15 1987, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 1, Journals, Box 2, Folder 27, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.
17 Atavistic reminders of Hujar were a daily occurrence for Wojnarowicz. Here, the quotation and citation of Hujar’s proper name on receipts and utility bills epitomises Jacques Derrida’s notion of iterability, in which a personality lives on discursively in spite of the physical death of the subject. ‘David had decided to move into Hujar’s loft. He would breathe the same air Hujar had breathed. He would hang on to any vestige. He would leave the phone and utility bills in that name, keep “Hujar” coming to the space. He even saved the junk mail that came for Hujar and at some point tried to stitch it all together to use as a background for a piece, the way he used maps.’ Carr, Fire in the Belly, 382.
Entangled with Wojnarowicz’s representations of cruising in *Close to the Knives* are questions of the survivability and survivorhood of the gay community. Both the history and legacy of homosexual culture was dramatically called into question by the AIDS crisis. The biomedical construction of HIV as a predominantly sexually transmitted illness threatened to eviscerate rituals, practices and environments central to this culture in the hope of limiting its incidence within the ‘general population.’ However promoting abstinence for anyone, let alone homosexual men, was a bitter pill to swallow; as Michael Warner has mentioned, ‘it is an absurd fantasy to expect gay men to live without a sexual culture when we have almost nothing else that brings us together’.[18] Representations of cruising in *Close to the Knives* therefore function to memorialise sites of profound importance to the sexual culture of homosexual men during the (post-)Stonewall era, as well as foster an erotic connection between Wojnarowicz and other men, both past and present. If ‘queers survive through the ability to invent or seize pleasurable relations between bodies… across time’,[19] then it is through Wojnarowicz’s conscious engagement with these cruising sites, both physically and as an artefact of homosexual culture, that he is able to produce intimate relations with (absent) others through a shared sexual citizenry.

Wojnarowicz’s representations of cruising in the West Side Piers draw a temporal line between his current sexual rendezvous and conventional depictions of these sites during the Stonewall era. For instance, Delany’s *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village* captures the carnivalesque

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atmosphere of the Piers which Wojnarowicz also drew upon in *Close to the Knives*. In both texts we see how the wealth of visual and tactile stimuli in the Piers created a space of ‘libidinal saturation’ for its nocturnal denizens. Delany writes that it was common to see

Thirty-five, fifty, a hundred all-but-strangers… hugely ordered, highly social, attentive, silent, and grounded in a certain care, if not community. At those times, within those van-walled alleys, not between the trucks, now in the back of open loaders, cock passed from mouth to mouth to hand to ass to mouth without ever breaking contact with other flesh for more than seconds. … It was engrossing; it was exhausting; it was reassuring; and it was very human.  

We see a different aesthetic at work in Wojnarowicz’s ‘Losing the Form in Darkness’; nonetheless, Wojnarowicz seems like Delany to be overcome by the sensuality of the naked bodies which he finds in the darkened areas of the Piers. Wojnarowicz marvels at the visual similarity of these bodies to the elegant forms of classical statuary, where passing through numerous doorways of the Piers leads him to confuse visually the frescoes on the walls and the subjects standing in front of him: ‘Seeing the pale flesh of the frescoes come to life: the smooth turn of hands over bodies, the taut lines of limbs and mouths, the intensity of the energy bringing others down the halls where guided by little or no sounds they pass silently over the charred floors’ (*CK*, 22). It seems here that Wojnarowicz’s aesthetic sensibilities have gotten the better of his visual faculties, in choosing to ignore the debris and filth of the Piers in favour of distilling a moment of eternal beauty from these figures: ‘I thought of the eternal sleep of statues, of marble eyes and lips and the stone wind-blown hair of the rider’s horse… of the wounding curve of ancient backs stooped for frozen battles’ (*CK*, 23). This romanticised image of the Piers is difficult to reconcile with Wojnarowicz’s later

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descriptions of this very same space, in which we see this artist failing to reconcile its present dilapidation with their own glorious image in the past. In ‘The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole,’ his descriptions of the Piers evoke regret, disgust, and sadness over the disjunction between his memories and the present reality:

Deep in the back of my head I wish it would all burn down, explode in some screaming torrent of wind and flame, pier walls collapsing and hissing into the waters. (*CK*, 187)

The smell of shit and piss is overwhelming; everybody uses this place as an outdoor toilet, getting fucked in the ass and then letting it loose in some spare corner. (*CK*, 187)

Wojnarowicz’s immediate reaction to the dereliction of the Piers is violent and absolute. In no longer evidencing the vitality of homosexual culture, Wojnarowicz calls for their decimation, having recourse to his own memories which preserve them in their earlier state as a sexual cornucopia: ‘I wish it would all burn down’. Yet what we also see emerging in these statements is a recognition of the Piers as spaces which exist outside of the framework of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, having been subject to numerous appropriations by those who inhabit them, whether homeless individuals, hustlers, prostitutes, or temporary travellers. Wojnarowicz explained to Barry Blinderman that he was fascinated by the evolution of the Piers and its adoption by the gay community as a place for intimate sexual encounters: ‘There were some extraordinary warehouses where a lot of sexual activity occurred, where a lot of homosexual men would roam the hundreds of rooms of these abandoned shipping structures and engage in open sex and whatever.’21 But he also retained an aesthetic

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appreciation for how the Piers changed with the passing of time, noting the interplays between light and dark, presence and absence, and the gradual ornamentation of the space through wear and tear: ‘I documented not just sexuality, but the slow disintegration of these architectural structures in times of storm, in winter, in spring, during rain; I’d write these long pieces about the sound quality, the visions of people that appear out of darkness and disappear into darkness’.

The liminality of the Piers both in function and form meant that Wojnarowicz was entering a space that abandoned the ideological edicts of control, order, cleanliness, and stability that characterise the ONE-TRIBE NATION. As Wojnarowicz mentioned in his ‘Biographical Dateline,’ the Piers were ‘as far away from civilization as [one] could walk,’ which was only enhanced by the presence of individuals who, like Wojnarowicz, were regarded as social ‘outlaws’: ‘People in the warehouses had their throats cut by thieves, were shot and dumped into the river, etc.’

The history of the East Village art scene and the gay cruising subculture of New York City are inseparable from the unique geography of the West Side Piers. Wojnarowicz’s maturity as a visual artist is in direct conversation with the advent of this space as a site of textual and sexual collaborations amongst artists of the Lower East Side. Wojnarowicz favoured the Ward Line Pier (number 34) in particular, and he collaborated with Mike Bidlo and Luis Frangella on a number of temporary graffiti pieces, photographs, and drawings that utilised the existing architecture of the site. Wojnarowicz also utilised the Piers in his 1978-79 photographic series, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*. As has already been discussed in chapter three, Rimbaud was an individual whom Wojnarowicz felt particularly aligned with, both aesthetically and biographically. Having both lived on the streets, resorted to petty thievery to survive,

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22 Wojnarowicz, ‘The Compression of Time,’ 54.
and been victimised because of their homosexuality, Wojnarowicz found in Rimbaud a fitting icon for his representation of an ‘outlaw’ reality. Wojnarowicz said in the ‘Biographical Dateline’ in *Tongues of Flame*, that with his series, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, he ‘started playing with ideas of compression of “historical time and activity” and fusing the french [sic] poet’s identity with modern new york [sic] urban activities mostly illegal in nature’. This experimental convergence of different spatio-temporal moments is evident in the print below (Figure 25).

In photographing this avant-garde artist amongst the refuse and ruin of the Piers, Wojnarowicz draws upon the poet’s status as a figure of marginality, both in terms of his social status and relationship to the literary establishment. This is further reinforced through the motto that is graffitied on the wall behind him: ‘THE SILENCE OF MARCEL DUCHAMP IS OVERRATED’. The slogan references

24 Wojnarowicz, ‘Biographical Dateline,’ 118.
Joseph Beuys’ infamous remark about the Dadaist, Duchamp, thereby weaving together additional strands of aesthetic influence and departure in the photograph. Yet it also brings to the fore questions concerning aesthetic indebtedness and the contestatory relationships between different avant-garde traditions, since Beuys was reluctant to acknowledge the significance of Duchamp’s critique of the institutionalisation of art and how such institutionalisation impacts upon the presentation of an artist’s ideas. With ‘Rimbaud’s’ arms outstretched in the photograph, Wojnarowicz produces a visual doubling in the work, in which the poet’s body mimics the truncated figure behind him. The drawing of this male, not unlike the Vitruvian man, highlights the sensual nature of the male body, reminding the viewer of the setting in which this photograph occurs. Nonetheless, the different graphic inscriptions one locates in the photograph – the drawing, reference to Duchamp, and ‘La Sueña mexicana de Nancy’ – contribute to the idea of the Piers as having been appropriated by its occupants to serve many functions over time. These traces, following Henri Lefebvre’s argument, demonstrate that the Piers are spaces that are always in transition; as ‘present spaces,’ they function as unstable artefacts that conjure different social relations and forces through the interplay of past, present, and future, such that ‘production process and product present themselves as two inseparable aspects’.  

Although Wojnarowicz focused his attention on representing the Piers as an important site of gay intimacy, he also retained interest in depicting other architectural spaces (including train stations, piers, alleyways, and nightclubs) that also achieved this aim. The formation of collective memories was an important aspect of

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Wojnarowicz’s works, insofar as they contributed to solidarity and the development of an alternative history to those enforced by the ONE-TRIBE NATION. In the chapter, ‘Losing the Form in Darkness’, Wojnarowicz catalogues the different body parts of men as he cruises along a deserted highway. His descriptions adopt the language of the cinematographer as he darts between extreme focus points:

> Old images race back and forth and I’m gathering a heat in the depth of my belly from them: flashes of a curve of arm, back, the lines of a neck glimpsed among the crowds in the train stations, one that you could write whole poems to. (*CK*, 12)

The description is palpable; the reader is immediately arrested by the suggestiveness of these body parts which, through their momentary ‘flash[ing]’ across the screen of one’s mind, may indeed be erotic in nature or admirable in their aesthetic perfection. Yet these images serve to gather ‘a heat in the depth’ of Wojnarowicz’s belly, and as such the physical urge that simmers within his body cannot be separated from the hope of its eventual orgasmic release. Soon, longing for erotic intimacy with the anonymous other is actualised; his traversal of long-abandoned streets enacts a temporal convergence of the distant past and the present: ‘The streets were familiar more because of the faraway past than the recent past – streets that I walked in those odd times while living among them in my early teens when in the company of deaf mutes and times square pederasts’ (*CK*, 13). Wojnarowicz refers in this passage to his teenage years hanging out on the streets of New York City; there in New York, ‘in the company of deaf mutes and times square pederasts’, he became a hustler and stole

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26 At this point in his life, Wojnarowicz was living near Eighth Avenue with his mother, Dolores, older sister, Pat, and brother, Steven. There is some ambiguity over the year that Ed Wojnarowicz handed over the children to their mother. According to Carr’s biography, ‘No one could tell me when this happened. … Here the timeline just disintegrates. Steven felt sure he was in the eighth grade, so – 1965 or ’66. … David situated the whole mess in 1963, which is certainly too early. According to his and Steven’s school records, they entered the New York City system on January 10, 1966.’ See page 22 and chapter two (pages 24-38) in Carr’s *Fire in the Belly* for further details.
in order to survive. Nevertheless, his memories of living on the streets cannot be
divorced from erotic desire, in which hustling, and later cruising, held the potential for
financial gain as well as intimacy of a non-sexual kind. We can certainly see how
Wojnarowicz undermines the normative assumptions of promiscuous sex as
unproductive and impersonal in the essay, ‘Losing the Form in Darkness’; here,
Wojnarowicz’s catalogue of quotidian objects operate as the stereophonic background
for his cruise:

cars buckling over cobblestones… trucks waiting at corners with
swarthy drivers leaning back in the cool shadowy seats… figures
passing within rooms, faraway sounds of voices and cries…
connecting me with the creaking movements of the city. (CK, 12)

With his cinematic eye, Wojnarowicz captures the architecture of these settings
through allusion and evocation: a figure ‘passing within rooms’ or the sounds of cars
‘buckling over cobblestones’ suggest rather than show ostensibly the possibility of
cruising or a serendipitous sexual liaison. Another foregone moment in this essay
involves Wojnarowicz having casual sex with another man at the West Side Piers.
Wojnarowicz is immediately transfixed by a fellow cruiser due to the notable display
of masculine virility and danger which exude from his heavily tattooed and aging
body: ‘Huge fins were riding his shoulders and tattooed scales of komodo dragons’
(CK, 14); ‘Close-cropped hair wiry and black, handsome like some face in old boxer
photographs, a cross between an aging boxer and a Mayakovsky’ (CK, 14-15). The
reference point that Wojnarowicz gives to the reader, that is, the Russian Futurist,
Vladimir Mayakovsky, assists in reinforcing the physical characteristics of this man.
The anonymous figure has adopted the brutal, hard, yet nonetheless handsome
features of this artist, not unlike those we would expect from a wiry pugilist. It would
not be unrealistic to assume, given how erotic desire often hinges upon physical
appearance, that this cruising narrative will soon slide into an inventory of sex acts, where a temporal grounding in the present moment of fucking will necessarily override any connection (phenomenological, ontological, or otherwise) to the past or future. However, hindsight has indeed intensified the cultural impact of this encounter; for Wojnarowicz, his fate is regarded as hinged upon this very moment, and thus its outcome has microcosmic and macrocosmic consequences. Whereas cruising would typically be associated with the temporality of fleetingness and the disposition of play, the sexual intimacy between Wojnarowicz and this handsome stranger approaches the point of ‘love’. In this regard, the nostalgic and often romantic ways in which Wojnarowicz remembers his sexual encounters challenge the idea that the sole motivation of promiscuous sex is physical satiation. Instead, Ben Gove finds that ‘Wojnarowicz recounts his own sexual experiences… as much – if not more – for the associations and fantasies they stir up, as for the physical pleasure’:

In loving him, I saw a cigarette between the fingers of a hand, smoke blowing backwards into the room, and sputtering planes diving low through the clouds. In loving him, I saw men encouraging each other to lay down their arms. In loving him, I saw small-town laborers creating excavations that other men spend their lives trying to fill. In loving him, I saw moving films of stone buildings; I saw a hand in prison dragging snow in from the sill. In loving him, I saw great houses being erected that would soon slide into the waiting and stirring seas. I saw him freeing me from the silences of the interior life. (CK, 17)

The intimacy shared between Wojnarowicz and this man goes far beyond physical pleasure; what occurs as part of their sexual union are shifts that are seismic in both

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27 Ben Gove writes that ‘Wojnarowicz underscores the common occurrence in anonymous sex of passionate connections and lyrical or sentimental interpretations that are conventionally ascribed solely to monogamous romance.’ Gove, Cruising Culture: Promiscuity, Desire and American Gay Literature (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 158.

28 Gove, Cruising Culture, 140.
magnitude and force. ‘In loving him,’ Wojnarowicz was catapulted into a future where homosexual love is the cornerstone of world-making and utopian optimism – ‘I saw men encouraging each other to lay down their arms’; ‘I saw moving films of stone buildings’. ‘In loving him,’ Wojnarowicz foresaw both the immediate release of physical tension and a release from ontological monadicity: ‘I saw a cigarette between the fingers of a hand’; ‘I saw him freeing me from the silences of the interior life.’ Thus, cruising assists in creating bonds of intimacy between homosexual men that exceed the realm of the physical. Although promiscuity is an inevitable aspect of cruising, the culture, as Tim Dean asserts, is ‘far from being reducible to [it].’ In fact, gay cruising constitutes a philosophy of living whose ethics depends on whether the openness to strangeness is cultivated, or, conversely, curtailed.’

As such, the emotional bonds that emerge through gay cruising oscillate between their world-making and world-shattering potentials. In respecting the ‘strangeness’ of the other, that is, inviting a disposition of ‘openness’ towards physical intimacy with an unknown and unknowable other, cruising enables the production of social relationships that resist the urge in heteronormative culture towards uniformity, categorisation, and identification. The creation of socialities occurs when cruisers, like Wojnarowicz, actively resist spaces of heteronormativity by fiercely privatising and thereby protecting cherished sites of homosexual promiscuity.

Wojnarowicz resisted the urge to represent cruising as simply a cornucopia of erotic pleasures by interspersing these moments of excitation with moments of extreme pathos. Barry D. Adam adroitly notes that ‘AIDS forced the domestic and sexual lives of gay men into the public realm, and thus into public acknowledgement,

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creating new opportunities for representation in the arts and public media.' It is not only the case, though, that AIDS pushed alternative cultures of sexuality into the public sphere in a positive way. The increased visibility of homosexuality in the public sphere and the high incidence of HIV/AIDS in the gay community were manipulated by homophobic groups as proof that HIV/AIDS was a ‘venereal disease’ with a moral orientation. According to Simon Watney, ‘AIDS… is effectively being used as a pretext throughout the West to “justify” calls for increasing legislation and regulation of those who are considered to be socially unacceptable’.

Wojnarowicz’s joyful perspectives on cruising in Close to the Knives are therefore interwoven with representations of the negative consequences of increased visibility of homosexuals in the public domain, including violence and hostility towards this sexuality. Nevertheless, he also shows how ‘a culture of men caring for men’ emerged within the gay community as a reaction against the inadequate and inept response of the American government towards the vast numbers of homosexual men dying from AIDS-related complications.

Wojnarowicz’s cruising narratives serve to combat normative conceptions of promiscuous and anonymous sex as careless forms of sexual intimacy. Whilst cruising is indeed sexually intimate, Wojnarowicz shows that it can also invite care through introducing trust, respect, and mutual responsibility between strangers. An alternative to the ‘preinvented world’ of uniformity and heteronormative relations might in fact be one where intimacy is constructed through a myriad of connections – sexual, discursive, and social – amongst individuals. Playing on a near-broken television in a Skid Row nightclub, Wojnarowicz sees:

32 Adam, ‘Care, Intimacy and Same-Sex Partnership’: 271.
A blue cowboy removing his blue plaid shirt with muscled blue arms, leaning down in a blue naked haze to lick the belly of a blue shirtless bunkmate. Crickets. A close-up of an amazing blue eye floating in a blue field cut to a blue tongue coasting along the endless surface of rough blue flesh. Crickets. Blue traces at night with a luminous blue haze of light casting about their leaves. Crickets. A blue dick floating across dark blue shadows and burying itself into a waiting blue mouth. Crickets. (CK, 74-75)

It is interesting to note that Wojnarowicz chose the colour, blue, to exemplify both the sexual and narrative climax of this section, given its associations with death and stasis. Yet the choice of blue is fitting in this context, as it lends a sense of calmness and surrender to this representation of sexual foreplay: ‘leaning down in a blue naked haze to lick the belly of a blue shirtless bunkmate’. The images conjured in ‘Being Queer in America’ are also reminiscent of those in Wojnarowicz’s short films, Slo-Mo Blue Boys 1 and Slo-Mo Blue Boys 2. Both of these silent and unfinished works involve the slow motion filming of men engaged in a variety of homoerotic activities (nipple and chest licking, kissing, groping, fellating). Since the footage is saturated with a blue wash, the viewer is led to conclude that the film described in Close to the Knives inspired Wojnarowicz to make both instalments of Slo-Mo Boys. Yet the images of men being splashed with water and kissing one another against a strobe-lit background also resemble footage featured in Wojnarowicz’s short film with Phil Zwickler, Fear of Disclosure: Psycho-Social Implications of HIV Revelation. The

33 Derek Jarman chose to use this colour as the primary backdrop for his twelfth and final film before dying of AIDS-related complications in 1994. Blue [1993], dir. Derek Jarman (UK: Basilisk, 2007), DVD.
34 Slo-Mo Blue Boys 1 and Slow-Mo Blue Boys – 2, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, 092.0423 and 092.0426.
35 Wojnarowicz and Phil Zwickler planned for Fear of Disclosure to be a larger filmic project involving a number of different episodes. In a letter addressed to an unnamed ‘Grant Officer,’ Zwickler describes the project as such: ‘Fear of Disclosure is a series of five, five to seven minute videos each of which explores the fears, desires and ramifications of revealing that one is sero-positive to HIV. Each of the videos will depict a different situation where a protagonist/narrator makes that revelation and explores the implications of that act.

The situations include: Telling a potential lover; telling your family; telling yourself (dealing
central scenario of this short film, that is, a failed hook-up between an HIV positive man and his serodiscordant partner, encapsulates changes to the construction of intimacy and sex as a result of the outbreak of HIV/AIDS. Its voiceover suggests that, although a fictional scenario, his rejection for being HIV-positive is a common occurrence within the gay community. As the narrator notes, stigma within the gay community towards HIV-positive individuals and PWAs have had deleterious consequences, with some gay men refusing to disclose their serostatus, and ‘a larger pool of gay men… refus[ing] to get tested, [thinking] fucking safely in ignorance is acceptable.’

The problematics of disclosing one’s serostatus and its effects upon the formation and consolidation of intimate relationships are further reinforced in Kent L. Sandstrom’s sociological study, ‘Redefining Sex and Intimacy: The Sexual Self-Images, Outlooks, and Relationships of Gay Men Living with HIV/AIDS.’ Sandstrom describes how one HIV-positive man, ‘Greg,’ finds the process of disclosing his serostatus unbearable, since doing so has so far triggered changes in the perceived desirability of him as a lover and/or long-term partner:

I kind of dread that whole process of revealing because I’ve had a couple of very dramatic instances where people were very interested in me and when they found out that I was diagnosed with AIDS, that was the end of it, period! The virus made them feel that I was poisoned and they wanted to stay away.36

The ‘dread’ that attends the ‘whole process of revealing’ was not alien to Wojnarowicz. In an audio recording Wojnarowicz made roughly a month after
returning from a cross-country road trip in 1989, he recounts how he was once rejected by a lover after he noticed a malignant growth on Wojnarowicz’s back:

I just remembered when one of the guys who wanted to make it with me he started disrobing me… and he noticed this tumour on the back of my hip which I’ve had for a year or so and he touched it and he said well I, I really don’t know, and it was as if, if I could convince him I didn’t have AIDS then he would make love to me and I just became silent.37

In Fear of Disclosure, the potential for a hook-up between the narrator, ‘Tony,’ and ‘Paul,’ seems plausible, for as ‘Tony’ notes from the outset, ‘we had a lot in common… he sounded great, he sounded really hot, too.’ However, once they get onto the topic of the ‘health-conscious’ lifestyle of ‘Paul’ and his desire to find a long-term partner, ‘Tony’ asks him whether he would ever sleep and/or date someone who has HIV. ‘Paul’ seems suspicious of the motive behind this question, and proceeds to ask if ‘Tony’ is in fact HIV-positive. After confirming his serostatus, the telephone conversation takes a sour turn – ‘I felt a pall cast over the potential of what was ever to be.’ Despite angrily protesting the narrow mindedness of ‘Paul’ for his inability to accept the reality of safer sex measures, ‘Tony’ is defeated; the conversation ends with ‘Paul’ half-heartedly telling ‘Tony’ that ‘I’ll think about it [a hook-up], and I’ll call you back.’ Inevitably, however, the narrator is still waiting for that call – ‘I haven’t heard from him yet.’

The erotic images in Fear of Disclosure are similar to those in Slo-Mo Blue Boys 1 and Slo-Mo Blue Boys 2, being mostly composed of young, muscular men dancing and gyrating across the screen with bare torsos and tight-fitting shorts. A blue light is cast over extreme close-up shots of features including exposed chests, crotches, and buttocks. However, whereas the Slo-Mo Blue Boys films are a

celebration of gay sexuality, the use of erotic imagery in *Fear of Disclosure* highlights the potential waning of the cruising subculture due to the problematics of diagnosis and disclosure. For despite the narrator proposing safer sex to his potential hook-up and believing that his seropositivity should not change the nature of their sexual intimacy, the reality was that the diagnosis did often disrupt, and even destroy, the sexual impulses of many gay men as well as their ability to initiate and/or sustain erotic partnerships.

Although counterintuitive to the growth of anti-sex rhetoric in the 1980s, Wojnarowicz advocated both physical and imagined intimacy as antidotes to a (perceived) loss of relationality in the wake of AIDS. Indeed, fantasy was a means of establishing intimacy with others when the homophobic proscriptions of the Reagan administration made it difficult to do so in reality. Throughout the first section of this chapter I have hinted at the cinematic qualities of Wojnarowicz’s writing. I argue that these cinematic qualities are utilised by Wojnarowicz to highlight the power of fantasy and imagination in producing sexual relations that resist the normative logics of hetero-reproductive sex. Of particular interest is how Wojnarowicz employed the linguistic equivalents of the cinematic flash back and cross cut to close the ontological gap between vision and imagination. According to Wojnarowicz, fantasised images often intermingle with ‘millions of disjointed observations collected and collated in the forms and textures of thought’ (*CK*, 26). In ‘In the Shadow of the American Dream,’ we can readily identify how fantasy functions to blur the boundaries between

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38 I would argue, like Cesare Casarino does in his article, ‘David Wojnarowicz, AIDS, and the Cinematic Imperative,’ that Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre is driven by a ‘cinematic imperative’, because of an ‘indefatigable visual attentiveness to the speed of things and to speed itself.’ Cinema, whether as ‘a form of thought’ or as ‘its exemplary instantiation,’ film, concerns itself with capturing the speed of objects and bodies in the world, and how such objects and bodies interact with one another. If cinema ‘is primarily a particular thinking practice’, and thought is ‘the speed of things’, cinema must articulate visually the intensity of motion by which objects hurtle through space. Cesare Casarino, ‘David Wojnarowicz, AIDS, and the Cinematic Imperative,’ *Raritan* 20, no. 4 (Spring 2001): 148-157.
the past and present, physical and psychic space, and memory and perception. This ambiguity was for Wojnarowicz a deliberate choice, since ‘an element of my sexuality has always been fantasy, or in the anonymous sex that I’ve had.’

Particularly, with the compulsory heterosexuality of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, where ‘It is a standard practice to make invisible any kind of sexual imaging other than white straight male erotic fantasies’ (CK, 119), Wojnarowicz employed fantasy to demonstrate the necessity for disclosing the sheer variety of human sexual impulses in society. Furthermore, fantasy functions to produce forms of intimacy that, quoting Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, ‘bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation’, once again undoing the primary structures that impose a ‘preinvented existence’ onto homosexuals.

With Wojnarowicz’s use of cinematic language, he affirmed the convergence of memory, fantasy, and vision in the production of erotic ecstasy. As such, a worker Wojnarowicz admired a quarter of a mile behind him on the side of the road, all ‘browned flesh’ and ‘bare arms,’ is transported into the present moment through the use of a fade-in technique – the erotic desire Wojnarowicz experienced in turn manifested in a sensation of ‘tension rising through my solar plexus beneath my t-shirt’, is so potent that it triggered for him a simultaneous merging of their existences. It is as though Wojnarowicz was destined to make (sexual) contact with this unnamed man, despite their differing physical locations and the linear and forward-moving trajectory his vehicle takes:

So when I see the workers taking a rest break between the hot metal frames of the vehicles, it doesn’t matter that they are all actually receding miles behind me… Now I am seated next to his body in the

The sexual intimacy shared between Wojnarowicz and this man is heightened by its cinematic description. His vision seems ordered according to a set of frames, and attention is afforded both to an exteriorisation of interior thoughts (akin to voiceover narration), and the composition of physical settings using chiaroscuro: ‘a lake cast into shadows by surrounding mountainsides.’ We also have reference to the technical procedure of image projection, which involves the ‘unreeling’ or ‘unraveling’ of film. There is a hyperawareness of differences in scale and framing between ‘the interior of the car’ and the vast and desolate expanse of the Arizona desert, a ‘landscape of dry scrub plains’. This cinematic logic is also evident in his cruises in metropolitan areas. In order to heighten their voyeuristic appeal for the reader, Wojnarowicz focuses his vision on specific parts of his lovers’ bodies during his cruising narratives, as if prescient of the use of extreme close-up shots to maximise one’s visceral and affective reaction to stimuli:

As each cab swung by me there was a video blaze of tiny green and red ornamental cab lights framing the darkened windows containing a momentary fractured bare arm of dim face filled with the stony gaze of road life. In these moments my face travels an elongated neck out my side window and floats up into the shadows of their open windows to place its tongue in between the parted lips of each driver. I could feel their arms reaching through the breeze of our moving vehicles to embrace me from behind. (CK, 29)

The cinematic metaphors Wojnarowicz employed in Close to the Knives therefore help to elucidate his discourse of cruising as involving the production of erotic connections that transcend the normative logics of time and space. Wojnarowicz captured within the frame of a darkened window a ‘momentary fractured bare arm’ and recorded the trajectory of his eyes from ‘an elongated neck’ to the ‘parted lips’ of
another man. The passage culminates in an intersubjective union between him and these drivers, whose arms ‘reach[] through the breeze… to embrace me from behind.’ It is perhaps irrelevant here whether Wojnarowicz has revised this memory or allowed his vision to deviate into fantasy and speculation. What is of paramount importance is how Wojnarowicz’s attention to scale, framing, and the technical apparatus of film in the passage demonstrate the productiveness of promiscuous sex and promiscuous thought. Wojnarowicz aimed to show in his cruising narratives that sexual promiscuity is ‘intellectually and imaginatively productive, rather than – as normative logic would have it – inherently empty and even destructive’.

The Reciprocity of the Carer and Cared-for Roles in the Partnership of Wojnarowicz and Hujar

The centrality of Wojnarowicz’s relationship with Peter Hujar cannot be overlooked in any discussion concerning care, intimacy, and benefaction. This section will aim to overturn existing assumptions surrounding the psychodynamics of caregiving, by considering the mutually reciprocal relationship of Wojnarowicz and Hujar. Rather than supporting the common view that it is the carer who offers physical and emotional support to the cared-for, Wojnarowicz generously put forward the idea that Hujar had a profound influence on not only his artistic career, but on his life overall. As Wojnarowicz revealed in an interview with Carr, his relationship with Hujar was one of emotional reciprocity, which through the passage of time continued to strengthen in intensity: ‘There was a density to the emotional contact between us that was great… and that was what was most valuable. After a couple of years knowing

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41 Gove, *Cruising Culture*, 142.
each other, it really solidified.’ Ultimately, Hujar’s form of care towards Wojnarowicz was beneficiary in nature. Hujar’s artistic influence on Wojnarowicz would continue to reverberate in his works up until his death in 1992: ‘Everything I made, I made for Peter.’

Sarah Smith Rainey’s *Love, Sex, and Disability*, examines pre-existing stereotypes concerning care in disabled and nondisabled relationships. According to Smith Rainey, a feminist ethics of care argues that the relationship of the cared-for to the carer is of a parasitical nature – the carer is assumed to exert all physical and emotional labour within the relationship, and the cared-for is necessarily accorded a role of passivity and (physical) inferiority. Smith Rainey uses as her examples Ellen K. Feder and Eva Feder Kittay, who see care as involving ‘interactions of unequals… between the caregiver and the dependent to be cared for.’ By extension, the cared-for is described in Kittay’s *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency*, as a ‘charge’ who, by default, relinquishes any responsibility he/she has towards self-direction and care. Going against the binarising thrust of this feminist ethics of care, Smith Rainey argues that identity is fundamentally intersubjective and interdependent. The implications of this are profound for relationships involving partners of differing physical abilities. Rather than painting a picture of the non-disabled carer as increasingly burdened by an endless cycle of cleaning and maintenance of the disabled cared-for, Rainey’s ethnographic research suggests that, intrinsic to the non-disabled/disabled coupling is a ‘sense of interdependence that

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allowed the disabled partner to give back or reciprocate for all the physical care received from the non-disabled mate.'

Although a feminist ethics of care has primarily focused on the female caregiver supporting either elderly parents or young children, we can already see how the negative stereotypes that inhere in these relationships can be potentially transferred onto relationships of a serodiscordant nature – that is, the carer is HIV-negative, and the cared-for is either HIV-positive or a PWA. However, I argue that Wojnarowiz and Hujar’s relationship is an exemplary model of how the existing feminist ethics of care does little to support the ‘reciprocity involved in caring relationships.’ In caring for each other, Wojnarowicz and Hujar challenge the existing binary model of the caregiver and the cared-for, and also demonstrate how illness and disability serve to enhance, rather than hinder, intimacy between partners.

Located within the David Wojnarowicz Papers at Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University, is a letter of complaint written by Wojnarowicz and addressed to ‘Dr. Elion,’ on October 23 1987. This letter was composed shortly before Hujar’s death on November 26 of the same year. At this point in his life, Hujar was extremely frail and cognitively disoriented due to the medication used to treat his AIDS and secondary symptoms associated with the syndrome. The context surrounding the composition of this letter was a very stressful encounter they experienced with an urologist, Dr. Januse Plawner, at Stuyvesant Polyclinic. Wojnarowicz, assuming the role of carer, accompanied Hujar to his scheduled eye exam, yet in arriving at the Polyclinic requested to see an urologist due to ‘complaining about pain while urinating and as of yesterday being unable to urinate

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very much despite sensations of needing to constantly.’ What ensued was an exceptionally insensitive examination by Dr. Plawner: ‘Peter’s reaction was of shock and much pain.’ Making matters worse, after Wojnarowicz complained outright to Dr. Plawner about his callous treatment of Hujar, Plawner called in a security guard, Kenneth Fletcher, who ‘began manufacturing false charges that he would give to the police when they arrived.’  

Wojnarowicz also engaged with this incident in his essay, ‘Living Close to the Knives’. Here, however, no mention is made of Dr. Plawner’s negligence or the falsification of events by the security guard. The only hint the reader is given that suggests the coincidence of these representations is Wojnarowicz’s explanation behind their visit to the hospital: ‘When we [Wojnarowicz and Anita Vitale] brought him in here it was just for some routine tests because he wasn’t pissing for days and the slightest movement of an arm or leg brought nausea’ (CK, 85). What is prioritised in the essay is a retrospective memorialisation of Hujar, achieved through the textual inscription of these events. Recalling Hujar’s slow and painful decline is crucial to the political and analeptic dimensions of Wojnarowicz’s care, insofar as the care elicited by textual representation extends beyond its narrowly conceived dyadic limits to include and encompass an illimitable mass of readerly others. Consequently, underlying beliefs of care, such as it being a physical experience between a single carer and cared-for, are queered. Care, when considered as a form of textuality, creates multiple branches of connection between an author and readers of different

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48 1987-Art Against AIDS/Jody Falco/Lydia Lunch/Rauffenbart/Paul Smith/Catherine Texier/D. Voyna/D. Wojnarowicz, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 2, Correspondence, Box 2, Folder 13.
49 My choice of the verb, ‘queered,’ is here quite deliberate. In ‘Doing Queer Love: Feminism, AIDS, and History,’ Lisa Diedrich argues that illness should be considered, like disability, ‘queer’ in its more archaic sense. Illness ‘itself might be understood as queer’, since it ‘queers identity categories, and it queers relationships between individuals, communities, and even nations.’ The doing, therefore, is relational, meaning that it is more than an idle ontological state of being queer. Lisa Diedrich, ‘Doing Queer Love: Feminism, AIDS, and History,’ Theoria 54, no. 112 (April 2007): 29, 30.
spatio-temporal moments, thereby triggering intimacy and empathy between these readers and the various personae in the text.

Following his HIV diagnosis, the audio recordings Wojnarowicz made became even more obsessed with working-through his fear of dying. Wojnarowicz related with desperation the impulse to expel the illness from his system through ‘puking’, as if the physical force of doing so would cure him of ‘whatever this [HIV/AIDS] was’:

I want to puke on the TV and I want to puke on the wall… throw my guts all over the fixtures… over the dark room… out onto the street… throw my guts out onto the buildings, throw my guts out all over Washington… round the world. 50

For the reader, the impulse ‘to puke’ erratically over a variety of household objects is initially regarded as a commonplace reaction to fearful stimuli; Wojnarowicz was, after all, coming to terms with the possibility that his HIV would develop into AIDS. However, this visceral, automatic, and aimless bodily reaction of ‘puking’ quickly turns into a transitive gesture directed towards a specific rather than indiscriminate target. For Wojnarowicz to throw his ‘guts out all over Washington’ transforms his private experience of illness into a public demonstration of anger; the personal is yoked to the political, since his contraction of HIV and eventual death from AIDS-related complications were inextricably linked to the insufficient response of the United States government to provide adequate health care services, research, safer sex education, and medical trials to seropositive gay men.

Wojnarowicz was at pains to reinforce the reciprocity of the caring relationship between himself and Hujar. Hujar’s aesthetic influence and legacy pressed onto Wojnarowicz’s consciousness with extreme urgency following his death,

and in such a way that allowed Wojnarowicz to rationalise his hatred towards the ONE-TRIBE NATION in creatively productive ways. For example, Wojnarowicz made the following remarks on an audio recording in Hujar’s flat after the latter’s death:

[I was] suddenly feeling like I was seeing through Peter’s eyes and all those months of him being ill and never knowing exactly what it was that he felt, never knowing what was going on inside his mind… suddenly it just felt like I’m seeing… that I had his eyes and I was looking through his eyes at the whole place and everything just made me nauseous, every surface every extension of the outside and I was… I just felt a lot of fear about the whole violence of that moment.51

In this intercorporeal description of ‘seeing through Peter’s eyes’ Wojnarowicz seems to achieve what he could not do immediately after his friend’s death. Hindsight and temporal distance have clarified for Wojnarowicz the political implications of his diagnosis. ‘Seeing through Peter’s eyes’ has also emboldened him to regard the ‘preinvented world’ as mortally dangerous to members of his ‘tribe’: ‘I was looking through his eyes at the whole space and everything just made me nauseous’. The reader is here reminded of Wojnarowicz’s attempt to commemorate Hujar through a series of postmortem portraits, which will be discussed in my sixth and final chapter. In ‘Living Close to the Knives,’ Wojnarowicz felt his artistic gesture to be a fruitless endeavour, being unable to capture a glimmer of life in Hujar’s half-open eye: ‘I kept trying to get the light I saw in that eye’ (CK, 102). Wojnarowicz, overwhelmed by the moment, failed to comprehend the significance of Hujar’s death or the still body laid in front of him: ‘this body of my friend on the bed this body of my brother my father my emotional link to the world’ (CK, 103). Although he did not see it himself, I argue in my sixth and final chapter that Wojnarowicz’s postmortem images of Hujar

are an admirable monument both to the artist’s profound sense of loss, as well as the
continued influence of Hujar over Wojnarowicz’s artistic and political concerns.

An essential aspect of Wojnarowicz’s ethics of care is its ability to persist
beyond the death of the cared-for. In Wojnarowicz’s short film dedicated to Hujar,
what begins to emerge is a form of care that is posthumous and in a perpetual state of
continuation. The footage taken for a proposed film about Peter Hujar is in fact a
collection of film fragments that have been arbitrarily arranged into the sequence that
we see now. According to Brent Phillips, media archivist at Fales Library & Special
Collections, New York University, the numerous reels comprising ‘Footage for Film
about Peter Hujar’ were collated based upon the title Wojnarowicz affixed to each
canister.\textsuperscript{52} Wojnarowicz reputedly sought to compose a film as an homage to Hujar
following his death, yet for reasons unknown never completed the project. However,
it would be an interpretive stretch to assume that all of the material included on this
particular DVD\textsuperscript{53} would have passed through to the final cut. For example, the silent,
black-and-white footage begins with an extended take of an imperceptible object,
followed by shots of the city, presumably taken from the point of view of Hujar’s
apartment in downtown Manhattan. There is also a lengthy section where
Wojnarowicz’s camera records the falling of heavy rain onto a large pond or river,
and shots taken from the interior of Wojnarowicz’s car as he travels along a highway
and then drives off to follow an unknown man underneath an overpass filled with
refuse and debris.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{52} Brent Phillips, personal conversation with Media Archivist at Fales Library & Special Collections,
New York University, 3 October 2013. The title given to these reels of film are an editorial
interpolation.

\textsuperscript{53} Footage for Film about Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film,
Subseries A, 092.0182. The title given to this item is a curatorial description.

\textsuperscript{54} Other curious elements of this footage include a sequence where a figure wearing a gas mask springs
up repeatedly from a bed. Another section involves a man naked from the waist up gesturing boldly to
the audience. This figure may be Hujar, given that he wears a trademark piece of string around his
For a considerable segment of the footage, Wojnarowicz has filmed himself as he lingers over photographic portraits of Hujar, some of them taken in his prime, some of them being post-mortem images of this artist. Through a clear focus on Wojnarowicz’s hand as he makes contact with the photographs, we can see how the physical touch conjures powerful memories of his former friend, lover, and mentor, almost as if to recall in the present his physical self. As Marita Sturken in ‘The Image as Memorial: Personal Photographs in Cultural Memory’ writes, the photograph is not so much ‘a container for memory… so much as it produces it’;\(^55\) we can see this very clearly in the footage where Wojnarowicz’s process of deliberating over these portraits is itself an act of constructing new memories of Hujar (through combining photographs taken by Wojnarowicz, Hujar, and unknown others), whilst simultaneously shoring up those earlier instances where intimacy was shared and created between the two through photographic collaboration.

The photographs Wojnarowicz selected for this homage were carefully chosen, where the first image in the album is his *Self-Portrait in Black T-Shirt, 1976*. This iconic self-portrait is perhaps the strongest declaration he made of himself as an artist; simple, yet thoughtfully composed, Hujar stares at his viewer against a bare wall, his black t-shirt providing a monochromatic contrast to his sparse surroundings. The next self-portrait is almost a mirror image of the first, this one featuring Hujar in an almost identical stance but now wearing a white singlet. The inimitable style of Hujar, reminiscent of classical nude statuary, is evident in the photographs.

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Wojnarowicz has selected. Further to this, Wojnarowicz infers an erotic bond between the viewer and subject, having chosen amongst others Hujar's *Self-Portrait with String around Neck, 1980* and *Self-Portrait, 1980*. The viewer comes to see Hujar’s body as lithe, strong, and ultimately desirable, an orientation which becomes even more significant once we view the negatives of the postmortem portraits of Hujar by Wojnarowicz that shortly follow this sequence.56 Other photographs have been taken from the personal collection of Hujar, including some from his adolescence and featuring him and his family. Later footage shows Wojnarowicz leafing through what appears to be a catalogue to one of Hujar’s exhibitions, doing so near the apartment window as people pass by underneath on the street. Some of the portraits include *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed, William Burroughs (II) 1975, Susan Sontag 1975, Paul Thek (II), 1975*, and *David Wojnarowicz Smoking, 1981*. Hujar’s fascination with animals and photographing aspects of the human anatomy are also evident in the portraits selected in the catalogue. Following this, Wojnarowicz scans the pages of a textbook relating to Renaissance art, including a series of paintings featuring Saint Sebastian; no doubt this hagiographic icon of gay sexuality would have been highly influential for Hujar and his composition of nude male portraits. In fact, Wojnarowicz selected this saint for inclusion in his portrait of Hujar, *Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian*, in 1982.

By selecting photographs that demonstrate Hujar’s artistry, along with images from his childhood, adolescence, and after his death, Wojnarowicz effectively gives the viewer a clear image of the trajectory of Hujar’s life and his achievements. In this respect, the footage is an artful and elegant way to memorialise Hujar. Moreover, by including live footage of the AIDS Memorial Quilt as it is unfurled and focusing in on

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56 I will attend to these postmortem images in more detail within my final chapter.
the inclusion of a panel for Hujar, Wojnarowicz enacts the work of cultural memory and the impulse of the gay community to commemorate publicly loved ones who had died from AIDS. The footage demonstrates the importance of ritual to the performance of collective mourning, where a group of four mourners gradually unfurl sections of the Quilt into its respective panels with movements reminiscent of an orchestrated dance. Paul Connerton, in *How Societies Remember*, asserts that the memories of groups are sustained and conveyed through bodies and recollection. Group memory is indeed constructed and repeated through the formalised physical enactments of these mourners, where the ceremony inherent in their bodily performance reminds each mourner that ‘its identity as [a community is] represented by and told in a master narrative’.

Footage of the AIDS Memorial Quilt shows how Wojnarowicz’s care of Hujar incorporated physical gestures of help and support, yet also involved political remonstrations of others who bore little sensitivity and empathy towards PWAs. Care assumed the form of protest through public displays of mourning and commemoration. With his focus on Hujar’s panel, Wojnarowicz also made clear their emotional connection with one another through its design (Wojnarowicz was responsible for choosing the images featured on it). The panel includes an image of the Dürer wing, and on the other side, where Hujar’s name and dates of birth and death are (1934-1987), is an image of a man climbing a branchless tree with his back to the viewer. In ‘Footage for Film about Peter Hujar,’ Wojnarowicz zooms into this particular aspect of the panel and in so doing highlights solitude, whether artistic or personal, as a fundamental component of Hujar’s life. Carr helpfully provides some background information to assist us in interpreting this curious image:

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This was almost the same image he’d painted for Gracie Mansion’s ‘Sofa/Painting’ show in 1983, which she explained as David trying to get away from the various dealers who wanted to show him. But while in the earlier work, he gave himself one short branch. Hujar, even more devoted to self-sabotage, had none.\(^{59}\)

The similarity of Wojnarowicz and Hujar’s images is perhaps the clearest indication of their intersubjective relation to one another, given that Wojnarowicz’s decision to include this particular image on Hujar’s panel has the function of memorialising, encapsulating, and solidifying his posthumous identity. We will see in the final chapter of this thesis how the aesthetic similarities between Wojnarowicz and Hujar’s photography signal the importance influence of this partnership on the politicisation of Wojnarowicz’s art.

\(^{59}\) Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 387.
CHAPTER SIX

The Last Collaboration: Wojnarowicz and the Postmortem Portraits of

Peter Hujar

In my final chapter, I argue that Wojnarowicz’s postmortem portraits of Peter Hujar marked another crucial turning point in the artistic direction of his career. Even though Wojnarowicz’s work had always been political in a general sense, with Hujar’s death came his increasing involvement in ACT UP and militant position against what he perceived as the homophobic and racist ideologies of Reagan’s administration. Hujar’s death galvanised Wojnarowicz’s understanding of how his own death (and lived experience) was explicitly connected with the degree of medical, social, and economic support he and other PWAs received from the Reagan government. In perpetuating Hujar’s posthumous legacy through these images, Wojnarowicz’s role as the primary trustee of Hujar’s intellectual estate, which entailed the necessity to commemorate this artist within the public domain, is made apparent to the viewer. Further to this, Wojnarowicz’s determination to make public his private losses evinces a resounding belief in the politicisation of personal mourning in order to effect social change. As Wojnarowicz explained following his trip to visit Hujar in hospital, ‘I’m acutely aware of myself alive and witnessing. … Time is now compressed and every painting I do, or film I make, I make with the sense that it may be the last thing I do and so I try to pull everything into the surface

1 Wojnarowicz became a member of an affinity group, ‘The Candelabras,’ following Hujar’s death. Wojnarowicz also engaged in one of ACT UP’s political funerals in 1988 – the appropriately named ‘Die In’ – in which he wore a jacket with the slogan, ‘If I die of AIDS – forget burial – just throw my body on the steps of the F.D.A.’ Cynthia Carr, Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 399.
of that action’. With this sense of urgency exacerbated by the acknowledgement that his life and that of other PWAs in the gay community were perceived as inferior to non-seropositive individuals on the basis of ‘lifestyle choices’, Wojnarowicz realised his ‘culture’s refusal to deal with mortality’ was directly correlated to his identification as a male homosexual PWA. As he wrote with equal amounts of desperation and anger in *Close to the Knives*, ‘WHEN I WAS TOLD THAT I’D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT DIDN’T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I’D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL’.  

Fundamentally, Wojnarowicz’s autobiographical writings were not the only aesthetic tools he used to challenge politically the myth of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. I would argue that his visual artworks, especially the postmortem portraits of Hujar, played a crucial role in anatomising his unique contribution to the intersection of aesthetics and politics in his oeuvre. Greater attention to these photographs is required for a number of reasons. First, postmortem PWA portraits paradoxically undermine the rhetorical equation that homosexuality = AIDS = death. This is because the portraits, rather than being devised by photographers outside of the PWA community, are composed by artists who are aware of how such individuals have been stigmatised by the mainstream press for their non-normative sexualities and lifestyles. The portraits they offer are touching remembrances of their loved ones,

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2 David Wojnarowicz, *7 Miles a Second*, illustrations by James Romberger and colour by Marguerite Van Cook (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012), 53. Although Hujar is never named, we can infer from the images of *7 Miles* and anecdotal evidence from *Close to the Knives* that they are one and the same. On page 52 of *7 Miles*, the uppermost image, a close-up of Hujar’s face covered with a nasal mask and breathing tubes, closely resembles the description found in *Close to the Knives* on page 69.


4 In reference to photographs of PWAs in the mainstream press, Simon Watney writes that the ‘unconscious of th[ese] photograph[s] is brutally direct: Homosexuality = AIDS = Death. Whether we are shown black Africans or American gays, the person with AIDS is invariably imprisoned within the demeaning category of the “victim,” in which he or she is stripped of all power and control over the actual complex meaning and dignity of an individual’s life.’ Simon Watney, ‘Photography and AIDS,’ in *The Critical Image: Essays on Contemporary Photography*, ed. Carol Squiers (Seattle: Bay Press, 1990), 183.
and seek to memorialise their existences and recognise them in their death with
dignity and respect. Particularly in an age where the deaths of PWAs were so
numerous and yet met with such little understanding or compassion from an
overwhelmingly heteronormative and heterosexist public, it was crucial for
Wojnarowicz and other intra-community artists to transform their private instance of
loss into a public judgement upon the silence of the AIDS crisis. As David L. Eng
writes, ‘the loss – indeed, the refusal – of a public language to mourn a seemingly
endless series of excoriated, dead young men triggers the absolute need to imagine a
discourse of identification that could mean anything other than silence, isolation, self-
abasement and death.’\(^5\) Despite his focus upon Hujar’s death in his postmortem
images, Wojnarowicz creates an affective connection between the viewer and his
subject, facilitating a space of intimacy wherein we acknowledge the simultaneous
trauma and necessity of documenting publicly gay loss and mourning.

Moreover, the often visually arresting and shocking nature of these
postmortem PWA portraits are what I regard as their rhetorical power to effect
political change. Such photographs present a clear image to the viewer of the
increasing death toll of individuals during the first two decades of the AIDS crisis.
Writing about these images, Emily Colucci argues that the documentation of Hujar’s
death lends a ‘different perspective on the AIDS crisis… Although the AIDS
epidemic claimed the lives of many others… there has not been enough public
recognition of the private losses with the gay community.’\(^6\) This is certainly true, but
I would go further in claiming that Wojnarowicz is prescient of how postmortem
PWA portraits have a more general significance in shifting western society’s cultural

\(^5\) David L. Eng, ‘The Value of Silence,’ *Theatre Journal* 54 (2002): 89, quoted in Emily Colucci,
‘Some Sort of Grace: David Wojnarowicz’s Archive of the Death of Peter Hujar,’ *Anamesa* 8, no. 1
(Spring 2010): 9-10.
\(^6\) Emily Colucci, ‘Some Sort of Grace: David Wojnarowicz’s Archive of the Death of Peter Hujar,’
*Anamesa*: 9.
attitudes towards death, dying, and mourning. Death has become increasingly feared within twentieth-century society, and I would argue even more so in the first decade of the AIDS crisis when the main individuals affected were young and seemingly ‘healthy’ males. According to Jay Ruby, ‘The practice of taking postmortem and funeral photographs crosscuts ethnic boundaries.’

Although originally a disease regarded as affecting only gay males – consider the biomedical nominalisation of HIV/AIDS as GRID – increasing fear that HIV/AIDS could affect anybody and everybody began to emerge when heterosexuals could be potentially ‘infected’ through their partners, intravenous drug use or blood transfusions. I argue that these postmortem portraits, in drawing on the symbolic, formal, and aesthetic traditions of nineteenth century postmortem photography, help to ameliorate society’s acknowledgement of death and restore dignity to the antemortem personality of the PWA. With his allusions to this photographic genre, Wojnarowicz’s images show how the facilitation of intimacy and empathy between the viewer and Hujar always requires a moment of recollection. Colucci in her article, ‘Some Sort of Grace: David Wojnarowicz’s Archive of the Death of Peter Hujar,’ confirms this viewpoint in her reference to Ann Cvetkovich’s theory of the archive. As Colucci notes, there is profound difficulty in documenting traumatic events that include the AIDS crisis, because of the ‘difficulty in finding a language for loss and grief’. Correspondingly, this trauma puts great pressure upon existing modes of representation and

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8 According to Watney, the discursive shift involved in broadening the demographies at risk of contracting HIV/AIDS had a corresponding effect of reinforcing normative ideologies of family and nation. As he writes in ‘Photography and AIDS,’ ‘The entire subject of AIDS has been used to shore up and reinforce the ideological fortresses of the Nation and Family, as if they were under a state of unprecedented siege. … The family at the heart of the AIDS commentary is an ideological unit, as yet supposedly unaffected, but held to be threatened by the “leakage” of HIV infection, which, like nuclear fallout, is widely and erroneously perceived to be everywhere about us, a deadly miasma of contagion and death.’ Watney, ‘Photography and AIDS,’ 174.

commemoration, which has as its positive consequence the emergence of ‘new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics.’ I argue that postmortem images of PWAs is a genre which Wojnarowicz and other artists such as Duane Michals, AA Bronson, and Félix González-Torres implemented in order to generate ‘collective witnesses’ and counterpublics during the first two decades of the AIDS crisis.

In referencing Victorian mortuary portraiture, Wojnarowicz’s postmortem images of Hujar also highlight the relationship between the present and the past upon which current knowledge is (re)collected and organised. As Paul Connerton in How Societies Remember shows, knowledge of the past is effectively ‘conveyed and sustained by (more or less ritual) performances.’ Whilst the AIDS Memorial Quilt utilised the American tradition of quiltmaking to produce a powerfully symbolic statement of public mourning, I claim that the postmortem images of PWAs made by intra-community photographers are another means by which the marginalised gay community of the 1980s ritualised their grief and political dissension. Indeed, as Nicola Brown, citing Pat Jalland, has suggested, ‘post-mortem portrait photography was one of a number of practices associated with mourning highly valued in Victorian culture’. Given the reverence with which the living treated the dead as seen in these portraits, one can draw the conclusion that Wojnarowicz sought to legitimise the death and life of PWAs through his sensitive black-and-white postmortem images of

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Undoubtedly, the due care which Wojnarowicz gave to Hujar’s deceased body is a retroactive gesture to the care Hujar received in life, thereby countering the media representation of the PWA as alone and ostracised by his family, friends, and the community at large.\(^{14}\)

This chapter draws on a number of interpretive frames to elucidate my concerns. In part, the emotional and visual shock\(^ {15}\) elicited by a postmortem photograph is attributable to contemporary society’s lack of exposure to this genre.\(^ {16}\) Cleverly drawing upon the conventions of Victorian mortuary and funerary portraiture paradoxically constructs Hujar’s death as singular and exemplary, even though the practice was a commonplace ritual\(^ {17}\) of mourning in the nineteenth century.\(^ {18}\)

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\(^{13}\) Hujar and Wojnarowicz both displayed a preference for black-and-white over colour photography. They claim that there is a lack of nuance in colour photography, in distracting the eye or focalising its attention on one element to the detriment of others. For Hujar, ‘colour interferes for the most part with the emotional content [of the image]’. Wojnarowicz states that colour depletes ‘the life of that image,’ and goes on to claim, ‘When the form isn’t something that is extremely intense like death or whatever colour becomes, you know, like you said, a sudden barrier that you have to break past in order to get out, you know, the life of it or the, whatever, it’s really imposing…. I always, you know, thought that black-and-white was more real than colour…. it’s such a totally false representation of whatever that image is and yet it’s more real’. Hujar Interview, Tape 1 (Part 2 of 2), David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0514, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.

\(^{14}\) Interestingly, Simon Watney observes that despite changes in patient care, biomedical developments and the socio-political mobilisation of activist groups around HIV/AIDS in the mid-late 1980s, ‘the overall “look” of AIDS [in the media and general public] has remained significantly stable and resistant to modification.’ What Watney means by this ‘look’ is that HIV/AIDS continues to be interpreted as ‘an intrinsic property’ of ‘risk’ groups such as homosexual men and IV drug users, which further entrenches its typologisation ‘as a moral verdict rather than a medical diagnosis.’ Watney, ‘Photography and AIDS,’ 173, 192.

\(^{15}\) I would argue that shock is the salient feature for contemporary audiences when viewing a postmortem photograph. But as Ruby has noted, this tradition is not as uncommon as had previously been thought. Photographing still born babies has emerged as an important mourning practice in the late twentieth century by encouraging parents to connect emotionally with their dead children, as both a means of remembrance and separation from them. See Ruby, Secure the Shadow, 178-89.

\(^{16}\) Atene Mendelyte argues that the cultural attitude of death as a ‘natural’ process has been replaced by ‘representations of the violent death in the mass media and fiction’. This has significant consequences in the way that society views the process of dying itself, for the mediatisation of death into a sensational ‘event’ often equates death with violence. Michael Lesy writes that “[t]oday, instead of gazing at death, we watch violence; instead of the long look at the steady state, we switch back and forth from one violent epiphany to the other. Ordinary and inevitable death, death as an actual part of life, has become so rare that when it occurs among us it reverberates like a handclap in an empty auditorium’. Michael Lesy, The Forbidden Zone, 3-4, quoted in Aténé Mendelyté, ‘Death (in the Eye) of the Beholder: An Encounter with Victorian Post-Mortem Photography, Synaesthesia 1, no. 3 (2012): 85.

\(^{17}\) I take as my cue Steven Lukes’ definition of ritual, provided by Connerton in How Societies Remember. Ritual is ‘rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance.’ Steven
Moreover, the association of photography and death cannot be ignored. Photography has a priori been regarded as a thanatographic technology, insofar as its technical procedure involves the ‘freezing’ or ‘immobilisation’ of the subject, akin to rigor mortis. Consequently, I will consider how death and mourning are always and already interwoven in the technology of the photograph.

Given the political purpose of these photographs, it is useful to contextualise Wojnarowicz’s works not only in relation to Victorian traditions of mourning and memorialisation, but also the documentary tradition of photography. With his persistent interest in cataloguing social figures excluded from mainstream representation, as if he were an armed flâneur ‘reconnoitring, stalking, [and] cruising the urban inferno,’ Wojnarowicz inserted himself into a long tradition of documentary photography, whose core drive was to improve the conditions of the marginalised, oppressed, and downtrodden. Wojnarowicz’s postmortem portraits can thus be associated with the work of social documentary photography. Even though his formal procedures are very different from photographers of this tradition, their lasting interest in letting the ‘facts’ speak for themselves through minimal editing of

Lukes, ‘Political Ritual and Social Integration’: 289-308, esp. 291, quoted in Connerton, How Societies Remember, 44.
19 Nonetheless, the practice was met with many dissenting voices. In his 1882 article, ‘A Grave Subject,’ George Bradforde is incredulous that living relatives would wish to commemorate the departed through a postmortem image. It appears that those individuals who would wish to preserve such a memory through photographic means have a more than morbid fixation with death. ‘How the relatives can bear to look upon these photographs I cannot understand, unless they have a peculiar love of the horrible. For my part I cannot see the necessity of photographing the dead at all. If the departed were truly beloved, nothing that may happen in this world can ever effect the dear features from the mind’s eye: it needs not a cold, crude photograph representing the last dreary stage of humanity to recall those lineaments. Indeed, I should imagine it would in time lead to the forgetting of the pleasant smile or the lightsome laugh, and supply, in place, a ghoul-like resemblance of anything but a pleasant nature’. George Bradforde, ‘A Grave Subject,’ 394-395, quoted in Brown, ‘Empty Hands and Precious Pictures’: 8.
20 Hujar conceives the art of photography not as temporal immobilisation so much as material transmutation. Wojnarowicz asks, in an interview, whether photography is a ‘freezing of life’, to which Hujar responds that photography is the process of ‘taking the shape of that moment of what’s happening and making something else out of it’. Photography is ‘the echo of that time… [and] has its own life’, rather than internalising the life of what has been photographed. The moment of the photograph has a distinct phenomenology from the referent. Hujar Interview, Tape 1 (Part 2 of 2), David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0514.
footage, makes Wojnarowicz’s work of a piece with them on the basis of a similar reformist agenda.

A related matter that I will discuss is a matter of professional ethics. Wojnarowicz’s postmortem photographs of Hujar were not an isolated case in the output of American visual artists during the first two decades of the AIDS crisis. In fact, other artists employed this mode of representation to memorialise their loved ones. Along with Wojnarowicz’s texts, AA Bronson’s photograph, *Felix* (1994) and Duane Michals’ *The Father Prepares His Son for Burial* (1991) immediately spring to mind. Issues of consent circulate around the production of such photographs. Certainly, the intention of Wojnarowicz along with these other photographers was to mourn the departed, and to spark public outrage over the lack of funding for drug trials and palliative care for PWAs. Such public outrage had the ultimate motivation of spurring social reform. But the question remains whether the end justifies the means. Do such postmortem images of PWAs achieve their aims, or do they merely perpetuate stigmatising representations of HIV/AIDS in the public imagination?

**Hujar’s Photographs in Life and Death**

When the camera merely focuses on the lifeless body of the subject with little attention paid to objects and surroundings that might indexically point to interpersonal relations, it is hard to see how postmortem portraits can counteract the image of death as non-relational\(^{21}\) and an ontological cleaving of the individual from the dense social

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\(^{21}\) Nonetheless, there was a tradition of soft focusing and vignetting in photographs to challenge death as the ultimate separation of the deceased from living mourners. See for instance, the spirit photographs popularised by the mid-nineteenth century Boston photographer, William Mumler. A highly influential example of Mumler’s work is the 1868 portrait, *Spirit Photograph: Man and His Departed Family*. William Van der Zee’s *The Harlem Book of the Dead* also features a number of postmortem images in which angels and cherubs have been added into the frame, as a way to ease the
networks of the living, let alone the image of the PWA as alone, depressed, and physically enervated. Yet what Wojnarowicz and other artists made apparent in their works was how the antemortem life of the postmortem PWA contradicted popular assumptions revolving around their isolation, deviancy, and (physical) privation. Consequently, Wojnarowicz’s work must be contrasted to that of Nicholas Nixon’s study of PWAs, roundly criticised as further entrenching negative stereotypes of such individuals. After having featured as a part of his 1988 retrospective at MOMA, *People with AIDS* became a book-length endeavour, expanding to include fifteen subjects who volunteered to share their narratives with Nixon and Bebe Nixon (his collaborator) over the course of 1988-89. Most reviews of *People with AIDS* within the queer community have been critical, since these images allegedly ‘reinforce the wider cultural and political victimization of people with AIDS’ by relegating them to the ‘black-and-white testimonial space of the “AIDS victim”’.  

Part of the reason why Wojnarowicz’s postmortem photographs, along with other intra-community artists, can escape criticism of this nature is due to the aesthetic and structural frameworks they place around the central image of the dead/dying PWA. Wojnarowicz’s postmortem photographs of Hujar cannot be viewed without considering their citation and quotation in the memoir, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* along with his journal entries, his unfinished film dedicated to Hujar’s life, and the mixed media collage, *Untitled [Hujar Dead]*. References and allusions to Hujar’s death, along with documenting in minutiae the process of constructing these postmortem images, ultimately operate in a paratextual manner – neither the events of Hujar’s death nor life can be reduced to their approximations in grief of mourning parents by ensuring the entrance of their deceased children in the Kingdom of God. William Van der Zee, *The Harlem Book of the Dead*, with a foreword by Toni Morrison (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Morgan & Morgan, 1978).  

22 Watney, ‘Photography and AIDS,’ 183.
aesthetic representation. The expansion of the postmortem images to include biographical material and supplementary information was a common procedure utilised by intra-community photographers. It is a technique reminiscent of the postmortem and memorial photographs of the 1840s – 1880s in their accommodation and normalisation of death as a communal and public, rather than individual and private, phenomenon. Indeed, the outsourcing of postmortem photographs to professional photographers, often connected with funeral homes, meant that many such images were framed in order to include supplementary information such as the photographer’s name or place of business. Postmortem photography as a burgeoning industry and death as a commonplace event were also evident in the private correspondences of nineteenth century individuals. Memorialisation of the now deceased person was evident in the text that often accompanied the postmortem image, occurring in a wide range of genres including postcards and *cartes de visite.* For instance, Jay Ruby in *Secure the Shadow* opines how one particular postcard depicting a funeral demonstrated that for the writer, ‘death is just another item of news along with their health and the tomatoes.’ The matter-of-fact nature of death is best exemplified when reproducing the message in full: ‘Emma, if you send some one out I will give you some tomatoes as I am going to pick them tomorrow. This card is of that Hornoff boy’s funeral last summer that was shot at camp. G. H.’

Wojnarowicz’s postmortem photographs are one way in which to show how the dead still continue to commune with the living so long as a symbolic remainder of

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24 Ruby, *Secure the Shadow,* 73.
25 ‘Based on an examination of several thousand photographs, death-related images are found from the beginning of photography until today in all photographic formats – daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, tintypes, *cartes de visite,* cabinet cards, stereographs, postcards, snapshots, Polaroid and 35mm color slides as walled-sized snapshots, life-sized enlargements made to be hung on the wall, cards mounted in albums, attached to memorial cards and tombstones, and placed in jewelry.’ Ruby, *Secure the Shadow,* 163.
their existences circulate within discourse. These postmortem photographs, recalling Margaret Gibson, are ‘melancholy objects,’ insofar as they ‘function as metaphorical and metonymic traces of corporeal absence.’ Fittingly, Gibson refers to such objects as ‘melancholy’ rather than ‘mourning’ objects, thus calling into question the long-held distinction Sigmund Freud made between melancholia as a pathological inability to detach one’s cathexis from the dead object, and mourning as a transitional state leading gradually to the ‘rehabilitation’ of the mourner. The fetishistic nature of the photograph, which recalls the presence of the deceased only to dismiss this as impossible, would be regarded as a mourning practice that avows the relational aspects of subjectivity. As much as to call into question whether the dead are truly dead to the living, such objects, in triggering the memories of loved ones are ‘a form of moral practice’, since with it attends ‘a confirmation of the sense of continuity (caring) and discontinuity (mourning) that each person experiences in their relation with others’. Hujar was an individual who worried over the duration and posterity of his legacy, a fact noted in Cynthia Carr’s biography, when on 11 October 1987, the day of Hujar’s fifty-third birthday and two months shy of his death, he wondered whether others would remember him when he is dead. Whilst Hujar, as the mentor of Wojnarowicz, bestowed upon his acolyte the role of trustee to his intellectual estate, Hujar toyed with both Vince Aletti and Stephen Koch on the issue of who would be most suitable for taking care of his proprietary interests. Aletti, as he wrote in Hujar’s obituary, arrived early that day to prepare, ‘And while I set out paper plates

31 Peter Hujar would eventually nominate Stephen Koch to be the executor of his estate. Hujar, Peter-Will, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 7, Subjects, Subseries A, Box 14, Folder 52.
and plastic cups, he started to talk about dying. He wondered how long his friends
would grieve, how long we’d remember him. He wasn’t needling or fishing for
sympathy, only clearing the air.  

Hujar’s intellectual and artistic influences on Wojnarowicz were unmatched
by any other figure in his life. To make postmortem photographs of Hujar was an
entirely deliberate act of memorialisation, and one that was fully aware of the
mortuary traditions of the Victorian era, as well as Hujar’s own interest in the
corporeal nuances and postures of classical portraiture. Wojnarowicz and Hujar only
knew one another for seven years, but that relatively short friendship proved to be the
trigger necessary for Wojnarowicz to realise his full artistic potential. As Susan
Gauthier mentions in Carr’s biography, ‘Someone saw that [David] was a true
artist.’ Wojnarowicz’s response to Hujar’s passing, however, exemplifies the
Derridean concepts of loss and mourning as always and already inscribed within the
contours of friendship. Writing in *Politics of Friendship*, Derrida claims that
mourning

Insinuates itself a priori and anticipates itself; it haunts and plunges
the friend, before mourning, into mourning. This apprehension weeps
before lamentation, it weeps before death, and this is the very
respiration of friendship, the extreme of its possibility. Hence
surviving is at once the essence, the origin and the possibility, the
condition and possibility of friendship; it is the grieved act of loving.

Derrida in *Politics of Friendship* claims that from the outset, individuals intuitively
understand the mortality-transcending role of friendship. This claim is evident in
Tom Rauffenbart’s remarks on the relationship shared between Wojnarowicz and

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33 Sarah Gaultier, quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 172.
34 Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, 14, quoted in Roger Starling, ‘Addressing the Dead of
Hujar. Rauffenbart, the executor of Wojnarowicz’s estate and his former lover,35 claimed in 1993 that ‘They [David and Hujar] were both more than and less than lovers. Peter was the one who saved him, who changed his life in a major positive way. They were kindred souls. Part of David was missing after Peter went.’36

According to Hripsimé Visser, Hujar’s work is characterised by a formal austerity that borders on conventionality, insofar as the subjects of his photographs, ‘portraits, nudes, animals, some cityscapes and even fewer landscapes, a pair of still lives – are the themes of classical photography.’37 Yet the simplistic and often sparse compositional elements of such photographs create a tension in the viewer, ‘the feeling that your first interpretation is wide of the mark’. In essence, then, his photographs ‘possess a concentration which draws you in to a core, a significance which you could formulate as a desire to unveil the essence of the being of man, woman, nude, transvestite, animal, landscape or still life.’38 This ‘essence of… being’ is ultimately an acknowledgement of death as that which unifies humans and animals. Although silence is what Peter Berger regards as the criterion that separates non-human animals from humankind, which in turn may justify the morally superior standing of the latter, it is also what allows animal life to ‘run parallel to [our own]. Only in death do the two parallel lines converge.’39 Rather than prompting their devaluation, then, Hujar’s photographs demonstrate a profound respect for animal life

35 In Wojnarowicz’s Will and Last Testament, he declared that ‘I hereby nominate, constitute and appoint THOMAS RAUFFENBART, to be the Executor and Trustee under this Will. In the event that he predeceases me, fails to qualify or having qualified, shall die, resign or become unable to act as such Executor, then I nominate, constitute and appoint PHILIP YENAWINE as successor to serve hereunder in his place or stead.’ Section 6, page 5 of Will and Last Testament. Amy Scholder is requested as a literary advisor to Wojnarowicz’s Estate and Gary Schneider as photographic advisor. Will and Last Testament, Section 6, page 6, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Accretions 2001, Series 6, Biographical, Box 2, Folder 4.
36 Tom Rauffenbart, quoted in Carr, Fire in the Belly, 380.
in its phenomenological and linguistic differences. As seen in his photographs of cows, geese and horses, his animal subjects are accorded the same level of importance that one finds in his images of their human counterparts. We may see this in their compositional simplicity: stripping the shot of any objects or (human) subjects which may distract the eye, the viewer is made to devote his/her entire attention to the animal(s) located in the centre of the frame, whose sight, being turned to the camera, often forces an intersubjective and interspecies encounter. In turn, the silence of the animal is a quality which Max Kozloff regards as being transferred by Hujar onto his human subjects, ‘since they are speechless, too, behind their paper divide. Compensating for this, Hujar appreciates creaturely muteness as being vibrant in its own right.’

What is death if it is not above all the ‘muteness’ of the subject? With the total cessation of bodily life, the subject can no longer signify linguistically with others in the immediate moment. This is not to suggest that the postmortem subject is unable to communicate entirely with the living – surely the perpetuation of his/her interests in wills, or the fulfilment of certain obligations relating to his/her intellectual property through an estate, ensure that the deceased’s memory and wishes are still in discursive circulation – but more that the capacity for the deceased to communicate orally with a living being instantaneously is no longer an option. The ‘muteness’ of the animal subject – which Kozloff claims lends a particular vibrancy to Hujar’s portraits – converges with the ‘muteness’ of death in Hujar’s catacomb images in his Portraits in Life and Death. An anecdote at this point may serve useful, insofar as Hujar’s first and only book serendipitously brought him and the initially star-struck Wojnarowicz together. In a letter Wojnarowicz wrote to his former lover, Jean-Pierre

40 Kozloff, ‘Hujar,’ 91.
Delage, on 9 January 1981, he related his first encounter with Hujar and his shock at meeting the photographer of this book. ‘He stared at me and I looked back several times. I guess I wanted him in a strong way.’ Upon arriving at Hujar’s loft, Wojnarowicz was stunned when Hujar handed him a copy of *Portraits in Life and Death*: ‘This is the kind of work I do.’ 41 The volume consisted mainly of portraits of friends between 1974 and 1975 but in keeping with its title, also includes photographs taken by Hujar in the catacombs of Palermo during a trip in 1963. 42 It is plausible to say that the twelve photographs of subjects interred at the catacombs, each in varying states of decay and preservation, were influential on Wojnarowicz’s own burgeoning interests in mortality, spirituality, and communal responses to suffering and trauma. Indeed, Wojnarowicz would include photographs of mummies in works such as *A Fire in My Belly* and the Kitchen performance, *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* (ITSOFOMO). For Visser, the inclusion of these postmortem images ‘are the macabre literal counterpart of the memento mori’, 43 and the images do certainly remind the viewer of the immanence of death in life. However, they also point to a pre-twentieth century reverence for the deceased and the elaborate customs that would assure the living, in their affectation of worldly comfort and peace, that they had made all the necessary arrangements to show to others their inestimable value to the mourners. A ‘good death’ was as much a reflection upon the life antemortem of the deceased as the values held by the living. Due care in the ‘laying out’ of the bodies in the catacombs is analogous, for Visser, to the poses Hujar had his sitters adopt in his portraits; in particular for Visser, the ‘reclining pose’, a favourite of Hujar’s, is an attitude ‘which is rather unusual in twentieth century photography’. 44 For it is a pose

41 Wojnarowicz, quoted in Carr, *Fire in the Belly*, 171.
that immediately evokes the position favoured by nineteenth century photographers for their postmortem (and even living) subjects, in part due to technical limitations with the photographic apparatus, as well as the very small window in which the deceased body retains its suppleness and motility before rigor mortis. In Heather Cameron’s ‘Memento Mori: Mourning, Monuments and Memory’, she states how ‘In the early days of photography, the long exposure times and aptly-named guillotine shutters required subjects to stand deathly still to obtain an image that wasn’t blurred.’ More so than this, Jay Ruby in Secure the Shadow writes that neck braces were recommended for living subjects of a photograph as a way to ensure the success of a clear image. He writes that ‘In the photographic studio of the 1840s through the 1860s, people were placed in restraints – clamps that prevented any head movement. They were told to sit perfectly still, not even to blink.’ Geoffrey Batchen corroborates this bizarre practice in his cross-ethnographic study of British and American, and Japanese postmortem photography. When it came to daguerreotypes and tintypes of the mid-late 1800s in the United States, ‘individuals and families would sit for one of these photographic portraits with their heads inevitably supported by a standing metal device to keep them steady… Early photography insisted that, if one wanted to look lifelike in the eventual photography, one first had to pose as if dead.’ The resulting stiffness of such a pose is responsible for the common and ‘erroneous tendency to read the expression of these photographic subjects as belonging to a somber controlled people’.

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46 With current medical technology, as in CT and MRI scans, patients are also restrained to guarantee a clear image.
47 Geoffrey Batchen, Suspending Time: Life-Photography-Death (Shizuoka, Japan: Izu Photo Museum, 2010), 115.
48 Ruby, Secure the Shadow, 44. Or, as Batchen quips, ‘the portraits that resulted have all the animation of a statue or a wax effigy.’ Batchen, Suspending Time, 115.
postmortem subjects in a way that mimicked activities they would have performed in life, such as reading a book or placed in a sitting position, often with their eyes opened, was one strategy employed by photographers to defer the finality of death. One such example of a postmortem subject being positioned in a sitting position is _Man Holding Dead Wife, ‘Til Death Do Us Part_’ (Figure 26).

Figure 26: *Man Holding Dead Wife, ‘Til Death Do Us Part*, circa 1845
Daguerreotype 1/6th plate

Without the paratext of the title, the viewer could easily mistake the sitting wife as being alive rather than dead,\(^49\) the relationship between her and her husband inferred through the intimate embrace they share. Yet upon reading the title, it is clear that the husband’s firm hold of his wife is necessary in order to keep her from falling out of

\(^{49}\) Particularly in postmortem photographs of children, props were used as a way to ‘disguise’ the deceased status of the sitter. Willow trees were particularly popular ‘or a wilted flower in the child’s hand.’ At other times, however, Ruby claims that ‘the portrait contains nothing to indicate that it is a posthumous rendering.’ Ruby, _Secure the Shadow_, 40.
this upright position, thereby betraying the artifice of life in this composition.⁵⁰ Stanley B. Burns in *Sleeping Beauty II: Grief, Bereavement and the Family in Memorial Photography* correctly surmises that ‘This daguerreotype may be considered an extremely unusual representation of the posthumous mourning photograph – depicting the dead as if still living.’⁵¹ Certain objects, however, within the photographic diegesis, were commonly used as metonymic signifiers of death when ambiguity was actual rather than cultivated. Willows, flowers and clocks were popular such objects, as well as the Bible, included here in *Man Holding Dead Wife*. The performance of sentience and consciousness was also evident in posthumous mourning portraits that depicted the deceased as living through keeping their eyes open. In *Dead Girl Propped on a Couch* (Figure 27), the colouring of the dead girl’s cheeks, along with her relaxed pose on the couch and ruffled clothing deceive the viewer into thinking that she is still alive.

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⁵⁰ However, the ability for the viewer to identify the female subject as dead rather than living may be contextually relative. Perhaps for a Victorian viewer, this postmortem image, along with ‘last sleep’ portraits, would not have fooled him/her into believing the subject was alive. Mendelyté states that ‘In most of the [Victorian mortuary] pictures the awkward position of the body, unnatural stare of the eyes or the feet slightly lifted above the ground (the presence of a stand) indicate to the viewer that s/he is looking at a corpse.’ Mendelyté, ‘Death (in the Eye) of the Beholder’: 87. 

According to Audrey Linkman, nineteenth century photographers often manipulated clothing and sheets in order to suggest the movement of the subjects’ now inert bodies. Lighting, whether natural or artificial, was also a key feature employed to ameliorate the grieving process, by increasing the likeness of the subject to the now deceased referent, and performing the artifice of death as a ‘serene’ or ‘peaceful’ phenomenon. In most situations, postmortem photographers ‘use[d] whatever available light came from the windows in the room’, necessitating a certain flexibility in the placement of their deceased sitter. According to Linkman, photographers were

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52 ‘The combined evidence of surviving portraits and published articles confirm that the post-mortem portrait in Victorian Britain was intended to play down the finality of death and suggest instead the gentle tranquillity of untroubled and peaceful sleep.’ Audrey Linkman, ‘Taken from Life: Post-Mortem Portraiture in Britain, 1860-1910,’ *History of Photography* 30, no. 4 (2006): 335.
often disinclined to use artificial lighting for its production of harsh shadows and contrasts, whilst Gihon emphasised that the body not be placed alongside the window, for ‘the evils of such a course are almost irremediable […]. A face half in light and half in shadow is most difficult to manage’. Pogue Harrison writes that postmortem images – whether painterly or photographic – have been a vital part of the mourning process since classical antiquity, since they are a record of the ‘person who has vanished’ but is nonetheless as ‘lifeless likeness of him or herself.’ Fundamentally, in order for the living to detach themselves from the dead, ‘the dead must be detached from their remains so that their images may find their place in the afterlife of the imagination’. Such conventions facilitated the psych-emotional separation of the living from the deceased by offering a final portrait of the latter, which, given the relative expense of such memorial objects in the early years of photography, may have been the only photograph the living had of the dearly departed. This was particularly the case with postmortem images of children, given their very brief existences prior to death. Whilst the opened eyes of the girl (Figure 27) may fool some into believing she is alive, the distinct rosy hue of her cheeks in an otherwise black-and-white ambrotype is in fact a clear giveaway that this is a posthumous image. Furthermore, as Burns claims, ‘That she is dead is readily evident by

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54 Robert Pogue Harrison, The Dominion of the Dead, 148, quoted in Brown, ‘Empty Hands and Precious Pictures’: 9. Harrison also suppositiously claims that death masks have historically been used as objects of consolation for the living. In fact, as Georg Kolbe notes, the death mask functioned as a mediating object of grief and mourning only from the late eighteenth century onwards. Before this, the death mask was ‘primarily only a studio-property, adapting itself to its subordinate task in the artist’s work on the effigies, which had a long career behind it before its stepchild, the death mask, saw the light.’ Georg Kolbe, ‘The History of the Death Mask,’ in Undying Faces: A Collection of Death Masks, trans. Margaret M. Green (1929; Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2003), 31.

55 ‘In the Victorian era, when photography was an extremely expensive pursuit, a post-mortem photograph was often the first and the last picture taken of the recently deceased.’ Mendelyté, ‘Death (in the Eye) of the Beholder’: 84.
examining the condition of her lower arms and hands. The dependent position of her arms resulted in blood pooling and discoloring them.\textsuperscript{56}

This preference in feigning vitality in a deceased subject gave way to depictions of the subject as if he/she were sleeping, in order to comfort the bereaved and mirror what was conceived as the ‘good’ Christian death. There is a very clear reason behind the depiction of death as one’s ‘last sleep’, offering repose and conceding the life of the deceased as having been lived according to Christian virtue. Furthermore, in requiring little more effort than shutting one's eyes, the death-as-sleep metaphor reinforced Victorian attitudes towards death as matter-of-fact, commonplace, and ultimately a ‘natural’ consequence of life. Audrey Linkman writes of this in \textit{Photography and Death}:

Sleep is familiar; it takes place within the safe, protected environment of the home and family. Unlike sleep, death is a mystery beyond the sphere of human knowledge. The state of unconsciousness is the link that connects sleep with death. Unlike death, however, sleep is not final. … So the metaphor effectively tames and domesticates the alien and frightening aspects of death.\textsuperscript{57}

Hujar’s interest in the ontological and corporeal specificities of death extended far beyond his catacomb images. One such portrait is the study, \textit{Ethyl Eichelberger as Auntie Bellum} (1983) (Figure 28).

\textsuperscript{56} Burns, \textit{Sleeping Beauty II}, unpaged.
Eichelberger was a playwright, actor, and drag performer who died in 1990 by suicide. Remaining faithful to the almost austere use of props within his other photographs, this portrait of Eichelberger performing as ‘Auntie Bellum’ focuses on the social consequences of death on the living and how they mourn and memorialise the deceased. The composition is simple. Auntie Bellum sits demurely on a chair and glances downwards at a small open coffin resting on a covered table. Whilst it was indeed common for posthumous mourning photographs to include relatives of the deceased in order to show communal relations and the ritualistic processes attending bereavement, it is ambiguous whether the coffin houses a girl, boy, or nothing at all. By the same token, the pose which Bellum adopts, with her eyes downcast and arms crossed neatly on her lap, is reminiscent of the highly coded gestures of nineteenth century postmortem photography in order to convey the grief of mourners. In part the result of the technical limitations of the photographic technology of the time and the perhaps questionable competence of the practitioner, most family portraits of the early
nineteenth century had as their sole aim to immortalise the likeness of their sitters rather than to express a variegation of emotions. But as we see in Henry Peach Robinson’s composite photograph, *Fading Away* (1858), postures rather than facial expressions evinced a highly prescribed set of ‘dramatic attitude[s] of grief borrowed directly from sentimental romantic paintings, lithographs, and pictorialist photographs’ of the time.\(^{58}\) Furthermore, the delicate fabric, colour, and elaborate dress of ‘Auntie Bellum’ would have been contrary to the codes of mourning in the nineteenth century, where it was expected especially of women to wear clothes denoting their relation to the deceased and current stage of bereavement. According to Ruby, during the mid nineteenth century ‘formal funeral clothes were expected attire for middle- and upper-class survivors.’\(^{59}\) Memorial paintings during this time often featured survivors in the accoutrements of mourning. Daniel Gyger Snyder, in his MA Thesis, mentions that ‘it became common for surviving members of a family… to have portraits made of themselves in their mourning clothes. This would allow the family to recall the moments of their deepest sorrow and, indirectly, the object of their sorrow.’\(^{60}\) Reference to death in Ethyl Eichelberger is certainly indirect, if not oblique. The rug on the floor suggests to the viewer a domestic setting and the open coffin a potential death, yet there are no other signifiers within the frame to confirm this suspicion. Moreover, if this is indeed a portrait of mourning, the purpose of such an image is unclear, unlike those photographs of the nineteenth century. For to envelop and embellish oneself in mourning clothes was to provide society with an unambiguous sign of propriety, at the same time as providing a ‘reminder to the mourners of their loss and thus [keep]… the work of grief in their

\(^{58}\) Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 92.

\(^{59}\) Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 104.

\(^{60}\) Daniel Gyger Snyder, ‘American Family Memorial Imagery, the Photograph and the Search for Immortality,’ 68, quoted in Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 105.
consciousness.\textsuperscript{61} Most striking about this photograph is the tonal contrast between the seated Bellum and open coffin. What captures the viewer’s attention immediately is not the suggestion of death, and not the open coffin that transfixed Auntie Bellum, but the capacious size of her dress, which occupies a large portion of the mid-lower half of the photograph. It is in fact the shapeliness and flowing nature of the dress that makes the viewer starkly aware of the corporeal immobility and ‘flatness’ that characterise deceased beings – a rigidity emphasised in the polygonal shape of the coffin.

The classical composition of this study, wherein the distance between the camera and Bellum has as its effect a creation of emotional distance between the viewer and this potentially mournful subject, is markedly different from Hujar’s images of the catacombs at Palermo. Although plainly demonstrating the ossification of these bodies and the long-gone departure of any trace of consciousness or subjectivity in their faces, Hujar aestheticises the death of these individuals. There is a sense of intimacy in these portraits which is notably absent in Ethyl Eichelberger as Auntie Bellum. I would like to think that the reason why such portraits elicit psychological intimacy and in turn resist the impulse to shy away from representations of death, is because of the care and respect that these individuals have received from their mourners in the preparation of their bodies for the afterlife. For instance, Catacomb Palermo Girl with Flowers (1963) (Figure 29) is compositionally anomalous, in choosing to crop rather than show in its entire length the casket containing the deceased girl of the title.

\textsuperscript{61} Ruby, Secure the Shadow, 110.
Viewed from a slightly skewed angle, the photograph focuses on the top half of the young girl’s body and the accoutrements of death. The laying-out of this Palermo girl suggests that her mourners took extreme care to produce an appearance of comfort in her postmortem ‘life’ – soft, pale bed sheets are carefully placed beneath her; a wreath adorns her head like a nimbus, and flowers are placed on top of her chest. Although the young girl stares at the viewer with hollow eyes, a memento mori if there ever was one, the viewer does not recoil at this image but is drawn further into it, looking for any clues or information that could assist in identifying this unknown girl.

The reclining pose so favoured in Victorian mortuary sculpture, which Visser identifies as being prominent in Hujar’s oeuvre and a pose that ultimately reminds the
viewer of the ‘laying-out’ position of the deceased body, is most apparent in Hujar’s portrait, *Candy Darling on Her Deathbed* (1974) (Figure 30).

![Candy Darling on Her Deathbed, 1974](image)

It is impossible to ignore the compositional similarities between Hujar’s reclining portraits and his catacomb images; whilst the deceased of the catacombs ‘are involuntarily stiffened in this pose, … to many of the photographer’s living models it seems to have been congenial.’\(^{62}\) At an initial glance, two visual registers compete in *Candy Darling* to hold our attention: fashion photography and memorial photography. Hujar was a fashion photographer during the 1950s, and this influence is obvious in the portrait.\(^{63}\) Max Kozloff notes that ‘Some of its themes he reproduced [in his

\(^{62}\) Kozloff, ‘Hujar,’ 98.

\(^{63}\) Hujar recalls that in the 1950s and early 1960s there was not a distinction between art and commercial photography per se. He discusses this, his experience working in fashion photography, and the first camera he owned (35mm) in an interview with Wojnarowicz. Hujar Interview, Tape 1 (Part 1 of 2), David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0512. ‘Photography flourished in fashion
portraits], though as they pertained to his own, different gay world’. Candy Darling, despite being placed in the context of a hospital ward, reclines on her bed exuding the grace, charm, and glamour which we expect from a haute couture model rather than a dying subject: her perfectly curled hair tumbles effortlessly from her head, her make-up is dramatic but not overstated. The easeful way in which the sheets caress her body as if they were drapery, along with the marmoreal sheen of her skin, strike the viewer as being typical aspects of classical nude sculpture. Yet, the preponderance of flowers in this composition, especially the single rose placed in front of her chest on the bed, metonymically signify her fragile health and imminent death. Furthermore, with the limited mobility of patients and the concentration of bodily smells within hospitals, refreshing floral perfume would certainly be welcomed and needed. Rather than an arbitrary hospital setting for a fashion editorial, her declining physical state is reinforced through these signifiers – the foldaway table, fluorescent backlight, and the side cupboard/table that we perennially find in hospital wards. Even the roses in the left-hand area of the photograph cannot escape semantic association with hospitalisation – they are, after all, placed in a male urinal bedpan. The allocation of this hospital bed as being her ‘deathbed’ in Hujar’s title, rather than a temporary place of rehabilitation and rest, signals the shift in twentieth century western culture towards death as a medicalised event. Whereas the final location of the dying had previously been the domestic household prior to the twentieth century, death became increasingly institutionalised as the authority of the medical practitioner, along with the invention of anaesthesia in the late nineteenth century, began to take hold. And while the ‘good death’ had previously been circumscribed by the dying person’s

magazines… [it was] a way of life or style… and I think there was an appreciation of self [in fashion photographs].

Max Kozloff, ‘In and Out of Fashion,’ in Peter Hujar: A Retrospective, 185.
family and friends, such representation ‘has largely given way to a quiet, managed process’, presided over by the surgeon or physician in a patient-controlled location such as the hospital.⁶⁵ Even if the context of death has shifted from the highly personalised and intimate context of the home to the comparatively sterile locale of the hospital, with its limited privacy, spaces of transience, and heavy foot traffic, Candy looks utterly comfortable in her penultimate resting place. Candy projects her sense of comfort to the viewer with the choice of a reclining pose, since it ‘establishes an intimacy with the viewer that seems vaguely privileged and conversationally offhand.’⁶⁶

Yet the viewer must keep in mind how the shift from the relatively private domain of the domestic home, to the public space of the hospital but in a ‘private’ room therein, has resulted in normalising certain patient behaviours, which in turn sanction particular forms and ‘performances’ of dying and death as acceptable and others as not. According to Bethne Hart, Peter Sainsbury, and Stephanie Short, the institutionalization of dying and death has led to professionals acquiring and exerting increasing power over the lives of dying patients; there is a constant emergence of more efficient death technologies, more sophisticated and specialized forms of counselling, more control over the professional administration to the dying people’s identified needs, and professional power that seeks to shape the lives of others to the prevailing ideal.⁶⁷

What strikes me, however, is that despite the bureaucratic and ontological constraints of the hospital, Candy Darling has reclaimed her own dying and death from its determination by the narratives of medicine and medicalisation. Fran Lebowitz claims that Candy ‘loved when Peter took a picture of her in the hospital. She got

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⁶⁶ Kozloff, ‘Hujar,’ 91.
dressed up, even though she was dying from bone cancer.”68 Candy refused to act demurely in the face of death; death is to be celebrated, ‘dressed up’ for, like any other ‘life-changing’ event. There is no trace of the maudlin in her self-presentation, or the figuration of the dying patient as haplessly resigned to his/her death. Her posture is that of high fashion, not of the enervated patient. Rather than the blanket designation of Candy as a dying ‘patient’, this portrait explores on Darling’s terms the existential and embodied changes triggered by her illness.69 Candy’s acceptance of her death as inevitable reflects what Kozloff sees as the ‘psychological crux’ of Hujar’s art: ‘we are all perceived, in or out of the sickroom, as unprotected from our fate.’70 Being unprotected from her fate does not equate to Candy’s renunciation of her life and autonomy, for Darling has transformed the sterile, impersonal, and public space of the hospital ward into an inherently intimate and personal setting. The viewer feels as if he/she is being presented with privileged access into the private world of a 1940s Hollywood icon, where the likes of Bette Davis and Rita Hayworth in their ‘women’s pictures’ would titillate the viewer by providing them a quick glance into their private lives. Indeed, Kozloff states that one of the central effects of Hujar’s portraiture was to overlook ‘the disparity between ourselves and the class or material fortunes of those he depicted. … Lacking such emphases on difference, we feel correspondingly closer to those in the pictures.’71 There is indeed a sense of intimacy between the viewer and Candy, generated by the strength of what initially appears to be her languid, faraway stare: the trust it conveys in its relaxation draws us into a private conversation, but her evening dress worn under the sheets may well

69 I disagree wholeheartedly with Kozloff, who believes Candy Darling refused to acknowledge the severity of her diagnosis with lymphoma. ‘He was there to photograph quite unhesitatingly in the hospital room when the life of one of his subjects, Candy Darling, neared its end, and her most beautiful denial of that fact he touchingly encouraged for what it was.’ Kozloff, ‘Hujar,’ 95.
70 Kozloff, ‘Hujar,’ 101.
71 Kozloff, ‘In and Out of Fashion,’ 190.
suggest a night on the town. Effectively, Hujar’s posthumous memorial photograph of Candy provides an alternative representation to the ‘taming’ of death in its medicalisation. As Kozloff notes, ‘fashion left a mark on his procedures’, and one certainly identifies how its semiotics operate within Candy Darling on Her Deathbed to mollify the viewer’s unease towards the dying and death.

Analysing a final portrait by Hujar will help to elucidate the formal influence his procedures had on Wojnarowicz’s postmortem photography, which will be the basis of my second section. The image, Jackie Curtis (1985) (Figure 31), of the former Warhol superstar and drag actor, demonstrates how the postmortem photographic tradition was still existent in America during the twentieth century, although practiced furtively due to society’s increasing unacceptance towards the practice as morose or even macabre.

![Figure 31: Jackie Curtis, 1985](image)
Black-and-white photograph, 15 13/16 x 19 13/16 inches

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72 Kozloff, ‘In and Out of Fashion,’ 185.
Ruby has debunked the claim that the practice of postmortem photography was limited to the nineteenth century. In fact, funeral and mortuary photographs continue to be produced, but ‘are more likely to be retained by the family because the photographs are sufficiently recognizable to be considered part of the family’s heritage and because they have far less market value’ than daguerreotypes and *cartes de visite* of the nineteenth century.\(^{73}\) The silence surrounding the frequency by which such postmortem photographs are produced is in large part attributable to families fearing reprisal or disdain from the wider public. Letters included in a column by Ann Landers in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* on 25 February 1991, show not only that postmortem photographers remain a commonplace ritual amongst the bereaved, but also how polarising the responses to such a practice are and continue to be:

> ‘Upset in Michigan’ wrote to say that she was appalled when her cousin sent several pictures of a deceased relative lying in a satin-lined casket with funeral wreaths all around. …
> From Evansville, Ind.: “When my mother passed away from lung cancer five years ago, I was shocked and appalled to see my niece taking pictures of her in the casket. I thought it was insensitive and disrespectful, but I said nothing. …
> White Plains, New York: ‘My wife and I were married nearly 50 years when she passed away. Mary was a pretty woman but for some reason she did not photograph well. Consequently she avoided the camera and hid whenever family photos were taken. When Mary passed away the mortician did such a wonderful job that I asked my son to take a picture of his dear mother as she lay in the casket with a red rose in her hand. That photo turned out to be the best one ever taken of my wife and I wouldn’t trade it for a million years.’\(^{74}\)

Nonetheless, there is a certain sense of sanctioned voyeurism that is tolerated, if not even outwardly accepted, when it comes to viewing postmortem images of individuals who, as former celebrities, had already been perceived as renouncing their claims to privacy and exclusivity in exchange of immortality in the public eye. One of the

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\(^{73}\) Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 162.

\(^{74}\) Ann Landers, quoted in Ruby, *Secure the Shadow*, 168.
earliest examples of a funeral photograph of a celebrity was that of Abraham Lincoln. Whilst it has become commonplace to represent pictorially the funeral of American presidents, the funeral photographs of Lincoln caused for many discomfort and outrage. Many, including one ‘Union’ photographer, regarded Benjamin Gurney’s photographs as being not only in poor taste, but also morally questionable in potentially besmirching Lincoln’s posthumous reputation. Most of these photographs by Gurney were confiscated and/or destroyed by Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton. However, one photograph resurfaced in the 1950s, Faked Abraham Lincoln Postmortem. In this tintype 1/6 plate, we have a foreshortened view of Lincoln as he lies supine on a bed embedded in an ornately gilded frame. According to Burns in Sleeping Beauty II, ‘This faked image of Lincoln is a legacy of America’s infatuation with postmortem memorial photography.’\(^7^5\) Disregarding the historical and cultural significance of postmortem images for a moment, we can see how one particular ‘Union’ photographer, in a letter to Humphrey’s Journal, was infuriated by this pictorial imitation of the esteemed President:

> What was the necessity of photographing the remains? Was there not already millions of good representations of the living man that they must desecrate the dead? And why should this privilege be granted to Mr. Gurney, to the exclusion of all other photographers. … Had not Mr. Gurney, during President Lincoln’s four years administration, sufficiently exhausted his vial of wrath and vengeance against him, that he must now disturb the repose of the dead, and insult and injure the bereaved family and true friends of the departed? The whole scheme was a disgraceful outrage upon humanity.\(^7^6\)

The American Civil War also prompted a tradition in which the linguistic reporting of human tragedy was accompanied by images depicting war casualties, disaster,

\(^7^5\) Stanley B. Burns, Sleeping Beauty II: Grief, Bereavement in Memorial Photography, American and European Traditions (New York: Burns Collection, 2002), unpaged.

\(^7^6\) William B. Welling, Photography in America, the Formative Years, 1839-1900, 175, cited in Ruby, Secure the Shadow, 18.
assassination and epidemics, in order to verify such narratives as ‘true’. It is a widely held assumption that the ontology of the photograph differs from that of painting or film, insofar as the potential for photographs to ‘lie’ or ‘deceive’ the viewer through misrepresentation is reputedly less than these other mediums. Whereas most would accept that a painting or drawing is a representation of a specific reality as perceived by the artist, the mechanism of the photograph, where light causes the production of the image, is regarded as being a more ‘transparent’ form of production because the intentionality of the photograph does not play as large of a role as it does in these other mediums. In some respect, then, ‘what a standard photographic image presents or represents is whatever was before the camera at the time of taking the picture and caused the image to offer to the viewer a particular visual array.’

The ‘truth-telling’ capacities of the photograph, especially when dealing with images of mourning, death or dying, can certainly arrest the viewer in their immediacy and aesthetic rawness. At the same time, however, death images of celebrities produce a different affective and aesthetic response than laypersons, especially when there are no visible symptoms of disease or illness displayed on the surface of the deceased body.

As a well-known performer within the community, the opprobrium that the viewer might experience in encountering a postmortem image is somewhat mitigated by Curtis’ celebrity. Despite being taken at a very close distance to Curtis, there is no sense of unwelcome intrusion or violation of his privacy by the viewer. In fact, through Hujar’s choice of a close proximity to Curtis, as well as the cropping of the image, the viewer is placed in the position of a mourner who, like other attendees at his funeral service, approaches the deceased in order to pay his/her last respects. The relaxed expression on Curtis’ face, produced by the heavy application of mortuary

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make up to conceal flaws, as well as the plush mattress placed underneath his body, give the impression as if he were sleeping. Such conventions in the laying-out of his body and the restoration of his face to its premortem state indicate the cultivation of the ‘good death’ still operating amongst mortuary practitioners. Items placed within Curtis’ casket may be interpreted as mnemonic devices that ensure a connection between him and living mourners. Alternatively, such items may epideictically function as a figurative summation of his artistic achievements, working to supplement a memorial card or obituary.

Wojnarowicz’s Postmortem Images of Hujar

The funerary photograph of Curtis lays the groundwork for thinking about the discursive intertwining of private and public forms of commemoration and mourning in Wojnarowicz’s postmortem photographs of Hujar. I argue that it was vital for Wojnarowicz to memorialise Hujar in his deathbed portraits because it offered public testimony on what it means to mourn an individual whose existence, and by extension death, are considered inconsequential in a heteronormative society. It is impossible to disentangle Wojnarowicz’s personal experiences from his politics, since ‘they intertwine synergistically and serendipitously, contesting hypocrisy and oppressive forms of authority.’ 78 Outraged by the biomedicalisation of HIV/AIDS which pathologised homosexuals as both responsible for, and a living embodiment, of the disease, Wojnarowicz used his personal experience as a political tool to break down systematically what he referred to as the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Documenting the death of Hujar is not only a powerful statement to the public that the deaths of PWAs

in toto are unacceptable; it is also a statement that such deaths must be acknowledged and accounted for by the Reagan administration. According to Wojnarowicz, transforming an inherently private moment of loss into a public statement ‘would serve as another powerful dismantling tool [against the ONE-TRIBE NATION]. It would dispel the notion that this virus has a sexual orientation or a moral code. It would nullify the belief that the government and medical community has done very much to ease the spread or advancement of this disease’ (CK, 121).

Wojnarowicz was also concerned that when PWAs did appear in the mainstream media, such images did little counteract the representation of these individuals as ‘victims’ helplessly resigned to their fate. This certainly may be the case for some, but as Douglas Crimp has argued, the representation of PWAs as miserable, alone, and in a state of physical and mental deterioration, had a powerful effect in rhetorically shaping the prognosis and etiology of HIV/AIDS and its ideal ‘target’. In shoring up the idea that the decline of PWAs is in direct connection to the subcultures of cruising and promiscuous sex, the prophylactic quality of the photograph gives the viewer a sense of safety in being doubly separated from the ‘contaminated’ patient. In maintaining rather than complicating the binaries of ‘healthy’ and ‘diseased’, the ‘clean’ and ‘polluted,’ such images are precisely what Crimp regards as being ‘phobic’, since the portrayals of PWAs ‘as desperately ill, as either grotesquely disfigured or as having wasted to fleshless, ethereal bodies’ evoke ‘the terror at imagining the person with AIDS as still sexual’.79

Wojnarowicz continually undermined the dangerous categorisation of the PWA as a ‘victim’ or ‘pariah,’ and was certainly concerned with the further demonisation of these individuals in the biomedicalisation of HIV/AIDS as a sexually

transmitted disease. Susan Sontag has written how different symbolic and cultural images attach to certain diseases and illnesses; whereas cancer has been regarded as the consequence of sexual repression or the internalisation of anger, HIV/AIDS is depicted using militaristic metaphors, where the self is ‘invaded’ by an external and ‘foreign’ body. Notwithstanding this, whilst the ‘invasion’ of the body from the outside would normally absolve the individual of any responsibility for such an ‘attack,’ ‘the popular interpretation of AIDS posits that those who acquired HIV did not responsibly protect themselves’ by engaging in high-risk lifestyles. My previous chapters have focused on how Wojnarowicz has challenged the social-deviancy model of the PWA by arguing how the sexual subculture of cruising was vital in constructing erotic intimacy and care. In this chapter, however, with its focus on PWA postmortem images and in particular such images of Hujar, it is important to consider how, with their representation of corporeal decay and ontological expiration, they are able to impart an ethics of dignity and care in death at the same time as encouraging rather than hindering the political project of representing PWAs through a variety of affects other than suffering and pity.

Let us now look at some of Wojnarowicz’s postmortem photographs. Immediately upon looking at these images, the viewer can identify the stylistic and formal influences of Hujar. Specifically in the photograph of Hujar’s exposed feet (Figure 32), Wojnarowicz has paid particular attention to the way the light and bed sheet fall upon them, providing focus through delicate framing techniques. Without

80 Common misconceptions about the spread of the disease and the probability of being infected were in circulation until 1988. On 26 May of this year, the US Surgeon General C. Everett Koop was responsible for organizing ‘the U.S.’s first coordinated HIV/AIDS education campaign by mailing 107 million copies’ of Understanding AIDS to American homes. Understanding AIDS, a pamphlet, immediately dispels the illusion that ‘only certain “high risk groups” of people are infected by the AIDS virus. This is untrue. Who you are has nothing to do with whether you are in danger of being infected with the AIDS virus. What matters is what you do.’ ‘A Timeline of AIDS,’ AIDS.gov, accessed 27 January 2014, http://aids.gov/hiv-aids-basics/hiv-aids-101/aids-timeline/.
81 Marita Sturken, Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 233.
any paratextual information to suggest that this image is of a dead body, the viewer would not be incorrect in comparing this cropped photograph of Hujar’s feet to a body part that has been discarded or cut off from a larger sculptural model, or perhaps a fragmentary, truncated classical statuary. Indeed, there is a sense of stillness in the photograph, suggested not only by the prostrate position but the deep creases of the fitted sheet underneath Hujar, which remind me of the hard and intractable materials used in classical sculpture.

![Figure 32: Untitled [Hujar's Feet], 1989
Gelatin-silver print, 20 x 16 inches](image)

The visual sparseness of these postmortem photographs in general and this image in particular is curious, for Wojnarowicz’s visual images tend to be stylistically frenetic, heavily collaged, and have a formal disorderliness about them which assault rather than soothe the eye. That he has shown restraint with these postmortem images may be a result of his desire to emulate Hujar’s photography, as a way to demonstrate indebtedness towards his former lover, friend, and teacher. Wojnarowicz, in an interview with Sylvère Lotringer, mentioned the great sensitivity with which Hujar
photographed his subjects, and his continued interest in the subject of death as that which should not be feared but scrutinised. Regarding a man Hujar photographed shortly before his death, Wojnarowicz wrote:

His descriptions of it were amazing. I could call them beautiful. It was a sensitivity to the process of this guy’s death. Everyone else in the hospital got hysterical, Peter just sat there; he looked at the guy; the guy died.\textsuperscript{82}

Wojnarowicz went on to add that Hujar approached death in the same manner as every other subject. Photography came intuitively to Hujar, where ‘snapping the shutter’ was as uncomplicated as ‘blinking his eyes. Death [w]as just part of everything.’\textsuperscript{83} The simple, no-fuss attitude in which Hujar photographed images of death is perhaps reflected in Wojnarowicz’s own postmortem images of Hujar. In perhaps the most memorable and well known of these images, the viewer peers down at Hujar’s face and upper body as it rests on a large pillow (Figure 33).


\textsuperscript{83} Wojnarowicz, ‘Sylvère Lotringer/David Wojnarowicz,’ 174.
It is a photograph which triggers a flurry of emotions, but none of these being terror or horror. Unlike AA Bronson’s photograph, *Felix*, which I regard as being deliberately taken to assault the viewer into acknowledging the full reality of HIV/AIDS as a syndrome that attacks the physical body, there is not this sense of complete debilitation when staring at this particular postmortem image of Hujar. The viewer of Bronson’s photograph is exhausted in their apprehension of the subject, almost as if the proximity to Felix’s body draws us in *too close*, so that any engagement beyond a purely immediate and visceral one is negated. Rather than being ethically suspect, I argue that when we linger on this postmortem image, perhaps even *stare at it*, we are performing what is potentially the *most* ethical task in the circumstances. For refusing to stare at this photograph would be equivalent to refusing to acknowledge the individual significance of Hujar’s death, as well as the very real and concrete losses that have occurred and continue to occur due to HIV/AIDS.
Another postmortem portrait of Hujar strikes the viewer in its compositional simplicity and beauty (Figure 34). Wojnarowicz has taken a photograph of Hujar’s right hand, shot at a close-up range so that we see how it delicately presses against the bed sheets underneath. The hand appears to the viewer supple and light, having been photographed before the onset of rigor mortis. A sense of spiritual calm is also suggested if we study closely the position of Hujar’s fingers; with his ring and little fingers bent slightly in the direction of his thumb, Hujar’s hand gesture recalls visually the Christian blessing. Nonetheless, the viewer recognises that this is a postmortem portrait, because of the discolouration of Hujar’s nails and concentration of blood in his arm. The diagonal line of the sheets bisecting the portrait almost in half lends movement to the composition, deflecting both the corporeal immobility of

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84 The author wishes to thank Mysoon Rizk for her thoughtful observation of this positioning. Rizk, personal communication, 25 May 2014.
Hujar and the immobilisation of time at the moment a photograph is taken. In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz explains that immediately after Hujar died, he was compelled to immortalise him through photographic means. Being unable to articulate his grief, Wojnarowicz felt an urge to preserve this moment in order to delay the finality of his death and the necessity of saying good bye: ‘I try and speak anyway and try and say something in case he’s afraid or confused by his own death and maybe needs some reassurance… but nothing comes from my mouth’ (*CK*, 103).

Whilst Hujar’s eye was a focal point for Wojnarowicz, both photographically and textually in *Close to the Knives* (‘I tried to say something to him staring into that enormous eye’), hands are nonetheless important tools of gestural and linguistic expression. Especially in the case of sign languages, hands are central to the process of linguistic exchange, and with the galleria of movements available to the communicator they animate and enliven social discourse. Furthermore, hand movements, conventional gestures and salutations are a way to bridge or resolve confusion between participants who do not speak the same language. As such, ‘Our faces may be the command centers of communication, but our hands speak a more common language.’

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, in *Staring: How We Look*, explains how hands, along with the face, capture the interlocutor’s attention and draws him/her into a staring exchange. Whilst hands ‘doing their jobs commonly do not draw stares’, hands which move atypically or which *do not move at all* command ‘scrupulous watching. We talk with our hands as much as with our mouths. … Hands are our harbingers, announcing us and our intentions to the eyes of others.’

Since the variegated movements and malleability of hands lends themselves to visual

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86 Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 120.
attention, the absence of such motions is also a point of interest. As a feminist disability scholar, Garland-Thomson concerns herself with the scene of staring as it relates to the absence of a hand or hands, and what sort of disruption this elicits within the visual field. However, at this point I would like to mention the many mortuary portraits in the Victorian era and early twentieth century which focus entirely on these bodily parts. As exemplar of this trend is Child’s Hands in Death (Figure 35).

Cecil Carey, the photographer, has deliberately chosen to conceal the child’s face in order to concentrate the viewer’s attention on his/her hands in the foreground. The central focus of this image is further demonstrated in the soft focus of the background and stark contrast between the dark colour of the bed sheets over the body and the paleness of the hands and forearms. Burns writes that this image, circa 1935, indicates an artistic shift in the 1930s in mortuary portraiture to incorporate elements of modern movements such as the Bauhaus, pictorialism and the close-ups of Weston.

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87 Garland-Thomson, Staring, 123.
For Burns, hands have always been an important element of portrait photography, but in this image they ‘tell the story.’ Although shifting the viewer’s focus on the subject’s hands renders him/her unidentifiable, we nonetheless know the child is ‘obviously dead’, due to the ‘postmortem flexion of the proximal finger joints’, a clear indicator of death. This is a remarkable image, displaying a certain reverence towards the subject that is evocative of hagiolatry. Indeed, Wojnarowicz’s description of Hujar’s body immediately after his death (CK, 102), reminds the reader of the worshipping of the Saviour’s body or of a venerated member of the Judaeo-Christian church. The compartmentalisation of Hujar’s ‘open eye,’ ‘open mouth,’ ‘beautiful hand,’ ‘his amazing feet,’ and ‘his head’ is a powerful reminder of those body parts found in Medieval Christian reliquaries. This interpretation is further supported if we look at another postmortem image of Hujar, which is a truncated view of his feet. Here, like the image of his hands and leg, Hujar’s feet are the focal point of interest, where the subtle lighting falls gracefully over his toes and dorsum pedis to intimate care and grace to the viewer.

Wojnarowicz once wrote that ‘some people have this idea that you’re diagnosed with AIDS and all of a sudden you’re waiting for death… Or that you’re facing some death skull down the road, and it’s just bullshit.’ Wojnarowicz’s astonishment towards what he saw as the overly futile view that being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS was tantamount to a death sentence was indeed the overwhelming sentiment during the first few years of the 1980s when the disease was little understood, as well as when the crisis was entering into its second decade and showed little signs of being cured. Watney writes how the gay community were at an impasse.

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in the 1990s in ‘experiencing what amounts to a tidal wave of death’89. With the increasing and accelerating death toll, many survivors, such as Watney, were confronted with the problem of how to retain emotional intensity and integrity in their strategies of mourning without becoming inured to loss and suffering. Hujar’s death on 26 November 1987, came at a time when there was renewed hope within the HIV/AIDS community; Larry Kramer in March founded the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) in New York City, and on 19 March, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved the use and production of the first antiretroviral drugs, zidovudine (AZT). Unfortunately, Hujar’s death cut short any chance for such an experimental drug to prove efficacious. It has been remarked upon that Hujar’s relationship to Wojnarowicz was not just that of a mentor and his acolyte; having both suffered stigmatisation by others for being homosexual, having come from family backgrounds of abuse and mistreatment, and in having an adversarial relationship with what they saw as an increasingly commodified art world, Hujar was the most influential figure in Wojnarowicz’s life. Writing a few days after Hujar’s death in his journal, Wojnarowicz’s words sadly convey how the death of his closest friend violently tore apart many of the relational markers that characterised his identity: ‘I realized Peter was many things to me. … Peter was a teacher of sorts for me, a brother, a father. It was an emotional and spiritual connection such as I never had with my family.’90 Given their inextricable bond with one another, it could be argued

90 Wojnarowicz, In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz, ed. Amy Scholder (New York: Grove, 1999), 199. Certainly, Wojnarowicz’s relationship with family members was strained at best. Despite being on speaking terms with his sister, Pat Fitzgerald, there were periods when Wojnarowicz would avoid physical contact with her prior to the birth of his niece. In a letter written on 2 March 1984 to Wojnarowicz, Fitzgerald writes, ‘I miss you so much never keep contact and here I am feeling sorry for myself. I feel sick and I can tell you how much pain I have. To think you were here [Paris] for so long just near me. Jesus Christ. Only 2 weeks ago I was going to call J.P. [Delage] and invite [him] for dinner and for one reason we decided not to make the dinner. Why oh
that Wojnarowicz’s postmortem photographs were a means of fetishistically disavowing the irreversible departure of Hujar from the realm of the living and thus the laceration of all affective and interpersonal connections that they shared. Roland Barthes has written extensively upon the spectrality of the photograph, which, due to its ability to conjure the deceased in the present \textit{as if alive}, denies the finality of death. Gazing upon a postmortem or posthumous photograph of a subject sparks a temporal disruption; despite the subject appearing to us in the present as living, the photograph nonetheless depicts that which has occurred in the past. The \textit{noeme} of photography is thus the ‘that-has-been’, since the photograph is an emanation of a subject whose discursive existence continues to persist even in the very absence or possible recurrence of a material referent. Clarifying his distinction between the studium and the punctum with reference to a photograph of a young boy, he defines the punctum as the realisation that ‘he is going to die. I read at the same time: \textit{This will be and this has been}; I observe with horror an anterior future of which death is the stake.’\textsuperscript{91}

What drives home the uncanny horror of the photograph is the convergence of two deaths into the singular temporal moment of visually apprehending the subject: the boy’s death is projected into the future at the same time that it has always and already occurred. Recalling his decision to photograph Hujar, Wojnarowicz questions whether he had ‘been holding off full acceptance of his dying’ in systematically cataloguing each and every aspect of his corporeality, from ‘his open eye, his open

Undeniably, there are ethical problems surrounding the lack of consent relating to the production and distribution of postmortem photography. The postmortem images of Hujar trigger difficult questions concerning access, consent, purpose and reception. Allan Sekula in his ‘The Archive and the Body’ argues that photography was implemented (but not exclusively or inherently) in the Victorian era as a technology of surveillance, normalisation and taxonomisation. By documenting and subsequently taxonomising individuals into social ‘types’, photography was instrumental in producing discourses of otherness and normativity as they related to race, sexuality, and health. Similar criticism has been launched at social documentary photography, whereby in its overriding agenda to improve the conditions of its subjects, it may produce an adverse effect; with a lack of attention to aesthetic qualities and operating under the maxim that the facts will ‘speak for themselves’, social documentary photographers have ‘often rendered those they recorded into passive sufferers of poverty, rather than active agents in their own lives.’ Nonetheless, reframing or returning another’s gaze is a form of activity, even if there is an imbalance of power evident in the relationship between photographer and subject. Yet if social documentary photographs can be charged with the crime of transforming their subjects into ‘passive sufferers’, then postmortem photographs would seem to do even more damage to the integrity and autonomy of the subject,

92 Wojnarowicz, In the Shadow of the American Dream, 199.
93 ‘This is how documentary works. … It defies comment; it imposes its meaning. It confronts us, the audience, with empirical evidence of such nature as to render dispute impossible and interpretation superfluous. All emphasis is on the evidence; the facts themselves speak… since just the fact matters, it can be transmitted in any plausible medium. … The heart of documentary is not form or style or medium, but always content.’ William Stott, Documentary Expression and Thirties America, quoted in Derrick Price, ‘Surveyors and Surveyed: Photography Out and About,’ in Photography: A Critical Introduction, ed. Liz Wells (London: Routledge, 2009), 90.
since there technically is no subject to speak of if he/she is dead. Yet I argue that at the heart of postmortem photographs is the ethical imperative to commemorate the deceased and to demonstrate the unique and profound loss that has occurred for the community of living members. Such commemoration takes on even more significance in a society where gay PWAs, already doubly stigmatised during their lives for their alternative sexuality and illness, are overlooked or trivialised in death when there is a failure in that very society to acknowledge the role that homophobic, biomedical and other moralising discourses have played in their suffering. Timothy Murphy has written thoughtfully on how the ‘incentive to memorialise’ friends, family and lovers who have died from HIV/AIDS is a powerful vehicle of social criticism, in refusing to surrender to ‘the levelling effect of death’ and asserting that ‘persons are not replaceable, that death does not nullify presence.’\textsuperscript{95} The impulse to memorialise was even more urgent for those individuals who were not mourned by their kin openly, due to the stigmatisation associated with dying from HIV/AIDS and homosexuality.\textsuperscript{96} In particular, Wojnarowicz’s determination to provide both visual and oral testimony of Hujar’s death is one way to bridge powerfully personal and collective memory, and public and personal modes of commemoration and responsibility. For in witnessing and providing testimony upon Hujar’s dying and death, Wojnarowicz performs the work of cultural memory, since these texts function as an oppositional politics against hegemonic notions of what it means to be a citizen,


\textsuperscript{96} In a conversation with Mary Hayslip about the death of Montanna Houston, Wojnarowicz noted that all too often parents refused to acknowledge the death of their children because doing so may have disclosed their seropositivity and/or homosexuality to others. ‘... I’ve had friends here [in NYC] who have died and I’ve seen their stuff just get destroyed by their families’. Interview: Mary Hayslip re: Montanna’s Death 4/9/90/ Phil: Health Stuff/Richard Last Tape (Part 1 of 2), David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0516. Wojnarowicz is hopeful that someone within Montanna’s family would recognise the value of his work; sadly, all of Montanna’s works were destroyed by his father, as explained in the note before ‘The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine over a Mouse Hole,’ in Close to the Knives.
particularly during times of national trauma. Marita Sturken describes how cultural memory works through various objects found in activism, art and popular culture, in order to produce memories that exist ‘outside the avenues of formal historical discourse’ at the same time as contesting and/or working with these dominant ideological modes.\(^\text{97}\) Connerton offers up a similar thesis in *How Societies Remember*, arguing that social memory is conveyed and sustained through bodily performance, which, as an extra-textual form of knowledge, is also an unconventional means of historical transmission. Taking as his exemplar the French Revolution, Connerton finds that social memory operates in two ways: through recollection and bodies. Connerton sees in the ‘sartorial licence’ of the revolutionaries a dual moment of recollection and change; although perceived as a decisive break with the past, the revolutionaries’ bodily practices in deportment and the allusions made to former genres of dress demonstrate that the future-oriented image of society is ‘[n]ever thinkable without its element of recollection – of recollection both explicit and implicit. The attempt to establish a beginning refers back inexorably to a pattern of social memories.’\(^\text{98}\)

Having briefly explained Sturken’s argument that cultural memory works through objects that fall outside the domain of formal historical discourse, and Connerton’s understanding of social memory as ‘conveyed and sustained’ through non-inscribing modes of knowledge – that is, chiefly bodily practices – we might begin to see how Wojnarowicz claims continuity with the past through his own citation of Victorian mortuary portraiture in the Hujar photographs. As Connerton mentions, rituals and rites ‘have the capacity to give value and meaning to the life of

\(^{97}\) Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 2, 3.

those who perform them.’\textsuperscript{99} Since rites are by convention repetitive, repetition must in turn ‘automatically imply continuity with the past.’\textsuperscript{100} The past with which Wojnarowicz wishes to connect, or more importantly, the personality whom Wojnarowicz wishes to convey and sustain beyond corporeal decay, is Hujar. Wojnarowicz achieves his aim through re-enacting Victorian conventions of mourning and memorialisation. Thus, the postmortem images perform the work of memory at the same time as producing new ideas and images of death and the PWA, since the narrative of Hujar which Wojnarowicz presents to the viewer starkly contradicts how he was represented in the mainstream press following his death.

Many obituaries of PWAs, including that of Hujar, failed to acknowledge the gay community that more often than not was the main source of care and income during the individual’s protracted illness.\textsuperscript{101} Simon Watney notes how ‘few biological families in reality respond(ed) well to the needs of gay men with AIDS’, thus leaving the bulk of daily tasks to members of the PWA’s queer ‘family’.\textsuperscript{102} Some obituaries of Hujar, including that of Anthony Scaduto’s \textit{New York Newsday} on 30 November 1987, worked to obscure the existence of a gay community surrounding Hujar, as if to

\textsuperscript{99} Connerton, \textit{How Societies Remember}, 45.
\textsuperscript{100} Connerton, \textit{How Societies Remember}, 45.
\textsuperscript{101} In fact, the obituary for Wojnarowicz that appeared in \textit{New York Times} failed to mention both Wojnarowicz’s homosexuality and that he was mostly estranged from his biological family. His non-heterosexual status is euphemistically mentioned in the statement, ‘He died of AIDS, said his companion, Tom Rauffenbart.’ The last paragraph fails to consider how Rauffenbart, along with individuals such as Marguerite Van Cook, James Romberger, Philip Yenawine, Anita Vitale, and countless others ‘survive him’ in being a part of his queer ‘family’. ‘He is survived by his mother, Dolores Voyna of Manhattan; two sisters, Pat Bernier of Paris and Linda Zaccaria of East Brunswick, N.J.; and two brothers, Peter, of Englishtown, N.J., and Steven, of East Windsor, N.J.’ Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 6, Subseries B, Box, 9, Folder 27, \textit{New York Times}, Obituaries, Friday 24 July 1992, ‘David Wojnarowicz, 37, Artist in Many Media,’ page number cut off, by Michael Kimmelman. The obituary obliterates any sense of homosexual love and desire shared between Wojnarowicz, Rauffenbart, and Hujar. Kimmelman claims that the death of ‘his friend, Peter Hujar’, along with his own diagnosis, ‘prompted [him]… to bear witness in his art to the disease and its social and psychological impact.’ The obituary by Amei Wallach (staff writer) on 25 July 1992 was no better: again, no reference is made to Wojnarowicz’s homosexuality, Hujar is described as Wojnarowicz’s ‘best friend’, and his survivors are ‘Dolores Voyna’ and ‘two sisters and two brothers.’ Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 6, Subseries B, Box 9, Folder 27, \textit{Obituaries}, ‘David Wojnarowicz, Outspoken Artist,’ 75, by Amei Wallach.
\textsuperscript{102} Watney, ‘Art from the Pit,’ 56.
deny the intimacy and normalcy of such relations especially in the processes of grieving. The highly selective nature of Hujar’s obituary speaks to the denial of homosexuality within the structure of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Wojnarowicz was adamant that there was a representational imbalance between heterosexuality and homosexuality, in which the latter was always and already relegated to the private sphere whilst the other was affirmed as the ‘normal’ and ‘ideal’ sexuality for the ONE-TRIBE NATION’s members. For Wojnarowicz, however, ‘sexuality has always been more than the heterosexual act and two positions on a bed, [even if]… sexuality in this society has been genericized to the point where it has become necessary to examine art and media’s depictions of it and to continue to define the diversities that have always existed.’

In addition to the flippant description of Candy Darling as ‘a young man from Queens who dressed in women’s clothes’, the obituary fails to mention any surviving relative bar his mother, Rose Murphy. That Murphy and Hujar had not spoken for some years and, according to Wojnarowicz, that she was an insouciant and unfeeling mother, does little to counteract the bitterness which Wojnarowicz, along with Hujar’s primary carers, Vince Aletti and Stephen Koch, must have felt when sifting through this and other incorrect obituaries. Such a gaping omission of Wojnarowicz’s name evidences the failure of the predominantly heteronormative context of 1980s America to acknowledge the grief and contribution of queer communities in caring for PWAs both within and after their lives. Wojnarowicz’s photographs of Hujar, then, are a riposte to the erasure of gay ‘families’ in mainstream obituaries of homosexual men. The footage which Wojnarowicz compiled for his unfinished film on Hujar, 

104 ‘I first looked at this photo days ago, the day after he died, and thought, How could his mother not love this boy?’ Wojnarowicz, In the Shadow of the American Dream, 202-203.
which includes a vast stretch of time where Wojnarowicz sifts through various portraits of his now deceased friend and former lover, is offered up as a counter-obituary in its narrativisation of intimacy and loss interpreted through a queer lens. As Marianne Hirsch writes in *Family Frames*, one of the core social functions of photography is its perpetuation of the ideology of the heteronormative nuclear family:

> The family photo both displays the cohesion of the family and is an instrument of its togetherness; it both chronicles family rituals and constitutes a prime objective of those rituals. Because the photograph gives the illusion of being a simple transcription of the real, a trace touched directly by the event it records, it has the effect of naturalizing cultural practices and of disguising their stereotyped and coded characteristics.  

Wojnarowicz repurposed these ‘family’ photographs of Hujar and other members of their community in order to legitimise the non-normative relationalities and socialities that made up their lived experiences. Wojnarowicz was in full knowledge of how photography works to entrench ‘familial myths while seeming merely to record actual moments in family history.’ This is a very strategic move on Wojnarowicz’s part, for despite the considerable involvement of gay lovers and friends in the care of seropositive men, the prevailing definition of ‘family’ in the 1980s nonetheless centred on genetic consanguinity. But as Michel Foucault wrote in ‘The Social Triumph of the Sexual Will,’ it is now more urgent than ever to challenge the highly limited set of relations which we find in our legal, social, and institutional worlds: ‘There is, of course, the relation of marriage, and the relations of family, but how

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106 ‘Through photographs, each family constructs a portrait-chronicle of itself – a portable kit of images that bears witness to its connectedness. … Photography becomes a rite of family life just when, in the industrializing countries of Europe and America, the very institution of the family starts undergoing radical surgery.’ Sontag, *On Photography*, 8-9.

many other relations should exist…!’ Furthermore, as Watney remarks, despite being at the heart of concern in British commentaries on HIV/AIDS, the family which the media invariably referred to was ‘not the families of more than 90 percent of people with AIDS, who are gay men or intravenous drug users’, but an ‘ideological unit… held to be threatened by the “leakage” of HIV infection’. That unit which Watney refers to is undoubtedly the heteronormative and able-bodied nuclear family.

As an artist whose thematic matter was dispersed and repeated over an assortment of textual forms, it is important to study the video footage that Wojnarowicz took of Hujar on his deathbed. This footage appears in two short films, ‘Mexico, etc… Peter, etc…’ and ‘Footage for Film about Peter Hujar.’ In ‘Mexico, etc… Peter, etc…’ the super8mm film that Wojnarowicz took of Hujar and which is described in Close to the Knives, is flanked by found footage of beluga whales. The transition from the serene image of these belugas swimming in clear, glistening water, to an extreme close-up shot of Hujar’s eye, is jarring. As we learn from Close to the Knives, Hujar’s eye (and by metonymic extension his subjectivity) still continues to exert a strange and frightening power over Wojnarowicz even in his dying state. Although we are led to believe that Hujar’s level of cognition has been greatly affected by the opportunistic infections triggered by AIDS, Wojnarowicz nonetheless regarded him as still being connected with the physical world through the imagined mobility of his vision:

110 Mexico, etc… Peter, etc… and Footage for Film about Peter Hujar, David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, 092.0201 and 092.0182. The titles of these items are curatorial descriptions.
111 ‘The orientation of Hujar’s face is totally different to the deathbed portrait (the head tilts downwards and to the left), which suggests that the film footage was taken at a time which preceded Hujar’s death. Furthermore, his eyes appear closed, whilst they seem to be half open in the postmortem images.'
I turn from the silence and the window and look at him and an iris appears beneath one half-lifted eyelid and its strength bores right through me. I turn away almost embarrassed having as much life in me as he hasn’t. The iris was the size of the room; it dwarfed the winter light filling the streets outside the window; it radiated across the heavy clouds with fifty thousand windows reflecting the blue of sky through it. (CK, 85)

Returning to the film, Hujar’s eye also arrests the audience in its scalar and morphological differentiation from the beluga whales. Colucci provides an interesting interpretation of this sequence in ‘Some Sort of Grace’, in which she advocates that with the comparison between the editing and movement of the beluga whales and the immobility of Hujar’s body following death, ‘a type of queer intimacy’ emerges.112 Utilising again Cvetkovich’s *Archive of Feelings*, Colucci claims that the queer intimacy generated between a non-seropositive carer (Wojnarowicz) and seropositive cared-for (Hujar) persists even after the latter’s death.113 This queer intimacy perpetuates through not only what Colucci sees as a ‘sensual focus on the body that appears in all of Wojnarowicz’s representations of Hujar’ (even those which are postmortem),114 but as I have noted through the incorporation of the conventions of Victorian mortuary portraiture which accord the deceased upmost respect and dignity. What Colucci nudges towards but does not explicitly say is how ‘the slow swimming of the beluga whales’ mirrors the careful but deliberate tracking shots of Hujar’s body, including his left hand, upper body, face, and feet, in a way that encourages a haptic ocularity and therefore intercorporeal

113 Queer intimacy is described as a relational bond between PWAs and their caretakers that challenges normative sexuality and upholds the idea of care as bidirectional and intersubjective. As Cvetkovich writes in *An Archive of Feelings*, ‘cumulatively, these AIDS caretaking memoirs add to queer representations of sexuality by finding eroticism and affect in physical acts that occupy a far wider range than genital sexuality, and in relationships that are just as intimate as those between families, lover, or friends.’ Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*, 237, 223, quoted in Colucci, ‘Some Sort of Grace’: 14.
moment between viewer and subject. For it is not, as Colucci states, ‘the power of [the] photograph’ that encourages a ‘queer intimacy through the tactile quality of Hujar’s skin’, but the camera movement tracing his body which acts as the extended hand of the viewer that in turn ‘reveal[s] a sensuality in these image of Hujar’s body, even in death.’

The footage Wojnarowicz compiled for his unfinished film on Hujar is a poignant reflection on the intimacy produced and sustained between these two artists. Although I discussed this unfinished film in my fifth chapter, I will briefly summarise my findings here in order to emphasise the profound intimacy shared between Wojnarowicz and Hujar both pre- and post- the latter’s death. Now living in Hujar’s apartment, Wojnarowicz sifted through progressively a number of portraits he took of Hujar before his death, as well as familiar images from Hujar’s oeuvre. The final section of the film comprised of stills is in fact the postmortem images of Hujar in the hospital. In the beginning section, we see a man, presumably Wojnarowicz, from behind, as he opens up a large photo album. A quick zoom by the camera centralises our attention on these photographs, which chronicle Hujar’s life from childhood to his death. Some of these portraits are highly intimate, emphasising the erotic form of Hujar’s body and conjuring sexual desire in the viewer; the viewer looks upon Hujar’s 1975 self-portrait, as he lies on his back with his chest naked, gazing seductively towards the camera. Wojnarowicz continues to turn these photographs, until we arrive at a tiny portrait of an adolescent boy, presumably Hujar. Wojnarowicz pauses to pick this image up, the camera zooming in to allow us to see the contact between the portrait and Wojnarowicz via his fingertips. Wojnarowicz then places the portrait down off-screen, in order to peruse a picture of a teenage boy attempting to get into a

115 Colucci, ‘Some Sort of Grace’: 16.
canoe. In the next image, we see Hujar laughing as he sits in the canoe in the lake. The following images are of Hujar as he transitions from his teenage years into early adulthood, and later, his emergence as a photographer and member of the downtown East Village artistic scene. What is fascinating about the earlier sections of this film is the camera’s focus on the materiality of these photographs, as well as the emotional intimacy that is sustained between Wojnarowicz and Hujar through their being physically handled. In Nicola Brown’s article, ‘Empty Hands and Precious Pictures,’ she argues that ‘the materiality of the post-mortem photograph, is central to its ability to console.’

Photographic objects, when they invite touch, mnemonically conjure the presence of the deceased in a way that facilitates the transition from mourning to acceptance. The intersubjective ‘reciprocity between the toucher and the touched’ is further evidenced in the way both Wojnarowicz’s hands, along with the tracking movement of the camera, encourage tactility; as they caress the image, the camera and the hands it mimics move ‘through time in a gesture of remembrance, invoking both the desire to touch the pictured person and the memory of doing so.’

Furthermore, the social aspect of photographs, in which they are handled, shared, and appended to various mediums, reinforces their affective potential, as a way of inviting discussion of the deceased by the living through the memories and past experiences which they evoke.

Consequently, Wojnarowicz’s unfinished films involving Hujar proves his belief that it was not only crucial to produce a counter-memorial of Hujar to the ones provided amongst mainstream media discourses, but as Murphy says, to resist the ‘levelling effect of death’ and the tendency for some survivors to suspend their mourning after an appropriate period of time has passed. Writing in his journal in

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1988 (no specific date), Wojnarowicz lamented how within his gay community survivors tended not to dwell upon the loss of a specific individual, in part because of the relentless surge of deaths caused by HIV/AIDS and its resultant fatigue and sense of habituation. ‘TOO MANY TIMES’, he states, ‘AFTER THE MMORIAL [sic] THEY RETURN HOME AND WAIT FOR THE NEXT PASSING, THE NEXT DEATH.’

In contrast, what Wojnarowicz regarded as being of ethically generosity to the deceased was to draw upon this private grief in order to trigger greater dialogue concerning the systemic discrimination against PWAs in his context: ‘ONE SIMPLE STEP CAN BRING IT OUT INTO A MORE PUBLIC SPACE.’ This confirms Connerton’s belief that self-knowledge is inextricably connected with the narratives and stories we share with others, wherein each account has significant repercussions for the generation of new counterpublics and ideologies. For ‘Every recollection, however personal… exists in relationship with a whole ensemble of notions which many others possess… that is to say with the whole material and moral life of the societies of which we are a part or of which we have been part.’

Prescient of how others may mourn him after he dies, and reflecting his view, like Crimp, that ‘mourning becomes militancy’ in a climate where positive action can be achieved through a collectivisation of grief, Wojnarowicz boldly wrote, ‘DON’T GIVE ME A MEMORIAL IF I DIE. GIVE ME A DEMONSTRATION.’

The postmortem photographs are an interesting strategy by Wojnarowicz in organising his own personal and social identity around HIV/AIDS and death, particularly when there was a push amongst activist organisations such as ACT UP, to construct positive images relating to the disease. Jan Zita Grover draws a distinction

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118 Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow of the American Dream*, 206.
119 Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow of the American Dream*, 206.
between intra-community and extra-community photographs of PWAs in the 1980s; prior to 1985, she argues that extra-community photographers, particularly journalists, produced the bulk of PWA representations, and in so doing were responsible for cultivating the symbolic equation of homosexuality with HIV/AIDS, and HIV/AIDS with dying and death. These overwhelmingly elegiac images of PWAs persisted ‘as late as 1986, [since] the average life expectancy of someone diagnosed with PCP was less than ten months.’ However, with the development of a serological test to detect HIV antibodies in 1985 and the approval in 1987 for the manufacture and use of AZT, the prevailing narrative of HIV/AIDS ‘went from an untreatable condition… to a disease often detectable years before it produced grave symptoms and observable physical changes.’ Such a change in patient trajectory helped to transform what was for many a personal identity and relation to HIV/AIDS into a politically informed and collectivised understandings of the illness-syndrome. The formation of a political identity relating to the diagnosis, treatment, and construction of HIV/AIDS assisted in critiquing and thereby undermining the ‘opportunistic identification’ of AIDS as synonymous with death. One of the most memorable targets of this initiative to dispel media representations of PWAs as on the verge of death and helplessly alone was Nicholas Nixon’s 1991 exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, People with AIDS. As Bethany Ogdon rightly remarks, the exhibition has been criticised ‘for what it says, and even more important, for what it doesn’t say about the person living with AIDS.’ Regardless of the good intentions of Nixon and his collaborator on the project, Bebe Nixon, the New York chapter of ACT UP argued that People with AIDS

125 Grover, ‘OI,’ 221.
did little to challenge rhetorically pre-existing assumptions of PWAs and the progression of the disease. In a letter protesting the exhibition, ACT UP claimed ‘In portraying PWAs as people to be pitied or feared, as people alone and lonely, we believe that this show perpetuates misconceptions about AIDS without addressing the realities of those of us living every day with this crisis as PWAs and people who love PWAs.’

Similarly, Wojnarowicz’s memoirs and writings demonstrate the divergence between the personal experience of PWAs and their representation by extra-community writers. In an interview conducted by Sylvère Lotringer, Wojnarowicz's description of PWAs contrasts sharply with those images seen in Nixon’s exhibition:

Right after my diagnosis, the things I appreciated for a period of time, about people who were dying from AIDS, was how courageous they were all the way up to the end, and all the words that connect to courage in people’s minds for those who are facing death. … Every time I experienced a friend’s death, or know of a friend’s illness and experienced part of it, I thought it was with great courage that they were living.

Although Crimp and Grover astutely argue that solely positive images of the PWA will invariably call up those representations that they seek to exclude, Wojnarowicz’s association of courage to ‘those who are facing death’ places us in a difficult position of reception when it is not the living PWA who is being represented in art but him/her in death. The New York chapter of ACT UP in their letter urged Nixon and others to supply images to the media of PWAs who are ‘vibrant, angry, loving, sexy, beautiful, acting up and fighting back.’ Their criticism of Nixon’s photographs of PWAs follows the same lines as those directed at social documentary photography, where

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127 ACT UP letter, quoted in Grover, ‘OI,’ 220.
128 Wojnarowicz, ‘Sylvère Lotringer/David Wojnarowicz,’ in A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side, 177.
129 ACT UP letter, quoted in Grover, ‘OI,’ 221.
representation of the subject, never a neutral process, invariably objectifies them in order to remain faithful to an overarching reformist agenda.

Allan Sekula comments on ‘the folklore of photographic truth’ in ‘Dismantling Modernism, Reinventing Documentary (Notes on the Politics of Representation).’ In his article, Sekula argues that documentary photography has been read in two distinct ways: as a thoroughly objective and ‘factual’ presentation of information, devoid of intervention by the photographer, or a bravura display of the photographer’s artistic ‘genius’. For Sekula, whether ‘the hermeneutic pendulum careens from the objectivist end of its arc to the opposite, subjectivist end’ will depend upon the context in which the photograph is received. When documentary photography remains in the contexts of media and journalism, its rhetorical power ‘reside[s] in the unequivocal character of the camera’s evidence, in an essential realism’. Whatever is photographed and appears before the eyes of the viewer is therefore regarded as a reproduction of the world itself: the camera becomes an ‘engine of fact, the generator of a duplicate world of fetishized appearances, independently of human practice.’ This serves to conceal Sekula’s interpretation of the photograph as always emerging through the interaction of social and historical relations; photographs ‘become repositories of dead facts, [are] reified [objects]’ if we disregard the discourses that anchor their production and dissemination. Conversely, when photographs are displayed as ‘art,’ the primary lens by which they are read is aesthetic; they become torn from their social relations, to the detriment of

131 Grover acridly writes, ‘we are in the land here of photographs-as-mirrors-of-the-artist’s-soul.’
133 Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism’: 862.
134 Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism’: 862-863.
the subjects who are transformed into archetypes of humanity and to the benefit of
the photographer who is constructed as a creative ‘master’:

Suddenly, the audience’s attention is directed toward mannerism, toward sensibility, toward the physical and emotional risks taken by
the artist. Documentary is thought to be art when it transcends its
reference to the world, when the work can be regarded, first and foremost, as an act of self-expression on the part of the artist. To use
Roman Jakobson’s categories, the referential function collapses into
the expressive function.

Sekula goes on to argue that when the social conditions around production are
removed, photographs become ahistorical, thereby neutralising their political
significance or ability to effect positive change within the community. Like Sontag,
Sekula is critical of Arbus’ work for this very reason: once the focus shifts from the
humanity of the subjects to that of the artist, the former are transformed into reified
objects: privileging the genius of the photographer has as its corollary ‘a certain
disdain for the “ordinary” humanity of those who have been photographed. They
become the “other,” exotic creatures, objects of contemplation.’

In having as his
focus people with HIV/AIDS, one can certainly see how Nixon’s photographs may
run the risk of transforming his subjects into more than just ‘objects of contemplation’; with the intersection of homosexuality and HIV/AIDS, his subjects
may be perceived as doubly deviant in their harbouring of a physical disease widely
regarded as moral retribution. Conversely, Nixon’s images may unwittingly
conform to a set of bodily codes and performances used in the early images of

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136 In this as in previous chapters of his work, Nixon cuts through to the common humanity revealed
by individual human beings.’ Abigail Foerstner, “People with AIDS”, An Essay on Human Frailty
137 Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism’: 864.
139 Susan Sontag notes that having a disease is to have a ‘punishment that fits the objective moral
character’ of the individual. Susan Sontag, Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors (New
individuals with HIV/AIDS in biomedical journals and the mainstream press, which as noted earlier have been criticised by ACT UP, Grover, and Crimp for portraying them as objects of pity and fear.

Nixon’s riposte to such criticism from ACT UP revolved around the issue of consent; since he obtained consent from his subjects to be photographed, Nixon could not, in his eyes, be doing any possible damage to them in their supposed knowledge of the manner in which such images would be used. But of course, the meaning of a photograph does not remain fixed from the time of its taking to its reception by a viewing audience. Furthermore, consent to be photographed is not the same as consent for its use and reduplication. In her article, ‘Access and Consent in Public Photography,’ Lisa Henderson explains the usual terms of contract between the photographer and his/her subject. The article notes how the interactional strategies typically employed by photographers to gain consent and in turn access to an image, are not normally framed around the issue of their use. Indeed, ‘While photographic encounters imply both issues, consent strategies are framed in terms of what photographers do to sustain access (and in some cases co-operation) long enough to get the pictures they want, in other words, consent to take.’

It is not usually part of the photographer’s strategy to obtain consent to use from their subjects, insofar as all that is normally required is ‘an explanation of one’s conduct as might be required to sustain access, in some cases for moments, in others for months.’

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141 Henderson, ‘Access and Consent,’ 276. Of course, legal issues may arise in the event that the photographs taken are deemed an invasion of the subject’s privacy. Invasion of privacy is considered as the ‘non-consensual publication of a photograph for purposes of advertising or trade.’ According to the United States First Amendment, news photography and artistic exhibitions are exempt from issues relating to the invasion of privacy. It only becomes a legal concern when the photographs are sold for commercial use. Nonetheless, as Henderson claims, ‘it is rarely an issue [among professional photographers] because their photographs are used for technically “editorial” purposes (in the case of news, documentary, and artistic publication). Moreover, those photographers who have thought about
emerges is a distinction between consent to take and consent to use, where the ‘practical emphasis is on getting the picture,’ and subsequent to this, ethical consideration or whether or not to publish the resulting image.142 As such, consent paradoxically does not equate to acceptance by the subject of the resulting portrait or what semantic or ideological purpose it is meant to serve. Indeed, the self-described ‘consensual’ relationship between Nixon and his subjects – ‘these people embraced us’143 – further entrenched the image of the PWA as powerlessly acquiescing to the accelerating evacuation of emotion and subjectivity from the body as illness and disease spread through it. In their foreword to the book version of People with AIDS, Nixon and Nixon write that all of the subjects not only ‘joined our effort’, but heralded the project in trusting the authors to ‘bear witness to their dread and suffering, to their courage and joy, to the immense love in some of their lives, and, too often, to their terrible loneliness.’144 Yet quoting Sturken, ‘these photographs convey not growing trust but rather the subject’s increased abandonment of self.’145 At a cursory glance, Nixon’s photographic subjects do appear to cede discursive control over their phenomenological and corporeal identities, and in turn have become objectified by the camera to the point of dehumanisation.146

144 Nixon, People with AIDS, 2.
145 Sturken, Tangled Memories, 130.
146 Peter Galassi, in his introduction to the MOMA catalogue for People with AIDS, refers to the relationship cultivated between Nixon and his subjects as ‘collaborative’. See Ogdon on this issue: ‘Galassi suggests that the “collaboration between subject and photographer” that is, for him, evident in every photographic portrait is enhanced in Nixon’s PWA work because there the portraits are serialized incrementally over an extended period of time, in which the severely ill subject becomes less and less able to compose himself as the image he desires to be for the photographer, the camera, and the public. Galassi turns to Nixon to corroborate his claim: “Nixon has said that most of the people with AIDS he has photographed are, perhaps because stripped of so many of their hopes, less masked than others, more open to collaboration” … Perhaps Nixon’s PWA subjects are “stripped of their hopes,” perhaps not.’ Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’: 88.
At this point it may be useful to draw a distinction, both in terms of reception and signification, between the two forms in which *People with AIDS* has appeared. In so doing, I will show that it is far easier to dismiss Nixon’s project on the basis of its presentation as a ‘Work in Progress’ than when we assess it on the merits of its dissemination as a book. In her brilliant analysis, Bethany Ogdon parries Charles Hagen’s review of ‘People with AIDS’ as a thoroughly compassionate tribute to its subjects. We are told by Hagen that Nixon ‘insists on the individuality of the people he depicts’, and through cataloguing their lives in minutiae, ‘we can recognize the terrible truth of their suffering.’ Like Nixon’s own remarks upon the consensual transaction between him and his subjects, in which ‘he had the courage to see and accept [their permission]’ and ‘they had the courage to grant [it]’, the ethical imperative underpinning the exhibition is to draw an empathic bond between the viewer and subjects, based on the latters’ ‘terrible… suffering’. Yet Ogdon states rightly that the narrative construed by Hagen ‘has more to do with what Hagen wants to believe about Nixon than anything represented within the photographer’s frame’. What is ultimately privileged in Hagen’s and other likeminded reviews is an image of the unassailable and heroic artist, who places him/herself in the field of danger to gratify the viewer’s fascination toward a subject. As Grover claims about Nixon and Debra Solomon’s work on PWAs, ‘they make it sound as if they were stalking rare animals at great emotional cost to themselves. The photographs then become the evidence of their bravery.’ Like the charges which are often laid against the genre of photojournalism, ‘People with AIDS’ would seem to exploit its subjects by

148 Hagen, quoted in Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’: 77.
149 Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’: 77.
150 Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’: 77.
transforming them into icons of suffering even in its attempt to depict, with ‘so much
candor and so little cant’ the ordinariness of their lives. One must also consider what
affects are elicited upon viewing these images. Do they arouse sympathy within the
viewer, curiosity, or something more sinister such as disgust and/or horror? Although
written in relation to photographs of torture and mass genocide, we might wish to ask
the same questions which Sontag posed in her stirring monograph, Regarding the
Pain of Others. Concerning the images of Nixon’s subjects, who are often
photographed on the verge of or following death,

What is the point of exhibiting these pictures? To awaken
indignation? To make us feel “bad”; that is, to appall and sadden? To
help us mourn? … Are we the better for seeing these images? Do they
actually teach us anything? Don’t they rather just confirm what we
already know (or what to know)?

In response to these questions, we can hypothetically assume that Ogdon, along with
Crimp and Grover, would argue that these images merely reiterate negative public
assumptions about the PWA. For Ogdon asserts that Nixon’s specific technical and
compositional methods obliterate the individuality of his subjects. Indeed, the 8 x 10
view camera ‘voids the subject of the very animation that expresses its desire’ and
therefore transforms him/her into a reified object. Drawing upon the Deleuzian
model of facification, Ogdon edges towards the idea that Nixon’s photographs petrify
his antemortem subjects to the point where they are interchangeable with postmortem
selves: they reduce the subjects to ‘pale, frozen, lifeless immobility’.

For Ogdon, the foreshortened view that is produced by Nixon’s use of an 8 x
10 view camera is chiefly responsible for the evacuation of his subjects’ animation

and ipseity. Unlike other cameras, an 8 x 10 view camera involves a different tactility and physicality than smaller cameras; rather than being held up to the photographer’s eye,

the photographer must disappear beneath a cloth drape to focus an individual shot through the ground glass at the back of the camera, before sliding a casing containing a single sheet of film in front of the glass. After this, the photographer can no longer see through the camera to the subject positioned on the other side. To trigger the shutter with a hand-held device, the photographer must emerge from under the drape and stand or sit apart from the camera.\footnote{Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’: 80.}

This is a most unusual and awkward scenario for a subject unaccustomed to the unique mechanics of an 8 x 10 camera. When the shot is taken with this device, the subject does not look directly at the photographer’s eye as seen through a machine held in his/her hands; rather, the subject stares at the camera itself. This can be highly unsettling for some given its impersonal approach, since the ‘photographic subject’s gaze doesn’t meet the viewer’s’.\footnote{Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’: 81.} Given the non-convergence of the subject and viewer’s gaze, Nixon’s photographs may heighten the already invasive and voyeuristic tendencies of photography.\footnote{‘There is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera.’ Sontag, \textit{On Photography}, 7. ‘To photograph people is to violate them; by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them that they can never have, it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed.’ \textit{On Photography}, 14. See also \textit{Regarding the Pain of Others}, 72: ‘Photographs objectify: they turn an event or a person into something that can be possessed.’} Furthermore, the ‘smooth, glossy surface’ of the camera eye, uncannily reminding us of the compound eye of the hymenoptera, may further remove from the process a sense of the photographer’s ‘human touch’, whether regarded as sensitivity or ethical consideration toward the subject.\footnote{Ogdon makes a similar complaint to Sekula about the ahistorical and politically neutralised position of photographs when they are removed from their social relations: ‘Nixon’s PWA photographs are devoid of social context [and so] they render their subjects as cut off from the intersubjective world, as already dead and gone.’ Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’: 82.}
Although difficult to replicate the original conditions in which the photographs were viewed (that is, as 8 x 10 reproductions), we nonetheless need to turn our attention to *People with AIDS* in order to assess whether Nixon’s subjects are ‘stripped of their individuating, socializing, and relational powers’ in being ‘facified’.\(^{159}\) Deleuze argues that close-up shots ‘facify’ the subject; by removing from the frame all spatio-temporal markers that would contextualise the subject for the viewer, the photographer effectively de-animates or immobilises him/her to the point of inertia.\(^{160}\) Rather than ‘immobilising’ him and therefore stripping him of individuating and relational powers, the images of Tom Petchkiss, the first subject of *People with AIDS*, present him as a vibrant being with whom we empathise, shifting the focus entirely from his phenomenological and ontological responses to illness and dying. I argue that this is because in these portraits of Petchkiss, Nixon contests the conventional depiction of PWAs as ‘a source of contamination and sexual deviancy… primarily in the form of starkly lit photographs portraying signs of the disease: lesions, wasting limbs, loss of hair.’\(^{161}\) In fact, these images would seem to suggest the very opposite: in the first close-up portrait of Petchkiss, taken in Arlington, Massachusetts in July 1987 (Figure 36), we see a physically strong and handsome young man staring confidently towards the camera, his bare chest and closely-shaven face betraying no signs of illness. The complementary portraits of Petchkiss in August (Figure 37) and September (Figure 38) of the same year, in which Petchkiss is viewed lying down on a bed from the same orientation, are shot at an uncomfortably close range using the ungainly 8 x 10 camera. Surprisingly, Nixon’s subject is perfectly relaxed in the September image, caught in mid-motion as he runs his fingers

\(^{159}\) Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’: 88.


\(^{161}\) Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 152.
through his hair and breathing with the aid of a nasal cannula. Although the August and September close-up shots abstract Petchkiss from his surrounding environment, I would suggest that Nixon has made this compositional choice for his subject’s benefit. By removing any and all information that could function as an index of HIV/AIDS and/or Petchkiss’ homosexuality, Nixon has resisted the impulse to codify him as a PWA, which as Sturken mentions draws upon visual conventions such as ‘wasting limbs’ and ‘lesions’. Certainly, such a manoeuvre is ideologically dangerous, since it depoliticises these images and thus fails to register the unique nexus of religious, biomedical and cultural ideologies that have affected the treatment of and meanings associated with HIV/AIDS.  

This depoliticisation is, for Grover, the most ethically irresponsible aspect of Nixon’s *People with AIDS*. In her highly informative text, ‘Visible Lesions: Images of the PWA,’ Grover takes to task how Nixon and his reviewers remove the historical specificity of these images in order that they reflect the ‘timeless realities’ of the human condition. In abstracting these subjects, the immediate effect is to create a disingenuous affective connection between the viewer and subject based on a shared sense of humanity. What subsequently occurs is that the sociopolitical ramifications of dying from HIV/AIDS are transmuted into a general comment about human mortality, which thereby elides the very concrete differences between the subject and the viewer and triggers in the latter a narcissistic moment of identification. ‘Formulations like “each of us [is] dying, too” function not to console the dying (they don’t) or to acknowledge their difference but rather to cancel it out, to deny it. … [They] emphasize the similarities between PWAs and us at a time when the differences have serious consequences for

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162 And this is precisely what Nixon and Nixon aim to do: ‘For each, in his or her own private way, participation in the project was an act of profound political significance.’ Nixon, *People with AIDS*, viii.

the lives of the people in question.’ Abigail Foerstner is wont to dismiss these differences; in her review of ‘People with AIDS,’ she comments upon the ‘common humanity [which]… compell[s] the viewer to acknowledge that people with AIDS are no different than other people, except that they are terminally ill.’ Yet being diagnosed with a debilitating syndrome, and a disease which had within the context of 1980s America a moral connotation, would surely make PWAs feel they are ‘different’ to other people in more ways than one. Nonetheless, I would be inclined to think that the removal of Petchkiss from any or all environments that would codify him as a PWA safeguards him from potential stigmatisation by the viewer, for without the paratextual apparatus of Petchkiss’ interview with Bebe Nixon, as well as the perfunctory note that acts as an obituary – ‘Tom Petchkiss died six weeks later, on October 12, 1987, at New England Deaconness Hospital. He was thirty-one years old.’ – we could easily see Petchkiss as experiencing a temporary ailment or in the process of recovery. Because Petchkiss is never depicted in a state of extreme physical deprivation, unlike Nixon’s other subjects, these photographs have a positive valence, where we are likely to notice him not on the basis of his illness but his uncommon physical beauty. Thus, the ambiguity which arises through the use of the close-up, rather than ‘facifying’ Petchkiss, in fact piques the viewer’s attention and compels us to learn more, not less, about his experiences and memories.

165 Foerstner, “‘People with AIDS’,” 89. One of the most concerning aspects of Foerstner’s review of People with AIDS is her failure (or refusal) to supply the proper names of Nixon’s subjects when discussing the various portraits. As what signifies as a shorthand for the subject’s identity and ipseity, the proper name individuates Nixon’s subjects and complicates depersonalization into into a generic type. But perhaps naming them would ultimately undermine Foerstner’s thesis. Consider her description of the portrait, Ginny and Bob Sappenfield, Boston, October 1988: ‘In one photograph, an AIDS patient sinks sideways in a hospital bed surrounded by stark, high-tech gadgetry that remains inadequate against his illness. In a later picture, he clings to life on oxygen, clutching his mother’s hand despite his obvious weakness.’
166 Nixon, People with AIDS, 2.
Figure 36: Tom Petchkiss, Arlington, Massachusetts, July 1987
Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10 inches

Figure 37: Tom Petchkiss, Arlington, Massachusetts, August 1987
Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10 inches
However, when concentrating on the series of photographs of Tom Moran and Donald Perham, the viewer reaches an impasse on the political value of *People with AIDS*: Nixon has suddenly lapsed into the ‘instinct for the sensational’. Whatever work that the Petchkiss portraits have done to counter pejorative assumptions about PWAs has been undone by these images, by making Moran and Perham assume bodily positions that typecast them as ‘the bald and wasted AIDS patient with the feverish, haggard look, lying in his hospital bed (preferably with a few tubes up his nose)’. Grover’s damning assessment of these images revolves around their irrelevance and inadequacy. *People with AIDS* does nothing to contribute to the dialogue which the increasingly politicised and militant gay community has developed in response to the AIDS crisis. Nixon’s images do not challenge ‘the existing conventions that have led

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PWAs being shunned, snubbed, hurt'.\textsuperscript{168} This is clearly the case if we take a look at the September 1987 (Figure 39) and January 1988 portraits of Tom Moran (Figure 40). The composition and high key lighting of the September image I regard as an outrageous aestheticisation of Moran’s illness, which keenly displays the deftness of Nixon’s photographic touch at the cost of humanising his subject. This September portrait brilliantly confirms the idea that many of the photographs are a statement about Nixon’s artistic sensibility rather than about his particular subjects. We view Moran from behind, in which a medium shot is used to depict him gazing toward a light-filled window, his thin arm (a result of muscular dystrophy) outstretched as if to touch the sun’s rays. Given the position of the sun, it is indeed odd the patch of light that settles on the top area of Moran’s back, until we realise the ulterior motive with which it is featured. The placement of light here emphasises Moran’s skeletal frame, a body under duress even if other indicators of HIV/AIDS are so far unapparent. The paleness of his skin and the blank and vast expense of his back only focalise our gaze even more on the visibility of these vertebrae. Given Nixon’s repeated claims to depict his subjects in multifarious ways, by showing their ‘bravery and cowardice and style and weakness’ as much as their ‘terrible suffering’, the viewer might wonder why it is necessary to include an image of Perham in a strikingly similar pose to Moran, that is, naked from the waist up with his back turned to the camera in order to focus on his emaciated body. Nixon is dangerously replicating the visual stereotype of the PWA as ‘all skin and bones’ in this July 1988 image of Perham (Figure 45).\textsuperscript{169}

\textsuperscript{168} Grover, ‘Visible Lesions’: 14.

\textsuperscript{169} Nixon includes another image of Perham that emphasises the gauntness of his frame. Dated May 1988, this portrait of Perham seated in profile in Milford, New Hampshire, again conjures the assumption of the PWA as a physically vulnerable and pitiful being. The viewer has to wonder about Nixon’s sense of propriety and ethics in photographing his subjects consistently in a state where they are half-clothed. Whilst perhaps appropriate or even expected in a hospice setting, Perham is here in a domestic home and in fact, seated at the dining table. Dining etiquette stipulates a certain dress code when communing with others, and Perham seems to be aware of this, as his worried and uncomfortable
That both Moran and Perham do not meet the gaze of the viewer head on further desubjectivises them. Particularly in the case of Moran, it is as if he is resigned to his death, that an essential kernel of his being has been dispersed into the ether via the window in the background. The outstretched hand, its edges made undefined by the daylight, is Nixon’s ventriloquising of Moran, as if to say through his body to death: *I am ready, take me now.*

The January portrait of 1988 sees Moran deteriorate even further. Sitting down on a vibrantly patterned sofa, the viewer infers Moran’s dramatic loss in body weight since September 1987. His dressing gown, covering his pajamas, seems at least two sizes too large for his current body. In this image, Moran stares at the camera to the viewer, yet he appears closed, guarded, and as if unwelcoming of or resistant towards an intersubjective colloquy. Once again, Nixon has manipulated the composition of the image to heighten the differences between Moran as a PWA and the rest of ‘us’, seen as individuals whose experientiality and individuation are exuded in our bodily vitality. That Moran is always pictured in a state of rest rather than movement is crucial, for it further sediments the image of the PWA as lifelessly inert.

Whilst images such as *Catherine and Tom Moran, East Braintree, Massachusetts, August 1987* (Figure 43) and *Nathaniel and Donald Perham, Milford, New Hampshire, January 1988* (Figure 44), do in fact frustrate the image of the PWA as

expression demonstrates. Yet Nixon is prepared to get his picture whatever it takes, even if it requires him to prod his subjects to disclose their physical illness in settings inappropriate or unfamiliar to such a genre.

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170 This interpretation is confirmed by Foerstner’s summation of the portrait. Grover has commented on Nixon’s ‘high renaissance’ style in *People with AIDS*, where his tendency to use high key lighting and to place his subjects near windows emphasise their fragility and vulnerability. Foerstner writes of this image, ‘The man in the photograph reaches out to a window, his hand skeletal yet translucent and suggesting that he has touched a hidden border between life and death.’ By describing Moran as having ‘touched a hidden border between life and death’ is tantamount to saying that Moran is not entirely of the physical world any more, that an essential part of him has been evacuated from his body, and that ultimately, the dying possess a preternatural insight into what is un(fo)reseeable by ‘healthy’ and ‘robust’ individuals. Foerstner, “‘People with AIDS”: an essay on human fragility and dignity,” 89.
cut off from interpersonal connection to their credit, none of the images reflect the ‘complicated history of PWAs’ attempts to name themselves, to assert their rights’.\textsuperscript{171} As such, Nixon has missed out on a vital opportunity to educate the audience on the important roles his subjects have played in the AIDS Action Committee of Boston, the location where Nixon enlisted their participation.

*Tom Moran, Boston, January 1988* (Figure 41) is compositionally analogous to Victorian mortuary portraiture, yet Nixon, unlike Wojnarowicz, does little to instill dignity in and respect for his subject in his extreme illness. Were Nixon to end the series at this point and were we unaware of Moran’s death on 8 February, 1988, we would not be mistaken in assuming this to be a postmortem portrait.\textsuperscript{172} Two styles converge in this image: with the artifice of lighting, Nixon references Victorian postmortem images that portray the ‘good’ Christian death,\textsuperscript{173} inferring Moran’s welcoming into the hands of God, whilst the foreshortened view of his body lying on a hospital bed denotes the position typically favoured in ‘last sleep’ images. Diverting our attention quickly to the posthumous mourning painting *The Last Sleep* by George Lambdin (Figure 42), we can see how constructed this image of Moran really is, in its pilfering of many elements of this photographic tradition. The grandfather clock displayed in the background centre of the portrait is explicit in its symbolism: Moran’s death is untimely, his life cut short by a ravaging illness. The

\textsuperscript{171} Grover, ‘Visible Lesions’: 15.
\textsuperscript{172} The trajectory of these images is predictable. Each series is ordered temporally to depict the subject at his/her healthiest state at the beginning, only to meet his/her demise in the concluding portrait. As Watney writes, ‘The photographic narration of AIDS reinforces the before-and-after conventions of traditional medical photography with the before-and-after conventions of standard photojournalistic practice. An emphasis is all but invariably placed on the question of fatality.’ Watney, ‘Photography and AIDS,’ 181.
\textsuperscript{173} … the light from the window has the clear symbolic meaning of “light from heaven”. … A famous example is William Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience* (1853, London: Tate Britain), and a similar window also appears in John Everett Millais’ *The Artist Attending the Mourning of a Young Girl*…, in which Millais shows himself being commissioned to draw a post-mortem portrait. In this painting, the window appears in the top right hand corner of the picture, behind the girl’s head, and clearly suggests her heavenly destination.’ Brown, ‘Empty Hands and Precious Pictures’: 11.
other ‘props’ utilised in the portrait – a chair, plant, piano, and the ubiquitous window – are fairly standardised objects which commercial photographers in the mid-nineteenth century drew upon, in their focus on representing the likeness rather than personality of their sitters.\textsuperscript{174} Yet, the standardisation of these ‘props’ used in Moran’s portrait is also indicative of the setting, that is, Lemdel Hospital, as noted on his patient uniform. Nonetheless, this only increases, rather than diminishes, the viewer’s unsettledness towards the image, for the portrait emphasises above all PWAs as being on the verge of death, as so debilitated and enervated as to be substitutable for their deceased counterparts.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Tom Moran, East Braintree, Massachusetts, September 1987
Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10 inches}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{174} ‘The setting [often purchased by the photographer] revealed little personal about the sitter. Seldom does there appear to be any attempt to convey some unique characteristic of the sitter, i.e., to portray, rather than merely represent.’ Ruby, Secure the Shadow, 61.
Figure 40: Tom Moran, East Braintree, Massachusetts, January 1988
Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10 inches

Figure 41: Tom Moran, Boston, January 1988
Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10 inches
Figure 42: George Lambdin, The Last Sleep, 1859
Oil on canvas, 40 x 54 ¾ inches

Figure 43: Catherine and Tom Moran, East Braintree, Massachusetts, August 1987
Black-and-white photograph, 8 x 10 inches
The book version of *People with AIDS*, produced in 1991, expanded upon Nixon’s earlier work, *People with AIDS: Excerpt from Work in Progress*, which was included in his retrospective at MOMA in 1988. Initially, *Work in Progress* was a
series of portraits of the one subject, Tom Moran. Following the success of this exhibit, Nixon expanded his project to include a series of people with HIV/AIDS, along with a prefatory essay written by Bebe Nixon and interviews conducted by her with their subjects.\textsuperscript{175} Sekula notes that one way to counter the ahistorical mystification of documentary photographs is to establish a metacritical relation to the genre. One way of doing so is to include text to ‘anchor, contradict, reinforce, subvert, complement, particularize, or go beyond the meanings offered by the images themselves.’\textsuperscript{176} With the inclusion of interviews and captions, Nixon and Nixon (inadvertently) create tension between the ways in which they perceive their subjects and how such subjects actually view their own illness and dying. Whilst there is no denying that Nixon and Nixon ultimately had editorial control over what aspects of the interviews were included or dispensed with in their book, the interviews nonetheless, as Sekula writes, ‘allow for a kind of self-authorship… Speech allows for critical reflection, for complaints, for the unfolding of personal histories, for the voicing of fears and hopes.’\textsuperscript{177}

Let us consider the foreword of \textit{People with AIDS}. From the outset, Nixon and Nixon made clear the scope of the book: ‘very little of it is about their everyday lives. Most of it is about their sickness, their dying and their deaths.’\textsuperscript{178} Having limited their focus to the trajectory of illness, the authors position the text as presenting a realistic depiction of living and dying with HIV/AIDS. Commenting on the ‘bravery and cowardice and style and weakness’ of their subjects, their dying and deaths are upheld as an antidote to the pretence and drama of suffering characters routinely found in literature – ‘Those lives and deaths are imaginary. These are real’

\textsuperscript{175} Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’: 76.
\textsuperscript{176} Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism’: 866.
\textsuperscript{177} Sekula, ‘Dismantling Modernism’: 882.
\textsuperscript{178} Nixon, \textit{People with AIDS}, viii. All subsequent references will be in text and cited \textit{PA}. 
Yet at the same time Nixon and Nixon attempted to highlight the ordinariness of their subjects, they nonetheless made them stand apart from the viewer by inferring that their illness was the defining factor of their identity. They may have once been ordinary, but with diagnosis comes an intensification of their impending mortality:

Before they became ill, their lives were much like other lives: complicated and unfocused and disappointing, productive and satisfying and full of promise. These individuals were as burdened with trivia and blessed with delight, as vulnerable to ill temper and laughter, as predictable and mysterious as anyone else. But each of them contracted AIDS, a disease that introduced them to illness and death far earlier than they expected. (PA, vii)

One wonders why these subjects’ lives, upon their diagnosis, cannot remain ‘full of promise’ and ‘blessed with delight’, as much as why an individual dying of HIV/AIDS has privileged and exclusive knowledge of (non)existence where for others it remains ‘as predictable and mysterious’ as it has ever been. Given that death can also be abrupt and unexpected, as well as protracted and inevitable, one also cannot see why these individuals have been ‘introduced… to illness and death far earlier than they expected.’ As social beings, one can assume that individuals have been accustomed to dying and death through others, even if they have not experienced them firsthand. Ultimately, then, Nixon and Nixon’s foreword establishes the idea of a harmonious and collaborative relationship between them and their subjects: having consented to be photographed is akin to having accepted the ideological and ethical implications of the project. Nixon and Nixon’s subjects effectively knew what they were getting into, thereby protecting the authors from any potential charges of ethical irresponsibility or misrepresentation: ‘So these fifteen people knew, too, that what we were trying to do was impossible: to record the illness and the dying of ordinary
people with so much candor and so little cant that even total strangers might be
moved’ (PA, vii).

Have Nixon and Nixon achieved what they have set out to do? In his book
review of People with AIDS, Robert Atkins is critical of the recontextualisation of the
images with the addition of text by Bebe Nixon, including interviews conducted with
the subjects photographed. Although such text goes some way in ‘enlarg[ing] the
emotional and intellectual range of the image’ and underlining ‘the insufficiency of
any documentary photograph to grapple with the complexity of AIDS’, the book also
fails to make a connection between the subjects’ diagnosis and public health measures
and initiatives to halt the spread of the disease.\footnote{179} What is also lacking is any
information regarding safer sex measures or biases in the existing biomedical
literature which paints intravenous drug users, Americans of colour, and gay men as
the only groups at risk of infection.\footnote{180} Atkins writes,

Unhappily, it [People with AIDS]… misses crucial opportunities to
educate its readers.

In her introductory notes about PWA Linda Black, for
instance, Bebe describes the difficulties black doctors had diagnosing
her condition. Why not a mention of the Centers for Disease
Control’s sexist definition of AIDS that excludes so many women like
Black? Or a list of simple things people can do to support PWAs and
combat AIDS phobia? No reader is likely to remain unmoved [by the
subjects’ stories]… But being moved is not enough. Hopefully this
affecting book will help spur long-overdue action.\footnote{181}

Atkins makes an interesting point that the photographs fail to trigger action in the

\footnote{180} This might be because although there were a variety of subjects chosen for People with AIDS,
including female and male, and straight and gay subjects from different ethnic backgrounds, ‘the group
did not represent a random cross-section of people with AIDS.’ Although all members of the AIDS
Action Committee in Boston, Nixon’s project ‘implicitly and quite stereotypically assert[s] cultural
“deviancy” and libidinal “excess” with AIDS’, since the four women chosen for the study all had
histories involving drug abuse, sexual violence and/or exploitation. Ogdon, ‘Through the Image’:
endnote 2, 101-102.
\footnote{181} Atkins, ‘Moving Pictures’, 85.
viewer, going no further than producing sympathy for Nixon and Nixon’s subjects even though HIV/AIDS ‘is the most devastating and important social and medical issue of our time’ (PA, vii). Nonetheless, I have been inclined to criticise *People with AIDS* so far on the basis that the images, more than anything else, project the stereotypical fantasies and prejudices of HIV/AIDS that exist in the cultural imaginary. The attempt by Nixon and Nixon to produce a master narrative about illness and dying through the photographs and foreword is undermined by the interviews reproduced in part or full within the book, which rigorously challenge the image of the PWA as being devoid of sexual desire or desirability, as a moral deviant,\(^{182}\) and/or on the brink of physical expiration.

Take, for instance, the testimony of Tom Petchkiss. As the first subject of *People with AIDS*, Petchkiss strikes us as a curious choice given the authors’ overtly morbid determination to document their subjects’ ‘sickness, their dying, and their deaths’ (PA, vii). We learn from Petchkiss’ testimony reproduced by Bebe Nixon that unlike other PWAs, he has so far escaped stigmatisation and continues to be an object of sexual desire for both heterosexual women and homosexual men. Perhaps his physical vitality and continuing good looks are in fact a blessing in the media-saturated environment of the 1980s that was intent on representing the PWA otherwise. He frankly remarks that he ‘still look[s] pretty good. Not like your typical AIDS patient, anyway’ (PA, 2). We even infer a sense of pride and relief in being able to pass visually as a ‘healthy’ individual, a young man whose sexual power continues to *stop* traffic because it manages to contain the secret of his seropositivity:

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\(^{182}\) The figure with AIDS, like the syphilitic and the leper, represents the capacity to infect the *morals* of the greater population. In the United States, this image is irrevocably tied to the fact that gay men constituted the first visible group of people dying with AIDS. . . . That AIDS was first called GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency) underscores its initial and powerful association with gay men and their sexual habits and attitudes, in particular the embrace by some of promiscuity as sexual freedom. Thus, the person contaminated with AIDS was marked by association with the figure of the narcissistic and reckless gay man.’ Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 150.
I’m gay, but that’s never stopped women from being attracted to me. There was one day, a few summers ago, when I was walking down the street, and I came close to causing two accidents. Both drivers, one a man, the other a woman, were looking at me and not at the road. It really happened. (PA, 2)

Yet placing Petchkiss’ testimony and his photographs side by side creates a tension between their competing registers and semiotics, and in turn undermines Nixon’s prevailing intention to represent HIV/AIDS as a disease which has ‘rendered [his subjects]… powerless over their lives’ in every way (PA, viii). The finality of these photographs’ trajectory and ideologies are mitigated somewhat by such resoundingly hopeful responses to diagnosis and treatment. As Petchkiss said later on, ‘Having AIDS has reprioritised my life. Things matter now that didn’t use to’ (PA, 2). Such statements suggest an invaluable turning point within one’s illness narrative, in which the fundamentally shocking event of diagnosis can spark productive self-reflection rather than self-pity and surrender. Nonetheless, Bebe Nixon’s reframing of Petchkiss’ testimony through the inclusion of an obituary note, as well as the editorial choice to end such positive statements on their bitter obverse (‘I feel cheated. I feel betrayed [by the disease].’), demonstrates her attempt to control the manner in which her and Nixon’s subjects are perceived by the viewer. As they stated within their foreword, HIV/AIDS has introduced their subjects ‘to illness and death far earlier than they expected’ (PA, vii). When we note Petchkiss’ last words, ‘I will die… “Before my time,” isn’t that what they say?’ (PA, 2), it is blisteringly apparent the extent to which Nixon and Nixon have repurposed and orchestrated their subjects’ narratives to chime with their own prejudices concerning HIV/AIDS.

In view of some of the ethically deplorable portraits made of Tom Moran, it will also prove useful to study the text accompanying them. Moran’s testimony ultimately presents his diagnosis with HIV/AIDS as adding to, not subtracting from,
the quality of his foreshortened life, an interpretation that runs afoul of the meanings imbued in the photographs. We come to an understanding that HIV/AIDS triggered a variety of emotions and responses far removed from blanket denial and rage: Moran acknowledges the support of his family, particularly his mother, Catherine, who became his primary carer. He comments on the continued loyalty of his friends, who have not deserted him following diagnosis, unlike his former fiancée. Moran also makes a cursory mention of the shame experienced in being a recipient of public welfare; as part of Reagan’s Safety Net, Moran was entitled to financial support which, even if necessary to sustain him following unemployment, nonetheless triggered adverse reactions: ‘My checks came yesterday. I nearly vomit every time I get one of these in the mail’ (PA, 9).

What is most surprising and compelling about Moran’s testimony is his discussion of his alcoholism and its relation to being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS. Far from the pessimism of the portraits, which display Moran as a helpless victim of his diagnosis, Moran quite explicitly shows his appreciation for how HIV/AIDS gave him the requisite willpower to address his alcoholism. Having grown up in a large Catholic and working class family from Quincy, Massachusetts, Moran explains how he was sent to a hospital in the winter of 1986 with a severe case of pneumocystis pneumonia. He nearly died. During this visit, Moran was diagnosed with AIDS. However, as his testimony in the summer of 1987 proves, this diagnosis was in his mind the necessary catalyst to stop drinking, which in turn lent a new outlook on his life:

I needed help to stop the alcohol, but I didn’t get it in the usual way. When I got so terribly sick with AIDS, they put me in the intensive care unit… I had very nearly died. And I said to myself, ‘You’re here because of AIDS. But you’re here because of alcoholism, too. You have to give up the drinking…’ Having a life-threatening illness, with AIDS, and the terrible fierce terror of the pneumocystis attacks, that
was the impetus that slowed me down from drinking… [it] gave me the strength to put the cork in the bottle. And I truly do believe that I’ve been granted new life. (PA, 6)

In the series of images I analysed above, there is not even a hint of Moran’s optimism in spite of the serious and frightening implications of being diagnosed with AIDS in the mid-late 1980s. Were we merely to study the images of Moran in isolation, we could easily concede with ACT UP et al that People with AIDS merely replicates media portrayals of PWAs. We could also unproblematically agree with ACT UP in their estimation that People with AIDS fails to register how a PWA’s deterioration is due not simply to a virus, but also ‘due to government inaction, the inaccessibility of health care, and institutionalized neglect in the forms of heterosexism, racism, and sexism’ (PA, 9). Nonetheless, I contend that the metacritical inclusion of oral testimony in the book version of this project creates friction between private and public perceptions of living with HIV/AIDS. Even if Nixon and Nixon’s own misperceptions about HIV/AIDS is obvious in the compositional strategies of the portraits and the various paratextual apparatuses included alongside them, their subjects are able to debunk the very powerful and unrelentingly rhetorical equation that AIDS equals a death sentence. For even if Moran relays to the reader his experience of periods involving emotional exhaustion where ‘I was just so… wrung out with it that I couldn’t mourn [myself] anymore’ (PA, 9) he also displays a renewed optimism which only came about through the restructuring of his priorities following diagnosis. As a consequence, Moran and Nixon and Nixon’s other subjects, still ‘have life left in [them]. And there is joy in living’, even if living means living with HIV/AIDS (PA, 9).

In contradistinction to the many ‘phobic images’ of People with AIDS, the photographs by Wojnarowicz of Hujar dissolve the prophylactic boundary that the
camera establishes between the ‘healthy’ viewer and ‘diseased’ subject by situating the viewer in as close an emotional, physical and phenomenological proximity as possible to the PWA. Contrary to the idea that ‘documentary photographs offer reassurance that the person with AIDS is detectable, not invisible or among “us”,’ 183 these postmortem photographs effectively show that diagnosis with HIV/AIDS is a potential reality for anyone and everyone, regardless of gender, sexuality, class, or race. Rather than shying away from counter-positive images of Hujar, Wojnarowicz constantly demonstrated in his postmortem photographs how Hujar’s personal identity existed in tension with the cultural predilection to reduce the identity of PWAs to their diagnosis with HIV/AIDS. As Sturken suggests, the tradition of medical photography impacted on the representation of PWAs, ‘in that photographs of patients automatically tend to reduce the subject to a symptom of disease.’ 184 Yet, I argue that Wojnarowicz’s postmortem photographs were produced in full knowledge of this tradition, and that he invites, if only to dispel, our discomfort towards Hujar’s body as ‘diseased’ or a possible site of ‘contamination’. It is not only the case that representations such as the ones by Nixon fail in their inability to ‘teach PWAs and their supporter about living with HIV/AIDS’; 185 it is also that such photographs fail to consider how to die with the disease in a way that does not eviscerate their identity and individuality.

I will end this chapter with one of more example, this time, Wojnarowicz’s citation of the postmortem photographs of Hujar in his Un**titled** [Hujar Dead] (1988-89) (Figure 46). I regard this mixed media artwork as being one of the most explicit examples in Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre of the social and political implications of living

183 Sturken, Tangled Memories, 53.
184 Sturken, Tangled Memories, 152-153.
185 Grover, ‘OI,’ 225.
with and dying from AIDS in the context of 1980s America. As Edmund White rightly claims, ‘If art is to confront AIDS more honestly than the media have done, it must begin in tact, avoid humour, and end in anger.’ Untitled [Hujar Dead] would undoubtedly qualify as an enraged confrontation with AIDS, as well as those scientific, political, and religious organisations which continue to thwart initiatives to stymie the spread of HIV. Wojnarowicz’s works are at their most politically confrontational and productive when he was able to utilise his personal experiences of HIV/AIDS for militant ends. This is clearly seen in the artwork, in which Wojnarowicz directly associated Hujar’s death, along with those ‘friends and neighbors who have been dying slow vicious and unnecessary deaths’, with the government’s refusal to confront or simply reorganise the systemic homophobia of the nation in areas ranging from education to biomedicine.

Figure 46: Untitled [Hujar Dead], 1988-89
Black-and-white photograph, acrylic, text, and collage on Masonite, 39 x 32 inches

186 Edmund White, ‘Aesthetics and Loss,’ in Don’t Leave Me This Way, 137.
At the centre of this mixed-media artwork are the postmortem images of Hujar’s face, hand, and feet. Superimposed onto these images is text directly drawn from Close to the Knives describing the rage which Wojnarowicz carried ‘like a blood-filled egg’ towards the religious organisations that continued to spread false information regarding safer sex procedures and the blatant misconstruing of HIV/AIDS as a moral disease. Surrounding these elements is a series of collaged play money, supermarket advertisements and pictures of the White House, plus paintings of sperm. These images, repeated throughout Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre, form part of his unique iconography in describing the collusion of money, politics, biomedicine and the media in the oppression of minorities such as homosexuals and the poor. As Jennifer Doyle notes, Untitled [Hujar Dead] is a cri de guerre that brings the sympathetic viewer to tears, for ‘The urgency that animated Wojnarowicz’s work then, at its moment of production, is warped by the knowledge that it was composed by an artist who would himself die of AIDS barely five years later.’ However, Wojnarowicz’s artwork also raises difficult ethical questions, for with the superimposition of text onto the postmortem images, Wojnarowicz runs the risk of undermining the non-transferrable and unique aspects of Hujar’s death. In submerging these postmortem photographs under what seems to Doyle an interminably long ‘rant,’ the viewer is forced to see Hujar’s body as a metonym for the many PWAs who have died during the first decade of the AIDS crisis. Thus, I argue strongly against Doyle’s statement that the shift from the visual to the linguistic ‘minimise[s] the voyeurism of photography [and] avoid[s] the potential moral charge of being a “vulgar” individual in looking at death photos.’ What I propose is that there is in fact a moral way of looking at postmortem images and potentially even staring at them. My thoughts on

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staring are informed by the feminist disability scholar, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, who has written how, as an interrogative gesture, the stare ‘asks what’s going on and demands the story.’ Against the social injunction not to stare, then, she suggests the alternative view that staring is a productive exchange between starer and staree that ultimately produces rather than inhibits knowledge of the other and otherness. Like Wojnarowicz, who is drawn to Hujar’s body in death and apprehends it in its otherness, the viewer is met with much the same challenge when confronted by the postmortem images of this photographer and their citation in Untitled [Hujar Dead]. A staring encounter with these texts is politically productive, insofar as it can elicit an intersubjective moment with the (absent) subject, as well as provoke dialogue concerning Wojnarowicz’s motivation in recording this event through photographic means. It is clear in Untitled [Hujar Dead] the political impulse guiding Wojnarowicz’s public reproduction of his inherently personal memorials to his former friend and mentor. In staring at this work and focusing our visual attention on Hujar’s body, viewers are not confronted with the horror of death as such, but the horrifying repercussions ensuing from a political administration that renders certain lies less worthy of medical attention and social support than others.

188 Garland-Thomson, Staring: How We Look, 3.
189 This is Garland-Thomson’s neologism in place of the commonly used ‘stared at.’
CONCLUSION
‘Do You Have a Room with a Better View?’

I started my thesis by examining two of Wojnarowicz’s artworks, one which captured the artist’s prolonged experiences of homophobia, and the other which embodied his struggle with mortality against the vicissitudes of time and the physical body. *Untitled [One Day This Kid…]* presents to the viewer a boy whose future should mirror the optimism that is etched on his broad-grinned face. Instead, Wojnarowicz quells any hope towards the future in his alarming text detailing state-supported violence and homophobia. The intersecting systems of Family, Politics, and Religion destroy any possibility for this boy to express his sexuality freely and without fear of reprisal. However, the second artwork, *Untitled*, gestures towards the redemption offered through community. Marion Scemama’s contribution to Wojnarowicz’s performance of his own death and burial signals for many PWAs the value in forming alternative ‘families’ at a time when their diagnosis meant they were often abandoned by their own kin. These two artworks thus signify the indissoluble tension between the personal and political within Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre, whether in terms of his theoretical confrontation with the heteronormative constructs of the ONE-TRIBE NATION or in his direct condemnation of the discriminatory policies of Reagan’s administration. Wojnarowicz found it impossible to separate individual experiences of discrimination from larger social structures that foreclose modes of knowing and being alternative to the dominant order. Whether thinking of Wojnarowicz as a young homosexual man or gay PWA, his identity was nonetheless one that made him a target of hostility, violence, and misunderstanding by the ‘general public’. His increasingly militant opposition against the religious, political, and biomedical
structures of his context following his diagnosis with HIV only reinforced his position as a figure of marginality and difference: ‘Any kind of outcast whatsoever’. Yet even as Wojnarowicz recognised that ‘Some of us are born with the cross hairs of a rifle scope printed on our backs or skulls’,\(^1\) he sought to empower ‘millions of tribes’ through accepting their differences as a source of pride rather than shame. Whether in his writings which catalogue the innumerable voices of the American nation or individual accounts of loss and mourning, Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre humanises those individuals which the ‘preinvented world’ would have us forget.

In a context where his homosexuality and HIV diagnosis meant he defied the normative and ideal image of the able-bodied and heterosexual citizen, it is unsurprising that he would claim to be living in ‘strange and dangerous times’ (*CK*, 58). Furthermore, when alternative sexualities and desires are excluded from the public sphere and perceived as dangerous to the body politic, one could not blame Wojnarowicz for asking his reader, ‘Do you have a room with a better view?’\(^2\) Yet as much as Wojnarowicz would have liked to evade the ideological grasp of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, he instead armed himself against this construct and fought assiduously to destroy its totalising influence over citizens of the ‘preinvented world’.

One of his essential weapons against the ONE-TRIBE NATION was in fact refusing the divisions between the private and the public, and the personal and political. Every individual act had for Wojnarowicz larger social repercussions, such that his identity as a homosexual PWA was conceived as a form of political activism. As he said in an interview with Keith Davis, ‘dealing with anything that’s queer is political by its own nature… being homosexual [means]… you’re not working with the support of

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\(^1\) David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage, 1991), 58. All subsequent reference will be cited as *CK* in the text.

\(^2\) David Wojnarowicz, *7 Miles a Second*, illustrations by James Romberger and colour by Marguerite Van Cook (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2012), 5.
society, you’re not living with the support of society at large, and that’s something that’s political in itself.³

When thinking about the beginning and end of Wojnarowicz’s life, we are met with two opposing notions of ‘Family’. Having been born into a family characterised by violence and cruelty, Wojnarowicz immediately felt at odds with the ‘Universe of the Neatly Clipped Lawn’ perpetuated by the ONE-TRIBE NATION, seeing that this vision of idyllic suburban life was totally opposed to his everyday reality. However, by acknowledging his sexual desires and working to combat oppressive ideologies through his political writings and artworks, we see another notion of ‘Family’ being introduced in his oeuvre. The notion of a ‘queer’ family is at its most pronounced in thinking about those individuals who commemorated Wojnarowicz after his death on 22 July, 1922, comprising a community of gay men, women, and friends that saw his death as a deplorable result of governmental neglect. Wojnarowicz’s friends took heed of his statement that transforming private losses into public action had ‘terrific repercussions in the preinvented world’ (CK, 121). Attesting to the large network of friends, carers, lovers, and community workers that surround the PWA during and after his life, members of the affinity group The Marys organised with Tom Rauffenbart to stage a memorial procession in honour of Wojnarowicz. In so doing, they fulfilled Wojnarowicz’s request in Close to the Knives for his funeral to be a political statement decrying the Reagan administration for maintaining the ‘day-to-day illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION’,⁴ along with providing a more general demonstration of the legitimacy of gay loss and love. But this procession, which began at Wojnarowicz’s flat and moved from Second Avenue through to Houston

³ David Wojnarowicz Interviewed by Keith Davis (Part 3 of 3), David Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 8, Audio, 092.0491, Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University.
Street, also demonstrated the formation of alternative structures to the normative heterosexual family unit of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Wojnarowicz critiqued normativity in its many guises throughout his career as an artist, having recognised from personal experience its inherent dangers in propagating heterosexist ideologies and stifling individual creativity. This impulse was at the centre of Wojnarowicz’s determination to write *Close to the Knives*, where he once said to Nan Goldin, ‘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.’

5 Wojnarowicz, quoted in Michael Broder, ‘Fighting Words,’ *QW* 42, 23 August 1992, 29, in Obituary- QW, ‘Fighting Words,’ The Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 6, Biographical, Subseries B, Box 9, Folder 34.

6 *Inside This House* (1990) is presumably based upon a short film entitled *Little House* (1985). In *Little House*, Wojnarowicz recites a lengthier version of the text featured in the gelatin-silver print, as he
constructed an alternative mythology and history to the ‘preinvented existence’ proffered by the ONE-TRIBE NATION, Wojnarowicz pledged his writings and artworks to the task of unveiling and consequently overturning the coalition of Nation, Family, Religion, Science, and Politics in their prejudicial treatment of difference and diversity. The toy house set against a background of lush, wild grass in *Untitled [Inside This House]* acts as a microcosm of the ONE-TRIBE NATION – ‘the interior of this house resembles a universe’ – and dramatises its edicts and limitations from the perspective of a female child. Employing the rhythms and tropes of *Untitled [One Day This Kid…]*, *Untitled [Inside This House]* places at its narrative centre the aspiration of ‘This little girl’.

Like the earlier print which included a self-portrait of Wojnarowicz, the viewer is confronted here by the inevitable destruction of ‘This little girl’s’ dreams if they fail to align with the ‘preinvented existence’ of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. Her dreams are described as those which ‘not everybody understands’, and which ‘go far away. Far far away’ when they cannot be realised within a world predicated upon the conformity and control of one’s ideas.

One is here reminded of Wojnarowicz’s concern towards individuals who, having exiled themselves from the ONE-TRIBE NATION, are unable to connect with other ‘member[s] of the same tribe’ and thereby form alternative social relations. In the world Wojnarowicz imagined himself to be trapped in, where individuals were

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films via stop-motion footage a toy house situated in a large field. As Wojnarowicz recounts how ‘This little girl’ has dreams that ‘go far away. Far far away,’ he slowly zooms out of his extreme close-up shot of the house to imply the dissipation of the girl’s dreams into the atmosphere. The entire text of *This Little House* is as follows: ‘Inside this house many things go on. Many people, many lives, many personalities. And some of the people dream and some of them don’t. Some of them eat, some of them starve, some of them cry, and some of them laugh. Some of the people wake up and some of them go to sleep. Some of them walk in their dreams, and some of them fall in their dreams, and some of them fly. Sometimes, the interior of this house is like a universe. Sometimes, the movement of bodies creates a rhythm that is an exact thing like science. Sometimes, there are rotations for period of time, and then sometimes collisions. Sometimes when a door opens a room is less empty. Sometimes a little dog comes to the door of the house and makes sound and the sound carries and the sound shifts and it rises up over the treetops into the wind. There inside this house is a little girl, and the little girl has dreams that not everybody understands. And the dream sometimes go far, far away.’ Amino; Bug; Little House, Wojnarowicz Papers, Series 10, Video and Film, Subseries A, 092.0381.
controlled through the mechanisms of technology, commerce, and politics and unable to connect emotionally with others through a shared history of knowledge and values, Wojnarowicz found many had little choice but to escape from the ONE-TRIBE NATION through self-destruction:

But when the volume of that war reaches epic dimensions, and when the person hearing it fails to connect with another member of the same tribe who can acknowledge the sound... that person can end up on a street corner, homeless hungry and wild-eyed, punching himself in the face or sticking wires through the flesh of his arms or chest. (CK, 38)

Yet there were others, such as Wojnarowicz, who diverted this inestimable pressure and ‘the need for [its] release’ through artistic creation. His visual artworks, such as _Untitled [Inside This House]_, convey with stark simplicity the overwhelming and almost uncontainable rage that began for him ‘with the earliest memories,’ when discovering that one’s sexuality would be the reason why ‘an organized social structure... would kill you spiritually or physically every chance it has’ (CK, 104).

Although not limited to a critique of society’s compulsory heterosexuality, Wojnarowicz saw how members of society whose cultural, social, corporeal, or economic circumstances deviated from the norm would invariably find themselves the target of discrimination. Indeed, the text of the gelatin-silver print reads, ‘Inside this house many things go on. Many people. Many lives. … Some of them dream. Some of them don’t. Some of them eat. Some of them starve. Some of them cry. Some of them laugh.’ With his use of parallel statements establishing oppositions between those who abide by the ONE-TRIBE NATION and those who do not, we can see how Wojnarowicz drew a correlation between an individual’s capacity to entertain alternatives to the ‘preinvented world’ and his/her level of economic security.
Wojnarowicz developed distinct verbal and visual languages in order to explain his politics and increasing frustration with the contemporary world. I have sought in this doctoral thesis to demonstrate the centrality of his concept of the ONE-TRIBE NATION not only to his post-diagnosis period, but also in his unremitting critique of oppression within the private and public spheres. Although the advent of the AIDS crisis and his own diagnosis with HIV did in fact prompt his politics to become more fixated upon issues concerning the empowerment of PWAs and the dismantling of social and biomedical prejudices against them, Wojnarowicz was nonetheless a lifelong advocate of equality and justice for minority cultures and sexualities. Whilst many passages in Close to the Knives catalogue how the ‘general public’ discriminates against PWAs, including but not limited to the distribution of false information about the transmission and etiology of HIV/AIDS, other passages of this text reveal themselves as critical on behalf of minority groups for how different, yet equally insidious, political and economic mechanisms are used to subordinate them. Furthermore, Wojnarowicz’s representations of homeless people demonstrate the very real struggles which these individuals experience due to factors such as social stigma, abuse, and a lack of support from family and friends. The exclusion of the homeless from moral consideration is something that Wojnarowicz understood intrinsically, given his own experiences of living on the streets.

Wojnarowicz’s first essay in Close to the Knives, ‘Self-Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds,’ makes clear how the poor are often regarded as discursive outsiders to the ONE-TRIBE NATION due to their lack of social and economic capital. Whilst bouncing around between half-way houses, dingy motels, and the local Horn & Hardart, Wojnarowicz comments on his emaciated frame: ‘I’m looking like one of them refugees in the back of life magazine only no care packages for me’ (CK, 6).
His reference to images of ‘them refugees’ found in the glossy photojournalism of *Life* suggests the distorted lens many wear when comparing poverty on home and foreign soil. There are ‘no care packages’ for Wojnarowicz or others in his situation; the homeless and other economically marginal figures are excluded from the ONE-TRIBE NATION, deserving neither charity nor a moment’s passing glance. This assertion is later reinforced in the essay, ‘In the Shadow of the American Dream,’ where Wojnarowicz talks about spending time in a neighbourhood during his youth in which one of the streets ‘was so crowded with homeless people that I can’t even remember what the architecture of the blocks looked like’ (*CK*, 32). Although he had not yet coined the term, ‘ONE-TRIBE NATION,’ it is clear that from a very early age that Wojnarowicz studied the dynamics between the ‘us’ and the ‘them’, and would later associate the separation of these categories with how the ‘ONE-TRIBE’ seeks to expel from its framework any difference that might threaten its homogeneity.

Later, in ‘In the Shadow of the American Dream,’ Wojnarowicz would write about a Navajo man as if he and his culture were on the brink of extinction. Wojnarowicz adopts the language of containment in his descriptions of the man as he sits

> hunched in the driver’s seat unmoving, [with] his face tilted as if in wait for someone familiar to exit the silent doors of the building. … He was trapped within the glassed-in-diorama of his metallic-and-chrome vehicle, within the museum of his own natural history as viewed from a white boy’s eyes. (*CK*, 29-30)

Wojnarowicz recognises the impossibility of viewing his subject objectively; he is, after all, viewing the Navajo man ‘from a white boy’s eyes’ and describes him as if he were an exhibit in a natural history museum. Wojnarowicz is thus implicated here in the racist discourse of the ONE-TRIBE NATION, which seeks to dilute or even
expunge from the historical record the rich and varied narratives of cultural and ethnic minorities. Wojnarowicz’s description of the Navajo man, like that of the family selling trinkets near Meteor Crater (CK, 47), point both to the fetishisation of ethnic minorities and the artefacts with which they are associated. Wojnarowicz aimed to clarify this through his appropriation of Native American artefacts and mythologies in his collages. In *Earth*, for instance, Wojnarowicz incorporates Hopi Kachina dolls in such a way as to highlight their artificiality and cheapness when their function is separated from their cultural significance. Wojnarowicz would also use animals in his visual artworks in order to challenge a simplistic model of humanity as singular and hierarchical, by offering an alternative world in which diversity is celebrated rather than eliminated. The varied number of species which he utilised in his visual artworks provided a fitting comparison with the refusal of the ONE-TRIBE NATION to see the human species as equally diverse in its races, cultures, sexualities, and politics.

This doctoral thesis has identified many ways that Wojnarowicz circumvented the ‘clockwork of civilization’ and its attendant myth of homogeneity and unity in the American nation. In chapter two, for instance, I claimed that Wojnarowicz developed a rhetoric of oppositionality and recalcitrance against the Reagan political administration. This rhetoric powerfully conveyed his anger towards the Reagan government for refusing to claim responsibility over the deaths of PWAs. In chapter one, I started to explain the complex iconography that Wojnarowicz constructed in order to critique the main axes of the ONE-TRIBE NATION that are responsible for the destruction of human diversity. This was further reinforced in my fourth chapter, where we saw how Wojnarowicz utilised a vast number of non-human systems in his artworks to convey the illimitable variety of desires and ontologies within the species *Homo sapiens*. But Wojnarowicz’s dissolution of the boundary separating the private
and the public, particularly in terms of his willingness to record his sense of loss for those friends and former lovers who had died from AIDS-related complications, is the strongest indication of the political impulse of his oeuvre. In refusing to let his audience or the conservative policymakers of his time dismiss the very real struggles and frustrations of PWAs, he employed a discourse of confrontation to effect positive social changes. In other words, Wojnarowicz ‘operated as if a “parrhesiastes” – a truth-teller, especially one who “speaks truth to power”… [through] “fearless speech.”’7 This ‘fearless speech’ is what many of Wojnarowicz’s staunchest critics, including Donald Wildmon, Jesse Helms, and Dana Rohrabacher, tried unsuccessfully to silence with their defamatory rhetoric and homophobic vitriol.

Wojnarowicz believed that any gesture, whether grandiose or ‘a tiny charcoal scratching’ (CK, 122), could slowly but surely wear away at ‘the injunction against trespass[ing]’ the laws of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. As I demonstrated in my fourth chapter, one way of invalidating the injunction against homosexuality was by ‘performing an X-ray of Civilization,’ that is, by scrutinising the politics of vision in society that relegate this sexuality to the private sphere whilst affirming the primacy of heterosexual relations. Wojnarowicz proudly affirmed his homosexual identity and desires through representing the subculture of cruising in his writings and visual artworks. At the same time, he sought to convey the production of intimacy and emotional care through anonymous sexual encounters, as well as between partners in serodiscordant relationships. Maintaining his allegiance to the collage aesthetic of his early days, Untitled [Inside This House] incorporates a circular inset in the top left hand corner, thereby presenting a rupture within the text that suggests a similar breach

of homogeneity that is crucial for destroying the ONE-TRIBE NATION. This inset projects the fate of civilisation if it continues to march at the same beat of its ‘relentless clockwork’; unable to maintain stability any further, the structures that buttress the illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION begin to fail, causing irreversible damage to the system as a whole.

I have attempted in this doctoral thesis to draw upon existing research on Wojnarowicz undertaken by scholars in the fields of art history, film studies, queer and cultural studies, and literary criticism. By the same token, my thesis has brought into the fold a number of theoretical topoi which can be used to expand the influence of Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre, by placing him within the framework of artistic genealogies that have so far been overlooked or mentioned cursorily. In no small part, my exploration of parallels between Wojnarowicz’s oeuvre and Victorian mortuary portraiture, the conventions of the open road genre, and Surrealism, is designed to suspend temporarily the identification of Wojnarowicz as an ‘AIDS artist’ whose value and significance only extends to his political reaction against the specific climate of social hysteria and public misunderstanding within the first decade of the AIDS crisis. Wojnarowicz’s concerns, as my doctoral thesis has confirmed, are more far-reaching that this limited picture, and it would be at a disservice to claim his importance only to those who suffered social injustices as a result of the Reagan government. Nonetheless, this is not to trivialise the institutional neglect and profound discrimination which many PWAs experienced within the first decade of the AIDS crisis, or to imply that Wojnarowicz’s contribution to the cultural activism of AIDS artists was either negligible or minimal. As a continuing thread in my thesis and particularly apparent within my second, fifth, and sixth chapters, Wojnarowicz was uniquely attuned to the nexus of politics, biomedicine, and religion in the
figuration of HIV/AIDS and those whose sense of embodiment was inextricably tied to this appellation. Ultimately, though, Wojnarowicz’s politics was broad enough to encompass ‘millions of tribes’ denigrated by the ONE-TRIBE NATION for their differences. Although his politics intensified following the outbreak of HIV/AIDS in the early 1980s and reached its apotheosis in 1987 with the death of Peter Hujar and his diagnosis with HIV in 1988, Wojnarowicz remained from the beginning of his career a parrhesiastes of ‘these strange and dangerous times’ in which we live.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chronological List of Visual and Audiovisual Works by David Wojnarowicz

Note: All artworks listed are courtesy of The Estate of David Wojnarowicz, New York

1978-79

*Arthur Rimbaud in New York.* Set of twenty-five gelatin-silver print photographs. 11 x 14 inches.

1979

*Heroin.* Colour. Silent DVD. Original format: super8mm film.

*Heroin.* Black-and-white. Silent DVD. Original format: super8mm film.

*Untitled* [Genet]. Xeroxed collage. 8 ½ x 11 inches.

1982

*Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian.* Spray paint on masonite. 48 x 48 inches.

1985

*Amino; Bug; Little House.* Colour. Silent ¾ inches umatic videocassette.


1986

*Excavating the Temples of the New Gods.* Acrylic and collage on masonite. 72 x 96 inches.

*You Killed Me First, Submit to Me, Death Valley ’69.* Colour and black-and-white. VHS videocassette.

1986-87

*A Fire in My Belly, A Work in Progress.* Colour and black-and-white. Silent super8mm film.

1987

*The Death of American Spirituality.* Mixed media on plywood. 81 x 88 inches.
Earth. Acrylic and collage on masonite. 72 x 96 inches.


Mexico, etc… Peter, etc…. Curatorial title. Colour and black-and-white. Silent DVD. Original format: super8mm film.

Untitled [Desire]. Curatorial title. Gelatin-silver print photograph. 27/ ½ x 34 inches.

Untitled [Man with Ants]. Curatorial title. Gelatin-silver print photograph. 27 ½ x 34 inches.

1988


Mexico Film Footage II. Curatorial title. Colour and black-and-white. Silent DVD. Original format: super8mm film.

Sex Series. Set of eight gelatin-silver print photographs. 15 x 18 inches.

Spirituality [for Paul Thek]. Curatorial title. Seven gelatin-silver print photographs on museum board. 41 x 32 ½ inches.


1988-89

Bread Sculpture. Bread, string, and needle. 13 x 3 x 6 inches.

Untitled [Hujar Dead]. Curatorial title. Acrylic and collage on masonite. 39 x 32 inches.

1989

Untitled [Hujar]. Curatorial title. Gelatin-silver print photograph. 20 x 16 inches.

Untitled [Hujar’s Feet]. Curatorial title. Gelatin-silver print photograph. 20 x 16 inches.

Untitled [Hujar’s Hand]. Curatorial title. Gelatin-silver print photograph. 20 x 16 inches.

1990

Subspecies Helms Senatorius. Cibachrome photograph. 19 x 24 ¼ inches.

Untitled [Inside This House]. Curatorial title. Gelatin-silver print photograph. 13 x 19 inches.

Untitled [One Day This Kid]. Curatorial title. Gelatin-silver print photograph. 30 x 40 inches.

What’s This Little Guy’s Job in the World. Gelatin-silver print photograph. 13 ½ x 19 inches.

Undated

Plain Ants…. Black-and-white. Silent DVD. Original format: ¾ inch umatic videocassette.

Slo-Mo Blue Boys 1. Colour. DVD. Original format: ¾ inch umatic videocassette.


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