

“David Wojnarowicz,” *Out*, 2002.

David Wojnarowicz surprised us. He was the rage-filled AIDS radical who in 1990 challenged Donald Wildmon and his American Family Association in court for misrepresenting his work as pornography and won. He was the street-raised hustler in Times Square from age 13 who taught himself to make art and ended up in the prestigious biennial show at New York’s Whitney Museum of American Art, in 1985 and 1991. He was also, as his several books, *Close to the Knives*, *The Waterfront Journals*, and *Memories that Smell Like Gasoline*, bear testament, an acute observer of the unmapped region surrounding his heart and one of the best writers of his generation. Artist, activist, writer, ”there were a hundred Davids,” says his lover of 7 years, Tom Rauffenbart. “Each one of us knew only a small part of him.”

Wojnarowicz was born in Red Bank, New Jersey in 1954 to a sailor father and a mother. His parents divorced when he was two, and his mother gave him and his two siblings over to an orphanage.

His father kidnapped them back after a few months, packed them off to his relatives, Michigan farm, then brought them back to his home in New Jersey where they lived with their stepmother. At eight and a half, David and his older sister called their mother in Manhattan. On a secret visit, she took them to the Museum of Modern Art. A month later, their father gave custody of David and his siblings over to their mother at a restaurant near the Port Authority bus terminal. She lived in a one-bedroom apartment near Hell’s Kitchen.

He turned his first trick at age 9.

After his mother went on welfare when he was 11 or 12, he made a living as a hustler. Wojnarowicz briefly attended the High School of Music and Art. He dropped out at 16 and lived on the streets full time. At 17 or 18, after several murder attempts on his life, skeletal and sleep deprived, entered a halfway house for ex-convicts.

After a few years of travelling~freight-hopping coast-to-coast and spending years in San Francisco and Paris~he moved to the burgeoning East Village in early '80s. He worked at nightclubs, formed a postpunk band called 3 Teens Kill 4~No Motive, and did impromptu public installations in the warehouses by the piers, also tossing bones onto the steps of the elite gallerist Leo Castelli or stencilling burning houses onto the doors of exclusive Soho spaces.

After meeting photographer Peter Hujar at a bar in 1980, the older man and Wojnarowicz developed a complex relationship of love and mentorship,

both more and less than lovers, as Wojnarowicz's lover Tom Rauffenbart has said.

Wojnarowicz's work ascended to prominence in the East Village art scene of the early '80s, and then ran into government censorship at the end of the decade and in the early '90s. He was an AIDS activist until the day in 1992 when he died from the disease at age 38. Wojnarowicz is being honored by a retrospective opening January 20 at Manhattan's New Museum of Contemporary Art (Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz) and by the simultaneous publication of *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz* by Grove/Atlantic. We've chosen to honor the outspoken artist's life by assembling a biography from his own words and from those of the people who knew

him best.

Before I went to sleep, I used the upstairs bathroom and in the floor were three bullet holes from where dad shot a gun one night drunk. Made me feel strange and cold seein' it.

-- from the Diaries [FC p. 48]

[At 10] I developed a habit of hanging off the roof ledge by my fingertips, dangling over 8th avenue at night as a test of strength.

--from Tongues of Flame [FC p. 115]

Pat Bernier~David's Sister

David was such a cute little kid, but he had the devil in him. Even then he was very artistic, always trying to draw and make things. Our childhood was quite troubled by the fact that we had an alcoholic father who was a sailor and was absent a lot and obviously had a lot of problems he couldn't deal with, probably from his own childhood.

[We wouldn't see] our father for months. He would come [home] and you hadn't cleaned up the lawn like you were supposed to and it was, let's go down to the basement and get beat up by two-by-fours.

I'm not kidding~pieces of lumber. He would start with David, and I'd hear the screams, then after came my brother Stephen, and then would come me.

So, the childhood was pretty miserable. There are a lot of kids that don't survive that kind of shit.

Somehow we all did. I don't say that psychologically we don't carry a lot of baggage. There is a trait that runs through all of us from the time we were kids, and that's anger at injustice. I recognize that in myself.

Later on, I just wanted David to get out of New York. I encouraged him to come to visit me in Paris.

He was struggling with his artwork; I knew he was having a lot of problems. So, he came to Paris and I got him a typewriter and he typed and did his journals and drawings. He tried to get one of his first things published, went around to publishers, but nothing came of it.]

Fran Lebovitz, friend

To me, David had the look of someone who'd not been taken care of in childhood. He had the exact background that when you hear about it on the news is the background of a psychokiller. David rose above the damage, but it was still there.

Kiki Smith, artist

I met David when he was inviting artists to go over to make art in the abandoned piers in the early eighties. We were inseparable for a couple of years after that. We would have breakfast together every morning. He liked such bad food, American food, like bacon and eggs and home fries, which I just hate, and now when I walk by one of those restaurants I say to myself, 'I never have to eat there again!'

He was in a band that used toy instruments and tapes called 3 TEENS KILL 4~No Motive, and he'd done a piece with Julie Hair where he'd stenciled a burning building on the wall and dumped a hundred pounds of bloody cow bones down the stairs of the Leo Castelli gallery on a Saturday afternoon. He was doing things on the street anonymously, painting on garbage can lids and stenciling on walls. David took risks. He was attracted to edginess. If you are gay and from a precarious family and economic structure, that forces you to be marginal. But he was very Catholic, proper in a way. Like he would steal all these trash can lids to paint on them, but then he would go to the buildings and replace them.

Amy Scholder, Diaries editor

David's diaries were really written for himself, privately. For me, what is so impressive about them was the way he always remained focused on what lay below the surface of things. He really seemed driven to keep on track about what was important to him. Even through his periods of taking drugs, David always kept a perspective that distanced him from the nihilism, self-indulgence, and pretentiousness that could describe the downtown nightlife in Manhattan in the early '80s. Especially when he was describing anonymous sex in the piers and abandoned buildings along the West Side [Highway], all of which could be very superficial. It is amazing how David would always reach out and into himself to find meaningful connections and insights, never trivializing even in the most spontaneous and chance encounters.

So if I make a sexual image and put it on a wall, in a way it's fighting against my need for anonymity, which I treasure to a certain extent. At the same time I'll make the image in order to put it on a wall so that I'm not alone.

~from an interview with Barry Blinderman

So, yes, this guy [Peter Hujar] was like a father, but was it really that, because I also saw him as sexual, handsome, beautiful mind... --from the Diaries [FC: p. 237]

Fran Lebowitz, writer

I got to know David through Peter Hujar, the photographer, who was like a father, a brother and a mentor to David. Peter was completely poverty stricken, and when he was dying there were about six of us who took care of him in various ways. We were all thrown into an exceptionally emotional situation, and through this I got to know David. Then I just adored him.

I had no interest in David's artwork at all, but I did talk to him about his writing. David did not have a literary sensibility. His writing was almost like bleeding. It seemed to me it was cultivation at the lack of cultivation. I found his work too unmediated, too direct; I tried to interfere with his style and I did not succeed at all.

Anyway, even though he was a real writer, not a phoney, what David didn't have was perspective. Everything hit him with the same intensity, and I think if he had lived to be an old man, he would have stayed the same way. That's why he spent the last years fighting those unwinnable fights. I really tried to talk him out of this. You have to reserve your energy for something else. I wasn't trying to talk him out of being angry. My point of view was that there will always be such people as Reverend Donald Wildmon, but they don't really have any power over an artist. But we disagreed on all of these things.

Gracie Mansion, art dealer

I first showed David in 1982, right at the start of the East Village art scene. He was incredibly charismatic. Unbelievably drop-dead gorgeous, and a voice that made you melt. You meet few people like that in your life. His persona was so powerful that, when you were around David, you knew you were in the presence of genius. Really.

I knew David socially and I knew him as a friend, but we didn't hang out together. David had a very difficult time with authority figures on any level. He wouldn't allow dealers or collectors to come to his studio.

Kiki Smith

The East Village art scene inflated very quickly and it was a gold rush. Suddenly art-consuming public was enormously and voraciously trying to eat David alive. But when David was selling, whenever he had money, he'd just pass it around, give it away. I think it was out of generosity and uneasiness. He had a conflict with being an insider and an outsider in the art world.

Judy Glanzman, artist and friend

Even when he was alive, the myth was forming. The street person who was a genius, like Bob Dylan. I'm sure that all that David said was true, but he also left out certain things. I never knew he went to the High School of Music and Art until much later. He collaborated on his own myth, definitely. [But] you can't be that much of an outsider when your art is on the cover of Artforum. He was tortured by those things. Only when he got dementia could he get joy out of his success. He had sold work to the Museum of Modern Art, and on a bad day, you could just tell him over and over and he'd be delighted.

Two years ago, David Wojnarowicz was the East Village's hot young artist. Then in a move that's extremely rare in today's art sweepstakes, he took himself out of the running and stopped painting for more than a year... then took a second eight month break. The painter said he stopped because he realized the art world wasn't really about art but about money and fashion and turning out product and he needed some time off to get his priorities straight. [New York Magazine, 1987]

Gracie Mansion

He never really stopped painting.

When David told me that he had AIDS in 1987, my first response--which was really stupid, but it was one that came from an emotional point of view--was, Maybe we shouldn't tell anyone about it. My

motive was not financial, because clearly, putting the word out that David had AIDS would have made me, as his dealer, very rich. I just didn't want David to go through that hideous thing that Keith Haring had gone through the year before, when collectors were saying, Did you hear about Keith? Keith has AIDS. Keith is dying. Oh, I have a piece of Keith's. What do you think it's worth? Do you think it's worth more now? all in one sentence. It really made me sick. Anyway, it was really the wrong thing to say. David took such offense to that, I can't tell you. I wouldn't say that he never forgave me, but he couldn't understand that what I wanted was to protect him and nothing more.

...I wake up every morning in this killing machine called america and I'm carrying this rage like a blood filled egg...

--from Untitled (Hujar Dead), quoted in Tongues of Flame

Wendy Olsoff, art dealer, PPOW

For some artists, believe me, their whole existence revolves around their gallery. But David wasn't like that. He was just an incredible person to spend time with. We weren't on the phone every day talking about his career or prices. You were much more likely to talk about dreams or something when you were with David. One night I was supposed to drive David to a performance he was giving in Philadelphia. I really have a terrible sense of direction and we got so lost. At that time, he and I both smoked a lot of cigarettes, and we were just smoking and jabbering away and we could have been driving across the country. Imagine being with David on one of those incredible road trips he took, where you are driving and having great conversations and looking out of the window for thousands of miles. I realized at one point he didn't really care if we got there or not. It was like on my shoulders, and he wasn't going to help me at all.

To speak of ourselves--while living in a country that considers us or our thoughts taboo--is to shake the boundaries of the illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION.

--Close to the Knives [FC: p. 153]

I asked Kiki to come back with me [after Peter Hugar's funeral] ... I wanted to show Peter's spirit some joy, some celebration....finally Kiki let go of my hands and started whirling in the space...whirling and jumping and driving through the darkness...this man and woman whirling in an invisible flutter of cloth and feet.

--from the Diaries [FC ONLY p. 236]

Kiki Smith

I have a weird idea about David, kind of a Christian thing that life has a purpose. You go along with very little complication in your life, then Bang! Out of no choice of your own, your life gets bigger. Then you either rise to the occasion or you don't. David had the eloquence and the anger that was appropriate to the situation of having AIDS in our society. He had the talent and the capacity to apply an equal force back. Whole communities were dying; it was a total attack on you. David used his humor and his intelligence to fight back against the Christian right and the government. He had an ethically grounded position and the other was a rancid position.

I am screaming, but it comes out like pieces of clear ice. I am signaling that the volume of all this is too high. I am waving. I am waving my hands. I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough. [FC: from Brush Fires in the Social Landscape, p. 25]

Nan Goldin, artist

Artists Space asked me to curate a show, *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, about AIDS [in 1989]. My idea was to create a show that was by and for the community that had been hit by this plague. I wanted it to be totally emotional and subjective, rather than abstract. I asked David to write the text for the show. I'd already included David as a visual artist. He wrote this incredible text. There was a big uproar from the NEA over the text. The director of Artists Space, Susan Wyatt, went to the NEA with the text to make sure there would be no problem before hand. Of course, there was a problem, because David had called Cardinal O'Conner a cannibal with black skirts and talked about wanting to set Jesse Helms on fire. It took everyone by surprise. They weren't expecting something that got this kind of attention. So the NEA freaked out. This was during the period of Serrano and Mapplethorpe, so Susan Wyatt was trying to be really cautious about the funding of her space, so she showed the text to them before hand and [NEA director John] Frohnmayer completely freaked out. David was really proud that words could still have that kind of power and meaning in the eighties. There were constant telephone conversations of Susan trying to get me to take certain words out and he took one 'fucking' out and that was it.

From David I learned never to compromise. There was no distinction between his work and his life, particularly in his writing. His writing was his guts spilling out. There was no curtain between his writing and his person. David had no protection as a person; he felt everything.

If I could write a book that killed America, I would have done it.

~from an interview with Nan Goldin, *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*

>From the cross examination of the plaintiff in *David Wojnarowicz vs. American Family Association and Donald E. Wildmon*, June 25, 1990:

[The NEA] decided that the show could be funded and that they would return the grant on the condition that Artists Space severed the catalogue from the funding covered by the NEA grant, and in other words, severed the political nature of my writings from the show ... The catalogue ... was funded by the Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation ...

[Frohnmayr] made a statement to the press that the word political means an entirely different thing in Portland where he comes from than it does in New York, and I told him that I felt that that was extremely cynical, and I also told him he referred to the word, political, as the P word so I said to him that he should consider the R word and resign.

from *Angel with a Gun: David Wojnarowicz*, by art critic John Carlin I always had the sense that David was this kind of visionary, that his work transcended comparison with his apparent peers, like David Salle or Keith Haring, and fed back into the greatness of Whitman, landing unceremoniously in Manhattan, on the losing end of a century of hope. Whereas Whitman sings an ecstatically democratic chorus, Wojnarowicz's work radiates a measured sense of culture locked in a death throes, a culture bankrupt and rotting at its roots that keeps shooting up exquisite flowers of evil.

Still, David's work remained lyrical and hopeful, pushing out its own rare beauty even in the face of the artist watching himself slowly die of AIDS. Ultimately, I don't think David saw his own work as negative, even if it corrosively attacked the deadly status quo in the United States ... he was compelled to make art, to teach us how to live better lives ... to speak the truths that are redrawing the lines of nature, self, and culture in such profound ways that we are being transformed without our even knowing it.

C. Carr, writer and friend

When he got very close to dying, he started to hang necklaces on the wall. He'd hang some of the necklaces on the wall, and he'd wear one or two around his neck. It turned out he had a whole collection of different kinds of necklaces that he'd found in various parts of the world. Some were just mardigras beads, and there was an incredible one made up only of charms. At some point, he went out and bought a gold necklace that was really amazing, a thick, heavy one of solid gold. Funny, because wearing jewelry was just not the sort of thing you would associate with David. He was mostly a jeans and T-shirt type of guy, and if it was cold, he'd put on a sweat shirt. He never cared about dressing up or wearing costumes. But in the end he wanted his necklaces all out and on the wall.

~ooh love is wounding me and I'm afraid death is making me lose touch with the faces of those I love...

[FC from *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*, p. 67]

Judy Glanzman

Has anyone told you of the surreal scene of David's death? All right, he dies, they come and put him in the black bag, and we are carrying him down the front stairs of Peter Hujar's old apartment building. All of a sudden, this woman begins screaming outside, Is that David! Is that David! It turns out to be the performance artist Diamanda Galas. Her brother had died of AIDS, and part of her thing was this excruciating screech. I don't know if she was keeping watch, or if it was coincidence that she was there, but it was so extreme. That's the kind of thing that would add to the myths that always surrounded David.

Nan Goldin:

Did you know there was a spontaneous demonstration in Cooper Square when he died? I don't know how people found out, but they did.

If I die it is because a handful of people in power, in organized religions and political institutions, believe I am expendable. [FC: Brush Fires in the Social Landscape, p. 25]

I don't know what you're seeing, but if there's light move towards it.

[FC Brush Fires in the Social Landscape, p. 25]

Tom Rauffenbart, lover

The first time I met David, I had sex with him in the basement of the Bijou theater on Third Avenue, that old porno theater. It was an anonymous thing--we didn't talk much. But I remember that I just was knocked out by this guy. He had one of those interesting faces that if you took all of the pieces alone you'd say it didn't work, but together, he was just beautiful. It was one of those wonderful, romantic, love-at-first-sight things at that point, just crazy, just wild. And we were a couple almost seven years, tempestuous years. I had never heard of David Wojnarowicz, the artist. When I asked him what he did, he said he painted, and I asked him if he meant houses. He told me later that it pleased him that I didn't know who he was. There were an awful lot of people who were hanging onto him then, when he was starting to get notoriety. I didn't really know many of his friends over the years at all.

David began to show signs of dementia a month or two before he died. Luckily his dementia was sweet; it seemed to burn all of the anger out of him. He'd wake up and tell me a long story about being in Argentine the night before, and we'd have these odd little talks sometimes. One time we were just lying there at night and he said to me, 'Well, I guess I'm not the star of this movie.'

I didn't know where this conversation was going, so I said, 'Well, you're already a star, but sometimes you have to do a cameo role, and that's okay.'

And he said, 'Well, do I die in this movie?'

And I said, 'Yeah, I think you do.'

And he said, 'Well, how do I die?'

And I said, 'I don't know, I haven't seen the ending. How would you like to die?'

He got kind of scared and silent. So I asked, 'How about quietly in your sleep?'

And he went, 'Yeah, OK. I guess that's all right.'

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