

# David Wojnarowicz

# *Photography &*

# *Film 1978–1992*

# 9 February – 5 May 19

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*Photography & Film 1978–1992*  
9 February – 5 May 19  
Opening: 8 February 19, 7 pm

David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) came to prominence in the East Village art world of the 1980s, actively embracing all kinds of media and forging an expansive range of work, both fiercely political and highly personal. Largely self-taught, he worked as an artist and writer merging found or discarded materials and an uncanny understanding of literary influences into sophisticated combinations. At first displayed in rough storefront galleries, his work gained national prominence. Diagnosed with HIV in the late 1980s, he became resolutely and fervently political at a moment when the AIDS epidemic was cutting down a generation of artists. Up until his death in 1992, Wojnarowicz was active in movements such as ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) and Gran Fury, an AIDS activist artist collective.

From the late 1970s until 1992, Wojnarowicz produced a body of work that was as conceptually rigorous as it was stylistically diverse. *Photography & Film 1978–1992* is the first exhibition to solely concentrate on his photographic and filmic practice, presenting over 150 works including photographs, test prints,

silkscreens, 16mm and super-8 films, and collaborative video works. Afterwards the exhibition will travel to the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery in Vancouver (CA).

Born in New Jersey in 1954, Wojnarowicz received no formal training in art after he graduated from Manhattan's High School of Music and Art. Friendships and collaborations with a wide range of artists, filmmakers, and musicians included Nan Goldin, Kiki Smith, Peter Hujar, Ben Neill, and others. This offered Wojnarowicz the possibility of experimenting with media and developing an open and original approach, which combined cultural, aesthetic, and political subjectivities. Wojnarowicz was a writer as much as a visual artist. His literary virtuosity was paramount to films like *Last Night I Took a Man* (1989) and *When I Put My Hands on Your Body* (1989), made in collaboration with photographer and filmmaker Marion Scemama.

Photography often formed the basis for Wojnarowicz's work; his first significant production began with his now canonical series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978–1979), using an old 35mm camera. For this series he photographed friends wearing a mask with the face of the unconventional and quirky nineteenth-



Ivan Dallatana *David Wojnarowicz on Hudson River pier, 1983*

© The Estate of Ivan Dallatana. Courtesy the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W Gallery, New York

century French poet for whom the film is named and captured them posing in locations throughout Manhattan and Brooklyn. Wojnarowicz plays with ideas of bringing together historical time and activity, fusing the French poet's identity with the modern urban realm. These kinds of urban spaces frequently drew on his personal experiences in the city, from his childhood hustling in Times Square to his adult life wandering among the abandoned warehouses on the Hudson River piers. Wojnarowicz anachronistically combined time, space, and activity by fusing the French poet's identity with the modern urban activities and settings common to the queer community of that time.

The death of his former lover, friend, mentor, and renowned photographer Peter Hujar due to AIDS-related complications and Wojnarowicz's own diagnosis marked an emotional period for the artist. Three intimate photographs taken by Wojnarowicz of Hujar moments after his death in 1987 show his face, his hand, and his feet, perpetuating a sense of personal loss as well as visualizing the horrors of the disease. The video *Fragments for a Film About Peter Hujar* (1987–1988) includes scenes for an incomplete, poetic homage to Hujar. After these personal confrontations with HIV, AIDS, and death, Wojnarowicz's art became strongly political, and soon he actively involved himself in public debates on medical research and the legal rights of artists.

*Untitled, the Sex Series (for Marion Scemama)* (1989) also comes from this distressed but fertile period. The black-and-white photomontages of homosexual and heterosexual sex juxtaposed with imagery of transportation allude to the importance of sexual desire, despite the AIDS crisis. The circles depicted in the series refer to the search for evidence, for example through use of binoculars and telescopes, in order to make research efforts public and to disrupt a world governed and censored by institutions such as the State and Church.

Symbols, metaphors, and language recur in Wojnarowicz's body of work, which is also often characterized by deep sincerity and a sense of responsibility towards humanity, animals, and nature. This tenderness and compassion resonates in the photograph of a hand holding a frog, titled *What is This Little Guy's Job in the World* (1990). Natural elements often recur relating to his dreams about tornadoes, ponds, and tidal waves, on the one hand, and as a metaphor for the experience of living in an urban jungle such as New York City, on the other. The large snake approaching a mouse in the four-channel video *ITSOFOMO (In The Shadow of Forward Motion*, 1989) is an illustration of a hunt for survival. Other often-repeated themes are the four elements, maps, animism, religion, science fiction, industrial landscapes, and architectural decay.

Reoccurring themes explored throughout Wojnarowicz's oeuvre are reflected in *A Fire in My Belly* (1986–1987), which can be seen as contemplation on cultural and individual identity, spirituality, and belief systems. On a trip to Mexico City, Wojnarowicz shot 25 rolls of super-8 film, documenting scenes that capture the social structure of city life. One of the central images is that of a child exploited as a fire-breathing street performer, which resonates in the title of the film and Wojnarowicz's own experience hustling on the streets at a young age. He later staged scenes in his New York City apartment to be combined with this footage. The dreamlike images illustrate thematic sections he had planned for the film's structure, outlined in a script. Among these images are coins dropping into a plate of blood, the now iconic self-portrait of the artist with his lips sewn shut, and a dancing, gun-wielding marionette. The actual film was never completed.

*Photography & Film 1978–1992* reflects on Wojnarowicz as a source for both art-making and activism at a time of political and personal uncertainty. The exhibition sheds light on a practice that has been exemplary and inspirational, not only for his contemporaries but also for younger generations, especially in a city such as Berlin.

## Public program

5/4 and F.R.DAVID *Black Sun*

Performance and book launch

8 February 19, 10.30 pm

Venue: Pogo Bar

Please RSVP at [reservation@kw-berlin.de](mailto:reservation@kw-berlin.de).

In English

Marion Scemama: *Self-Portrait in 23 Rounds: a Chapter in David Wojnarowicz's Life, 1989–1991* (2018)

Berlinale film screening (Panorama 40)

9 February 19, 7 pm

Venue: Berlinale, Zoo Palast 2, Hardenbergstraße 29A, 10623 Berlin

Tickets via Berlinale website

Phil Zwickler and David Wojnarowicz:

*Fear of Disclosure* (1989)

Berlinale film screening (Panorama 40)

13 February 19, 11 am

Venue: CinemaxX 8, Potsdamer Straße 5 / Entrance Voxstraße, 10785 Berlin

14 February 19, 7.15 pm

Venue: Arsenal, Potsdamer Straße 2, 10785 Berlin

Tickets via Berlinale website

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### Opening hours

Wednesday–Monday 11 am–7 pm

Thursday 11 am–9 pm

Closed on Tuesday

Modified opening hours during Gallery Weekend on Friday, 26 April 19, 11 am–9 pm

### Admission

8 € / reduced 6 €

Combined Day Ticket KW / me Collectors Room Berlin

10 € / reduced 8 €

berlinpass holder 4 €

Free admission to people up to the age of 18,

KW Lover\*, on Thursday evening  and during Gallery

Weekend ~~on Friday, 26 April 19, between 6–9 pm~~

### Guided Tours

KW offers free guided tours through the exhibition during regular opening hours. For further information on tours for large groups (over 10 people), please contact Duygu Örs at [do@kw-berlin.de](mailto:do@kw-berlin.de) or +49 30 243459-132.

### The Berlin Sessions:

*Reading David Wojnarowicz*

15 March 19, 8.30–10.30 pm

Venue: Eisenherz bookstore, Motzstraße 23, 10777 Berlin  
In English

*ITSOFOMO (In the Shadow of Forward Motion) (1989)*

Multimedia performance by David Wojnarowicz and Ben Neill

Performed by Ben Neill and Don Yallech

26 April 19, 8 pm

27 April 19, 6 pm

Venue: KW hall



### *Ektachrome Archives*

Performance by Lyle Ashton Harris

2 and 3 May 19, 9 pm

Venue: Volksbühne Grüner Salon, Linienstraße 227, 10178 Berlin

Admission: 5 € / 3 € reduced

Tickets via Volksbühne website

### Colophon

Curator: Krist Gruijthuijsen

Assistant Curator: Cathrin Mayer

Curatorial Fellow: Léon Kruijswijk

Public Program and Outreach: Sabrina Herrmann

Head of Production: Claire Spilker

Technical Management: Wilken Schade

Head of Installation, Media Technology: Markus Krieger

Installation team: KW Installation Team

Registrar: Monika Grzymislawska

Head of Press and Communication: Karoline Köber

Interns: Leonie Kennedy, Isabell Kolditz

Text and Editing: Krist Gruijthuijsen, Friederike Klapp, Karoline Köber, Léon Kruijswijk

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Senate Department  
for Culture and Europe

 Berlin

 SIEGESSÄULE

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Media partner: SIEGESSÄULE

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