

Bennett Beaumont

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ARTH 4311

April 8, 2025

David Wojnarowicz: Art, Activism, and the Impact of AIDS

For my archival research project, I decided to focus on the same theme as my found archive assignment: AIDS discrimination in New York during the epidemic. This paper will highlight the work of David Wojnarowicz, a multimedia artist, writer, and activist known for his sexual and politically charged work. His responses to the AIDS crisis and his exploration of themes like queerness, poverty, and social justice solidify him as a prominent figure in the East Village art scene (MoMA). He had a very close relationship with fellow artist Peter Hujar, a photographer known for his black-and-white portraits, particularly of figures in the New York City art scene. Hujar eventually died of AIDS-related illness in 1987 (MoMA). We are going to explore the impact of Hujar's death due to AIDS related complications and how it influenced Wojnarowicz's activist work, as well as how he dealt with his own AIDS diagnosis. Wojnarowicz's work is heavily inspired by dreams. His art is very conceptual, making direct comments about social injustices. When gathering my research, I used three foundational sources, namely the *New York University Special Collection*, *The David Wojnarowicz Foundation*, and the documentary *Wojnarowicz*. I searched through the NYU database, which held

all of Wojnarowicz's written and audio journals. Initially, the audio journals were inaccessible until I discovered the documentary *Wojnarowicz*, which used the same archived material in their film, including the audio journals. With these materials, I was able to hear Wojnarowicz's real words and the tone regarding the experiences I was reading about, deepening my understanding of him and his work.

Wojnarowicz and Hujar had a very connected relationship. They started as lovers, which lasted for a very short time before it evolved into something much deeper. They developed an incredibly close friendship as platonic soulmates, but with their twenty-year age gap, they were described by the people closest to them as father and son. Peter was the father figure David never had. Wojnarowicz grew up with a very abusive and alcoholic father who once bought him and his siblings a bunny, then took it away, butchered it, and fed it to the children without telling them (McKim). Peter gave David the mature security he never had. Wojnarowicz is quoted saying, "He was somebody who I thought saw the world as I didHe was twenty years older. So, his perspective was really interesting to me. And he taught me a lot of things. And he connected instantly to what I thought about the world myself. But beyond him I always felt like a stranger among people" (The David Wojnarowicz Foundation). He also stated, "Everything I made, I made for Peter." (TDWF Oral History). The two even shared the same taste in men as Wojnarowicz started dating his long-term partner, Tom Rauffenbart. When he introduced him to Peter, he found out that he and Tom had a relationship years prior. Hujar was supportive of this relationship, reportedly saying that Tom was perfect for David.

In December 1986, Peter's friend Fran Lebowitz brought him for an AIDS test. Ten days later, on January 8, 1987, Peter received a positive diagnosis. When Wojnarowicz heard this news, he immediately lept into action, trying to support Hujar in any way he could. In his journals, he wrote about his time taking Hujars' work to local sellers in an effort to earn more money for him. He also connected with Anita Vitale, a friend of his partner, Tom. Vitale was the director of the New York City AIDS case management unit for which David was reachout out for financial government support (McKim). On Thanksgiving 1987, Wojnarowicz was joined by Fran Lebowitz in Hujar's hospital room where he was comatose and later passed that same day (McKim). Wojnarowicz asked her all to leave the room, and he was quoted saying, "If I could attach our blood vessels and we become one, I would" (McKim). It was at this moment, after everyone had left the room, that David took the death portraits of Peter. He photographed Peter's head, hands, and feet as he believed that these body parts kept you grounded to the earth and in touch with the experience that is life. Wojnarowicz memorialized Hujar by using these death portraits in a multitude of his works, highlighting the horrors of the AIDS epidemic. One of Wojnarowicz's rawest works is the film *Untitled (Peter Hujar)*. This film shows Wojnarowicz's friend and mentor directly after his death. This film consisted of memories they shared, lessons they learned, and themes that aligned with their shared views of death. This film was the first work of Wojnarowicz's that used the death portraits to immortalize Hujar's memory.

Two more notable works of Wojnarowicz's are *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* and *Biography of Peter Hujar (7 Miles a Second)* (The David Wojnarowicz Foundation). *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* shows a collaged image of the death portraits, specifically the

photos of Hujar's hands and feet. These were accompanied by a text overlay of a speech that we will hear Wojnarowicz use frequently in his political works. The second piece, *Biography of Peter Hujar (7 Miles a Second)*, shows what I interpret as a timeline of Hujar's life. We see several images that are niche references to his life cycle except for the two motifs that depict sperm and an image of T-Cells. These cells are the part of the immune system attacked by the AIDS virus. In the center of this piece is a mathematical equation representing the escape velocity of the Earth. Escape velocity is the minimum speed needed for an object to break free from a celestial body's gravitational pull without further propulsion. It was this equation that led me to think of this as his life cycle. Wojnarowicz was somewhat of a spiritual figure, having his own unique beliefs of life and death that both he and Hujar shared. I include these pieces because I think of them as depicting the two foundational sides of dealing with death: anger, which we see in *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, and acceptance, celebrating his memory with a loving send-off in *Biography of Peter Hujar (7 Miles a Second)*. These two works are what led me to look at the relationship between the two. The love and hate that exuded from these works were the driving force of my intrigue in developing this assignment.

It was in 1988 that Wojnarowicz himself received his diagnosis. Wojnarowicz's boyfriend Tom had received a test and diagnosis first, which urged David to get tested as well. This test resulted in a positive diagnosis for ARC, the preliminary virus to AIDS. I highlighted a letter written by David detailing his diagnosis and how he was unable to use the popular medication used to combat the virus due to physical strain and his inquiry of experimental drugs. It was in this letter that I found out about Wojnarowicz's

involvement with the social justice group Act-Up. Additionally, he had connections with the subgroup of Act-Up called Gran Fury, a collective of artists who created signs and posters for the organization (New York University Special Collections). This letter led me to Wojnarowicz's involvement in the Act-Up protests and his independent activist work, highlighting a photo of him at an F.D.A protest in Rockford, Maryland. In this photo taken by Bill Dobbs, we see David's back with a painted message on a black leather jacket stating, "If I die of AIDS-Forget Burial-just drop my body on the steps of the F.D.A." The reason for this protest was to demand faster access to experimental treatment drugs from the F.D.A. They wanted to pressure the institution into expediting the drug approval process. They felt the lengthy processes the F.D.A was taking were contributing to the epidemic's severity. We see the connection of his appearance at this protest through his letter detailing his diagnosis. In this, he states that he is looking into experimental drugs because the ones accessible to him were detrimental to his health. It was here I could see a direct link between his journals and his real life actions, making it a very beneficial addition to this project.

During the same time as the F.D.A protest, Wojnarowicz wrote a poem about his late friend Peter Hujar. I found this poem in one of his journals surrounded by pages of works that Wojnarowicz had been planning. In this poem, we can observe that Hujar's death is still haunting Wojnarowicz. Every line begins with "Peter" then states typical human actions that pertain to Peter, some of which included the words "photographed", "dreamed", "wept, fucked", "had aids", and "died". The final line of this poem states, "All of this stuff life is made of." This final line is what led me to include this poem. Not only is it a commemoration of Hujar's life, but it is also a showing of David's acceptance of

this virus inevitably killing him. He highlights all of what Peter did in his life, that no matter his actions, his fate was decided once he received that diagnosis. Peter shut down and lost hope. This poem, I believe, is Wojnarowicz telling himself that this was not how he was going to die, that he was going to keep living until his body wouldn't let him. David was going to fight the virus that was consuming him and oppose the people who were letting it run rampant through the community. David's goal was to leave a lasting impact that would leave his community in a better state than what he had experienced.

“Silence = Death” is a saying used during the AIDS epidemic as a way of highlighting the urgency of the situation. It was used to plead with people to speak up, talk, and learn about the atrocities of the virus. Act-Up coined this term, along with a motif of a pink triangle. This symbol was used during the holocaust as a way of identifying gay men in concentration camps. Act-Up reclaimed this symbol as an act of resistance, using it to highlight the urgency of AIDS. By pairing the term “Silence = Death” and the pink triangle together, we get a strong and meaningful commentary on the virus. The two were used in 1990 by filmmakers Rosa von Praunheim and Phil Zwickler in the making of their film titled *Silence = Death*. Wojnarowicz is heavily featured. He uses the same monologue he had included as the overlay on the piece *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*. He also showed the death portraits of Peter Hujar in his piece of the film. This is yet another instance of Wojnarowicz using the death of Peter Hujar as a way of bringing real-life commentary to the AIDS epidemic. Showing something so raw and personal to him, yet so relevant to the horrors of the world, made something truly impactful. It was the repetition of these motifs that made me look into them further.

These words of the monologue harbor David's real and raw emotions on the virus, an unfiltered commentary on the wrongdoings of government power that resulted in the death of a loved one. I used this film as a resource because it is the only instance of David verbalizing this speech accompanied by the photos of Peter, making the impact much stronger.

I wanted to highlight an exhibition of Wojnarowicz titled *The Lazaretto*. This was an anonymously created installation exhibited at P·P·O·W gallery in September 1990. The exhibition drew a parallel between the treatment of lepers 400 years prior and people with AIDS in the present day, addressing social discrimination against drug users, queer communities, and people of colour (The David Wojnarowicz Foundation). The most evident identifier that David was behind this exhibition was his monologue, the same one featured in *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, and the film *Silence = Death*. In this exhibition, the opening space is a recreation of a bedroom with a corpse tucked in under the covers, surrounded by garbage and pill bottles. On the wall was that same speech written in what was meant to look like blood. I believe that this is the most concrete representation of David's feelings regarding the death of Peter. During this time, Wojnarowicz was starting to experience his own health declining, which I believe fueled the increasingly graphic tone of this depiction of Hujar's death. It was becoming more evident to David that he would meet the same fate, filling him with more and more anger as the days passed.

It was in 1991 when Wojnarowicz's mental and physical health was taking a visible toll, leading him to a hospital visit. I chose to pull an excerpt from his journal that described this trip to the hospital and the treatment he was receiving from the doctors. It

also highlighted how he felt as though they were not giving him the real reason for why he was there. He believed they were taking pity on him for his illness and filtering their words. I chose to demonstrate this because it shows how little they could do to treat this virus and how few resources healthcare providers had to handle AIDS patients. I used this journal entry to look at the transitional period between his overall healthy self and the broken human being I was reading about in his last entries.

The last pieces of archival material I referenced were from his last writing journal. In these excerpts, we see the joy and hope leave Wojnarowicz's life as he turns into what he feared most. Wojnarowicz is noted stating that the only thing he feared about the virus is that it would destroy his mind, take away everything unique about him, and in turn destroy his art. In his journal, he wrote, "My life is no longer filled with poetry and dreams." This line made me realize that I was no longer reading the words of the David Wojnarowicz that I had been researching. The foundational aspect of David's work is its inspiration comes from his dreams and how, without them, he is no longer himself. An excerpt from later in this journal states. "I am very isolated and alone now... I hope I can come to an end soon." This was the final passage of Wojnarowicz's journals that I had read, feeling like my research had come to a natural end. It was on January 22, 1992 that David would pass in his New York City apartment surrounded by all of his closest friends and family due to AIDS related complications.

In exploring the archives of David Wojnarowicz, I developed a much deeper understanding of a topic I had already considered myself adept at. It wasn't until I had read about these real-life experiences surrounding AIDS that I would truly understand the pain this experience caused. This project proved to be an emotionally taxing yet

rewarding process; using archives as primary sources was something unfamiliar to me. It opened my eyes to the amount of information that you don't see on the surface. I did, however, find myself questioning the ethics of an archive like the Wojnarowicz journals in the *New York University Special Collections*. It felt very invasive reading David's journals as these were personal objects that may not have been intended for anyone to see. These journals were written documentations of his darkest thoughts and personal experiences. I had a lot of reservations about what I should include, especially that of the experts from his final journal depicting the lead-up to his death. I decided to use them to bring to life the actual pain this virus caused many people. This topic is becoming more relevant under the current United States government. We can observe this through the banning of AIDS resources on government websites and the freezing of funds for PEPFAR, a program providing developing countries with HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar's stories matter equally as much now as they did then. Looking down the barrel of the gun that is the Trump administration, it is necessary for these archived materials to come to light to remind people of the pain this virus has caused. By keeping these journals, the real stories of AIDS victims are kept alive. Wojnarowicz and Hujar are still fighting the battle they died for to this day and will continue to long after we're gone.

Sources

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Wojnarowicz (2018)

***Grammery as well as spell check was used in this paper.

