

Beginning in the late 1970s, David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) created a body of work that spanned photography, painting, music, film, sculpture, writing, and activism. Wojnarowicz was largely self-taught and came to prominence in New York in the 1980s, a time marked by creative energy, financial uncertainty, and profound cultural changes. Intersecting movements—graffiti, new and no wave music, conceptual photography, performance, and neo-expressionist painting—made New York a laboratory for innovation. Wojnarowicz refused a signature style, adopting a wide variety of techniques with an attitude of radical possibility. Distrustful of inherited structures, a feeling amplified by the resurgence of conservative politics, he varied his repertoire to better infiltrate the prevailing culture.

Wojnarowicz saw the outsider as his true subject. Queer, and later diagnosed as HIV-positive, he became an impassioned advocate for people with AIDS when an inconceivable number of friends, lovers, and strangers were dying due to government inaction. Wojnarowicz’s work documents and illuminates a desperate period of American history: the AIDS crisis and culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s. But his rightful place is also among the raging and haunting iconoclastic voices, from Walt Whitman to William S. Burroughs, who explored American myths, their perpetuation, their repercussions, and their violence. Like theirs, his work deals directly with the timeless subjects of sex, spirituality, love, and loss. Wojnarowicz, who was thirty-seven when he died from AIDS-related complications, wrote: “To make the private into something public is an action that has terrific ramifications.”

Hear archival recordings of the artist and listen to curators, scholars, and contemporary artists on Wojnarowicz and his work at whitney.org/Wojnarowicz, or borrow our free multimedia guide.