Wojnarowicz, who aspired to be a writer in the 1970s, immersed himself in the work of William S. Burroughs and Jean Genet—two collages here feature them—but he felt a particular kinship to the iconoclastic nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud. In the summer of 1979, just back from a stay in Paris with his sister, the twenty-four-year-old Wojnarowicz photographed three of his friends roaming the streets of New York wearing life-size masks of Rimbaud. Using a borrowed camera, Wojnarowicz staged the images in places important to his own story: the subway, Times Square, Coney Island, all-night diners, the Hudson River piers, and the loading docks in the Meatpacking District, just steps away from where you are standing. Born one hundred years, almost to the month, before Wojnarowicz, Rimbaud rejected established categories and wanted to create new and sensuous ways to participate in the world. He, like Wojnarowicz, was the forsaken son of a sailor father, made his queerness a subject of his work, and knowingly acknowledged his status as an outsider (“Je est un autre”—“I is an other”—is perhaps Rimbaud’s most famous formulation).

In the early 1980s Wojnarowicz had no real income. He scavenged materials like supermarket posters and trashcan lids as well as cheap printed materials available in his Lower East Side neighborhood. Incorporating them in his art, Wojnarowicz found radical possibilities in these discarded, forgotten artifacts and in the city itself. He embraced the abandoned piers on the Hudson River, particularly Pier 34 just off Canal Street, for the freedom they offered. He cruised for sex there, and he also wrote and made art on site. He appreciated their proximity to nature and the solitude he could find there. A slideshow of Andreas Sterzing's photographs documents Pier 34 from 1983 and 1984.

Wojnarowicz began using stencils out of necessity. He was a member of the band, 3 Teens Kill 4, whose album, *No Motive*, is playing on speakers in this gallery. He produced posters for their shows, and to prevent their removal started making templates to spray-paint his designs on buildings, walls, and sidewalks. These images—the burning house, a falling man, a map outline of the continental United States, a dive-bombing aircraft, a dancing figure—became signature elements in his visual vocabulary, creating an iconography of crisis and vulnerability. Wojnarowicz frequently railed against what he called the "pre-invented world": a world colonized and corporatized to such an extent that it seems to foreclose any alternatives. For him, using found objects, working at the abandoned piers for an audience of friends and strangers, and creating a language of his own were ways to shatter the illusion of the pre-invented world and make his own reality.

For his exhibition at the East Village gallery Civilian Warfare in May 1984, Wojnarowicz created a group of cast-plaster heads that he individualized by applying torn maps and paint. He made twenty-three of them, a reference to the number of chromosome pairs in human DNA, and explained that the series was about “the evolution of consciousness.” At the gallery, he installed these “alien heads” on long shelves on a wall painted with a bull’s-eye. Suggesting a firing line, the installation evoked the conflicts then ravaging Central and South America, from the Contra War in Nicaragua to the Salvadoran Civil War to the Argentine Dirty War. The specter of torture, disappearance, and human-rights abuses cast a shadow over all of the Americas.

Wojnarowicz’s work, with its dense constellation of signs and symbols, frequently used allegory to critique what he saw as our corrupt society. The alien head, for example, was a way to represent the foreigner or the outsider. In this installation, these symbols of the powerless hold space and compel their viewers to consider how power is claimed and held.

Wojnarowicz met Peter Hujar in 1980. They were briefly lovers, but the relationship soon transitioned and intensified into a friendship that defied categorization. The two, as the works in this gallery demonstrate, frequently made artworks using the other as subject. Twenty years Wojnarowicz's senior, Hujar was a photographer and a known figure in the New York art world, esteemed for his achingly beautiful, technically flawless portraits. At the time of their meeting, Wojnarowicz was still finding his way. It was Hujar who convinced him that he was an artist and, specifically, encouraged him to paint—something Wojnarowicz had never done. After Hujar's death in 1987 due to complications from AIDS, Wojnarowicz would claim him as "my brother, my father, my emotional link to the world."

In the mid-1980s Wojnarowicz began to incorporate his disparate signs and symbols into complex paintings. A fierce critic of a society he saw degrading the environment and ostracizing the outsider, Wojnarowicz made compositions that were dense with markers of industrial and colonized life. These include railroad tracks and highways, sprawling cities and factory buildings, maps and currency, nuclear power diagrams and crumbling monuments. Interspersed among them are symbols that he connected to fragility, such as blood cells, animals and insects, and the natural world. Wojnarowicz used these depictions as metaphors for a culture that devalues the lives of those on the periphery of mainstream culture. He made these paintings at a time when AIDS was ravaging New York, particularly the gay community. Although AIDS was first identified in 1981, President Ronald Reagan did not mention it publicly until 1985. By the end of that year, in New York alone there already had been 3,766 AIDS-related deaths.

This gallery presents a selection of film footage from the late 1980s. Wojnarowicz filmed constantly during this period, bringing his Super 8 camera with him on his frequent travels. At the end of October 1986, he went to Mexico where he filmed the Day of the Dead festivities and other scenes at Teotihuacán. This footage includes fire ants climbing on objects such as clocks, currency, and a crucifix that Wojnarowicz brought with him. Wojnarowicz, who was raised Roman Catholic, would later speak of Jesus Christ as one who "took on the suffering of all people." As the AIDS crisis intensified, he sought to find a symbolic language that encapsulated ideas of spirituality, mortality, vulnerability, and violence. He began to edit the Mexican footage into a film entitled *A Fire in My Belly*, but it was never finished.

Also on view here are images that correspond to a journal entry concerning a planned film about Peter Hujar. Wojnarowicz abandoned that project as well, but he used stills from it and other films as the basis of other work. Ravenous for the world and its offerings, Wojnarowicz used film as form of second sight, a visual notebook, and a record for us to see the world—at least in flashes—as he did.

On September 17, 1987, Gracie Mansion Gallery opened an exhibition of Wojnarowicz's work called *The Four Elements*. These symbolically and technically dense paintings—allegorical representations of earth, water, fire, and wind—are Wojnarowicz's take on a theme with a long history in European art. By linking his contemporary moment to a historical subject, he claims a lineage for his work as he suggests the particularity—and particular violence—of his time.

This gallery presents audio recordings of Wojnarowicz reading his own work in 1992 at the Drawing Center, New York, at a benefit for Needle Exchange. The texts are excerpts from his books *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) and *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline* (1992); a short work, “Spiral,” which appeared in *Artforum* in 1992; and another brief piece that begins with the phrase “When I put my hands on your body,” which also appears in a photo-based work in the final gallery of this exhibition.

Wojnarowicz was in the hospital room when Peter Hujar died from complications related to AIDS. He asked the others who were there to leave so that he could film and photograph his friend for the last time. The three tender images of Hujar's head, hands, and feet installed here come from this final encounter. While Wojnarowicz would continue to draw and paint after Hujar's death, photography and writing would preoccupy him until the end of his life. He moved into Hujar's loft, which had a darkroom, enabling him to reconsider and experiment with the vast number of negatives he had accumulated over the years.

During the period covered in this gallery, Wojnarowicz found himself at the center of political debates involving the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In a newsletter that the American Family Association distributed to criticize NEA funding of exhibitions with gay content, the religious lobby group excerpted Wojnarowicz's work out of context. He sued for copyright infringement and won. Wojnarowicz's hand-edited affidavit and related materials are included here. The searing essay he contributed to the catalogue for *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing*, an exhibition curated by artist Nan Goldin in 1989, triggered the NEA to withdraw its funding. In it Wojnarowicz strenuously criticized—and personally demonized—conservative policy-makers for failing to halt the spread of AIDS by discouraging education about safe sex practices. One of its most memorable passages is the pronouncement: "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."

The sole survey of Wojnarowicz's work during his lifetime, *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame*, was held in 1990 at Illinois State University in Normal. In the lead-up to the exhibition, he began work on the four large-scale paintings of exotic flowers on view in this gallery. Equating the beauty of the body with its very fragility, Wojnarowicz uses the flower as an allusion to the AIDS crisis, his own illness, and a continuum of loss. Importantly, the flower also suggests the possibility and necessity of beauty. The artist Zoe Leonard recalls showing Wojnarowicz, at the height of the AIDS crisis, her small work prints of clouds. Leonard, also an activist, recalls: "I felt guilty and torn. I felt detached—my work was so subtle and abstract, so apolitical on the surface. I remember showing those pictures to David and talking things over with him and he said—I'm paraphrasing—Don't ever give up beauty. We're fighting so that we can have things like this, so that we can have beauty again."

Wojnarowicz's work concerns itself with the mechanisms, politics, and manipulations of power that make some lives visible and others not. The will to make bodies present—the compulsion to clear a space for queer representations not commonly seen through language and image—was threaded throughout his work, exacerbated by the AIDS crisis, and crystallized in the work seen in this gallery. *Untitled (One Day This Kid . . . )* (1990–91) is perhaps Wojnarowicz's best-known work. Black script shapes the boundary of a boy's body—a boy whom we know, with his high forehead, prominent teeth, and electric eyes, is Wojnarowicz as a child. He sits for what we assume is a school picture, and he's no older than eight. The text that surrounds him projects the child into a future scarred by abuse and homophobia. This artwork, like many by Wojnarowicz, has rightly come to embody the spirit of protest, struggle, and resistance. Wojnarowicz died on July 22, 1992. By the end of that year, 38,044 others in New York had died from AIDS-related complications. In his essay "Postcards from America: X Rays from Hell," Wojnarowicz states what is equally true of art and protest: "With enough gestures we can deafen the satellites and lift the curtains surrounding the control room."