

WHITNEY

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PRESS RELEASE



David Wojnarowicz with Tom Warren, *Self-Portrait of David Wojnarowicz*, 1983–84. Acrylic and collaged paper on gelatin silver print, 60 × 40 in. (152.4 × 101.6 cm). Collection of Brooke Garber Neidich and Daniel Neidich

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ RETROSPECTIVE AT THE WHITNEY EXPLORES THE ENDURING RESONANCE OF AN ARTIST WHO MERGED THE PERSONAL AND THE POLITICAL

NEW YORK, MAY 24, 2018—This summer, the most complete presentation to date of the work of artist, writer, and activist David Wojnarowicz will be on view in a full-scale retrospective organized by the Whitney Museum of American Art. *David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night* is the first major re-evaluation since 1999 of one of the most fervent and essential voices of his generation.

Opening at the Whitney on July 13 and running through September 30, *David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night* features more than a hundred works by the artist and is organized by two Whitney curators, David Breslin, DeMartini Family Curator and Director of the Collection, and David Kiehl, Curator Emeritus. The exhibition, which will be installed in the Museum's fifth floor Neil Bluhm Family Galleries through September 30, draws upon the scholarly resources of the Fales Library and Special Collections (NYU), the repository of Wojnarowicz's archive, and is also built on the foundation of the Whitney's extensive holdings of Wojnarowicz's work, including thirty works from the Museum's collection. It will travel to the Museo Reina

Sofia, Madrid, in May 2019, and to Mudam Luxembourg - Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg City, in November 2019.

Beginning in the late 1970s, David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) created a body of work that spanned photography, painting, music, film, sculpture, writing, performance, and activism. Joining a lineage of iconoclasts, Wojnarowicz (pronounced Voyna-ROW-vich) saw the outsider as his true subject. His mature period began with a series of photographs and collages that honored—and placed himself among—consummate countercultural figures like Arthur Rimbaud, William Burroughs, and Jean Genet. Even as he became well-known in the East Village art scene for his mythological paintings, Wojnarowicz remained committed to writing personal essays. Queer and HIV-positive, Wojnarowicz became an impassioned advocate for people with AIDS at a time when an inconceivable number of friends, lovers, and strangers—disproportionately gay men—were dying from the disease and from government inaction.

Scott Rothkopf, Deputy Director for Programs and Nancy and Steve Crown Family Chief Curator, remarked, “Since his death more than twenty-five years ago, David Wojnarowicz has become an almost mythic figure, haunting, inspiring, and calling to arms subsequent generations through his inseparable artistic and political examples. This retrospective will enable so many to confront for the first time, or anew, the groundbreaking multidisciplinary body of work on which his legacy actually stands.”

David Breslin noted, “With rage and beauty, David Wojnarowicz made art that questioned power, particularly why some lives are visible and others are hidden. Wojnarowicz wrote, ‘To make the private into something public is an action that has terrific ramifications.’ Present throughout his work and this exhibition is the will to show the desires, dreams, and politics of outsiders—like him—queer, economically marginalized, sick, vulnerable, and vibrantly idiosyncratic.”

David Kiehl remarked, “David Wojnarowicz created a vocabulary of images that permeate his visual work—each laden with associations that ask the viewer to pause and consider our personal complicity in a shared inheritance of what it is to be a sentient human being, in a world that places in jeopardy the natural order and our humanity.”

Largely self-taught, Wojnarowicz came to prominence in New York in the 1980s, a period marked by great creative energy and profound cultural changes. Intersecting movements—graffiti, new and no wave music, conceptual photography, performance, neo-expressionist painting—made New York a laboratory for innovation. Unlike many artists, 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, Wojnarowicz varied his repertoire to better infiltrate the culture.

Wojnarowicz was a poet before he was a visual artist. His mature period began with *Rimbaud in New York* (1978–79), in which he photographed friends wearing a mask of the nineteenth-century French poet's face and posing throughout New York City. He became, in the 1980s, a figure in the East Village art scene, showing his paintings, photographs, and installations at galleries like Civilian Warfare, Gracie Mansion, and P.P.O.W. During a time when AIDS was ravaging the artistic community of New York, Wojnarowicz emerged as a powerful activist and advocate for the rights of people with AIDS and the queer community, becoming deeply entangled in the culture wars.

His essay for the catalogue accompanying the exhibition *Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing* (curated by Nan Goldin at Artists Space in 1989–90) came under fire for its vitriolic attack on politicians and leaders who were preventing AIDS treatment and awareness. The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) threatened to defund the exhibition, and Wojnarowicz fought against this and for the first amendment rights of artists.

The Whitney retrospective will include an excerpt of footage shot by Phil Zwickler, a filmmaker, fellow activist, and friend of Wojnarowicz who also died of AIDS, in which Wojnarowicz is seen preparing to talk to the press

in the wake of the NEA controversy. Important text-photo works from this period, which incorporated writings from *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, a collection of essays published a year prior to Wojnarowicz's death, will also be in the Whitney show, including *When I Put My Hands on Your Body* (1990), *Untitled (One day this kid...)* (1989), and the iconic photograph *Untitled (Falling Buffalo)* (1988-89).

The Whitney exhibition begins with the artist's early experiments in collage and photography that were contemporaneous with the *Rimbaud in New York* series and features three of Wojnarowicz's original journals that he kept during the time he was living in Paris and conceiving the Rimbaud photographs. Also on view will be the original Rimbaud mask the artist had his friends wear to pose for the photographs.

Wojnarowicz's early stencil works first appeared on the streets of downtown Manhattan. These show him developing an iconographic language that he also used on the walls of the abandoned piers on the Hudson River and would figure in the more complex studio paintings that characterize his art later in the decade. An important group of spray and collage paintings in 1982 focus on an image of the artist Peter Hujar, his great friend and mentor. A group of Hujar's photographs of Wojnarowicz will be shown in conversation with these paintings. By the mid-1980s, Wojnarowicz's paintings combined mythological subject matter with elements that explored urbanism, technology, religion, and industry.

His masterful suite of four paintings from 1987, each named for one of the four elements, will be shown in their own gallery both to emphasize the centrality of painting and image-making during this moment and to mark the beginning of a period of mourning, rage, and action (both aesthetic and activist) marked by the death of Hujar and others to AIDS-related complications. His never-completed film, *Fire in My Belly*, will be shown among other unfinished film work that later would become the source for much of his photographic work from 1988-89: the *Ant Series*, *The Weight of the World*, and *Spirituality (for Paul Thek)*. A gallery will be devoted to a recording of Wojnarowicz reading from his own writings in 1992 at The Drawing Center in Soho.

About the Artist

After hitchhiking across the U.S. and living for several months in San Francisco, and then in Paris, David Wojnarowicz settled in New York in 1978 and soon after began to exhibit his work in East Village galleries. He was included in the 1985 and 1991 Whitney Biennials, and was shown in numerous museum and gallery exhibitions throughout the United States and Europe. Previous exhibitions to focus on Wojnarowicz include "Tongues of Flame" at the University Galleries of Illinois State University (1990) and "Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz" at the New Museum (1999). Wojnarowicz was the author of a number of books, including *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991). His artwork is in numerous private and public collections including the Whitney Museum of American Art; the Metropolitan Museum of Art; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; The Art Institute of Chicago; the Broad Art Foundation, Los Angeles; and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid, Spain.

Curatorial Credit

The exhibition is organized by David Breslin, DeMartini Family Curator and Director of the Collection, and David Kiehl, Curator Emeritus, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

Catalogue

Published by the Whitney Museum of American Art, the catalogue features essays by artists Gregg Bordowitz and Julie Ault; Marvin Taylor, Director of the Fales Library and Special Collections; novelist and editor Hanya Yanagihara; Cynthia Carr, author of *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times David Wojnarowicz*, the definitive biography of Wojnarowicz; as well as the co-curators.

Programs

The exhibition will be accompanied by a robust program of performances, talks, and readings that will highlight Wojnarowicz's work as a performer and writer as well as reflect on his milieu in New York during the 1980s and 90s.

On Friday, **July 13**, in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition, the Whitney will present the symposium **Visual Arts and the AIDS Epidemic**, drawing on an oral history project of the same name undertaken by the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, focusing on memories of the AIDS crisis. This program features conversations with artists, activists, and oral historians and is presented in collaboration with the Archives of American Art. The symposium, free and open to the public, is funded by The Keith Haring Foundation. It will also be live-streamed.

Programming will also include a conversation on **Saturday, July 14, at 3 pm**, between Marion Scemama and Sylvere Lotringer about the extensive interview Lotringer conducted with Wojnarowicz in 1991, the subject of a film by Scemama.

In addition, as part of the exhibition, the Whitney is presenting a rare performance of Wojnarowicz's multimedia work ***ITSOFOMO (In the Shadow of Forward Motion)***, made in collaboration with composer and musician Ben Neill. The work debuted at The Kitchen in 1989 and has not been performed live in New York in 25 years. *ITSOFOMO* integrates music, text, and video in a multi-dimensional format that embodies acceleration and its sensory manifestations. It is within this framework that Wojnarowicz addressed the acceleration of the AIDS crisis and confronted the politics of AIDS in the U.S. For this presentation, Ben Neill and the percussionist Don Yallech, who played alongside Neill and Wojnarowicz in 1989, will revisit this fierce meditation on history and power. Performances will take place **September 14 to 16**.

Further details and additional programs to be announced on whitney.org.

Exhibition Support

Major support for *David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night* is provided by the Ford Foundation; The Thompson Family Foundation, Inc.; and The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

Significant support is provided by The Keith Haring Foundation Exhibition Fund, Brooke and Daniel Neidich, the Trellis Fund, and the Whitney's National Committee.

Generous support is provided by Philip Aarons and Shelley Fox Aarons, Susan and John Hess, Nancy and Fred Poses, The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, and Fern and Lenard Tessler.

Additional support is provided by the Daniel W. Dietrich II Foundation.

About the Whitney

The Whitney Museum of American Art, founded in 1930 by the artist and philanthropist Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney (1875–1942), houses the foremost collection of American art from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Mrs. Whitney, an early and ardent supporter of modern American art, nurtured groundbreaking artists at a time when audiences were still largely preoccupied with the Old Masters. From her vision arose the Whitney Museum of American Art, which has been championing the most innovative art of the United States for more than eighty years. The core of the Whitney's mission is to collect, preserve, interpret, and exhibit American art of our time and serve a wide variety of audiences in celebration of the complexity and diversity of art and culture in the United States. Through this mission and a steadfast commitment to artists themselves, the Whitney has long been a powerful force in support of modern and contemporary art and continues to help define what is innovative and influential in American art today.

Current and Upcoming Exhibitions at the Whitney Museum of American Art

Mary Corse	June 8 – November 25, 2018
Pacha, Llaqta, Wasichay: Indigenous Space, Modern Architecture, New Art	July 13 – September 30, 2018
David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night	July 13 – September 30, 2018
Kevin Beasley	Opens Fall 2018
Andy Warhol – From A to B and Back Again	November 12, 2018 – March 31, 2019
Juan Antonio Olivares: Moléculas	Until June 10, 2018

Zoe Leonard: Survey	Until June 10, 2018
Grant Wood: American Gothic and Other Fables	Until June 10, 2018
Nick Mauss	Until May 14, 2018
Between the Waters	Until July 22, 2018
An Incomplete History of Protest: Selections from the Whitney's Collection, 1940–2017	Until August 27, 2018
Flash: Photographs by Harold Edgerton from the Whitney's Collection	Ongoing
Where We Are: Selections from the Whitney's Collection 1900–1960	Ongoing
Christine Sun Kim: Too Much Future	Ongoing

The Whitney Museum of American Art is located at 99 Gansevoort Street between Washington and West Streets, New York City. Museum hours are: Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Sunday from 10:30 am to 6 pm; Friday and Saturday from 10:30 am to 10 pm. Closed Tuesday. Adults: \$25. Full-time students and visitors 65 & over: \$18. Visitors 18 years & under and Whitney members: FREE. Admission is pay-what-you-wish on Fridays, 7–10 pm. For general information, please call (212) 570-3600 or visit whitney.org.

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