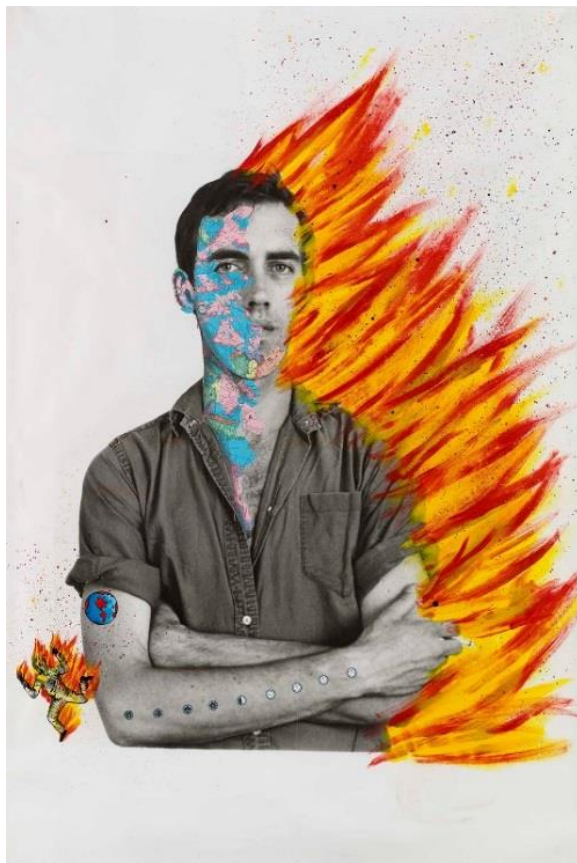


## David Wojnarowicz. *History Keeps Me Awake at Night*



DAVID WOJNAROWICZ CON TOM WARREN  
*Autorretrato de David Wojnarowicz*, 1983–84  
Acrílico y collage sobre gelatinobromuro de plata  
148,6 × 99,1 cm  
Colección de Brooke Garber Neidich y Daniel Neidich  
Fotografía de Ron Amstutz

- DATES:** 29 May – 30 September, 2019
- PLACE:** Sabatini Building, Floor 1
- ORGANIZATION:** Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, in collaboration with the Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid, and the Mudam Luxembourg – Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxembourg
- CURATORSHIP:** David Breslin and David Kiehl
- COORDINATION:** Rafael García
- TOUR:** Whitney Museum of American Art, Nueva York: 13 July– 30 September, 2018  
Museo Reina Sofía, Madrid: 29 May – September 30, 2019  
Mudam Luxembourg - Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean, Luxemburg: 26 October, 2019 – 2 February 2020

The exhibition **David Wojnarowicz. History Keeps Me Awake at Night** is the first major review of the multifaceted creative work of the artist, writer and activist David Wojnarowicz (New Jersey, 1954-New York, 1992) since the 1999 exhibition at the New Museum in New York and the 2012 publication of *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz*, his Cynthia Carr's detailed biography.

This major retrospective, organized by the **Whitney Museum of American Art** in New York in collaboration with the **Reina Sofia Museum** and the Mudam **Luxembourg - Musée d'Art Moderne Grand-Duc Jean**, not only examines the plurality of styles and media that the artist displayed in his practice, but also relates his work to the political, social and artistic context of New York in the 1980s and early 1990s.

That was a time marked by **economic uncertainty** and the **terrible AIDS epidemic**, but also by creative energy and a series of **profound cultural changes**: the intersection of different movements - graffiti, new wave and no wave music, conceptual photography, performance and neo-expressionist painting - turned the American city into an **artistic laboratory for innovation**.

In this scenario and until his premature death from HIV, David Wojnarowicz, practically self-taught, developed an artistic work that, without sticking to a characteristic style, includes photography, painting, music, cinema, sculpture, literature and activism to make a lucid and incisive chronicle of the moment he lived.

In his work, **the figure of the marginalized** is the object of Wojnarowicz's favorite representation. Homosexual and HIV-positive, he became an ardent defender of people suffering from AIDS at a time when many friends and strangers were dying in the face of the government's passivity. On the other hand, Wojnarowicz's work can also be framed in this tradition of iconoclastic artists, from Walt Whitman to William S. Burroughs, who have analysed **American myths**, their repercussions and their aggressiveness. Like them, it addresses timeless themes such as sex, spirituality, love and loss.

The exhibition brings together approximately **200 works**, many of which belong to private collections and come from the United States, making it a unique opportunity for the Spanish and European public to see the most important retrospective after his death.

### Literary influences

Before being a visual artist, Wojnarowicz was a poet. In the 1970s, when he wanted to become a writer, he had great admiration for the iconoclastic French poet **Arthur Rimbaud** and, in a way, their lives resembled each other. With the French poet as a reference, just after returning from a trip to Paris, a twenty-four year old Wojnarowicz photographed three of his friends strolling through the streets of New York with a life-size Rimbaud mask, the original of which can be seen at the beginning of the exhibition. Next to it there are 39 snapshots of what is now considered a canonical work: the series *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* (1978-79), produced by Wojnarowicz in places that had been important to him.

His close relationship with literature also shows the great influence that other writers such as **William S. Burroughs** and **Jean Genet** exerted on his work. Both authors appear in two collages in this room - *Untitled (Genet portrayed by Brassai)* (1979) and *The Recurring Dream of Bill Burroughs* (1978). The early adoption of the seriality of the photographs and the use of collage mark the beginning of Wojnarowicz's stage of artistic maturity.



DAVID WOJNAROWICZ  
*Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, Arthur Rimbaud en Nueva York, 1978-1979 (Copia de 1990)  
Impresión en gelatina de plata  
20,3 x 25,4 cm  
Colección del Estate of David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992), por cortesía de P.P.O.W. Nueva York  
Imagen por cortesía de la Fares Library and Special Collections, New York University

### Dock 34: found objects and stencils

In the early 1980s, Wojnarowicz had no fixed source of income. That's why he recycled all kinds of found materials, such as trash can lids or posters and "all for one dollar" stores in the Lower East Side neighborhood. His main work scenario was the abandoned buildings on the Hudson River docks.



DAVID WOJNAROWICZ  
*Untitled (Falling man and map of the U.S.A.)*, 1982  
Sin título (Hombre que cae y mapa de los EE. UU.)  
Pintura en espray sobre papel  
60,8 x 45,7 cm  
Whitney Museum of American Art, Nueva York; adquisición con fondos del Print  
Committee 2001.269  
Imagen © Whitney Museum of American Art, Nueva York

He created there works of art such as those that can be seen in the next section of the exhibition, which begins with works showing his usual stencils - a house on fire, a falling man, a bomber, etc. - which became distinctive elements of his visual vocabulary. Wojnarowicz began to use them out of necessity. He was one of the members of the musical group no wave 3 Teens Kill 4, whose album *No Motive*, you can hear a small room adjacent. He designed some posters to announce the band's concerts and, to prevent them from being ripped off, he began to create templates to spray his drawings on buildings, walls and sidewalks.

Screen-printed advertisements of "offers of the week", which were taped to shop windows and periodically renewed, were also used by the artist. Once stencilled, painted and/or transformed into collages, these posters became unmistakable works by

Wojnarowicz. Examples of this are *Jean Genet masturbating in Metteray prison (London Broil)* (1983) or *Martinson Coffee* (1983).

### Metamorphosis

Wojnarowicz introduced a new dimension to his work with the most important piece he presented in an exhibition that took place in 1984: a series of shelves with twenty-three heads (in reference to the number of pairs of human DNA chromosomes) of plaster with paint and collage bearing the collective title *Metamorphosis* and shown below.

These monster/alien/mutant heads had already appeared in some stencils and collages, but this was the first time it had taken on a three-dimensional form. The installation, reminiscent of a firing squad wall, referred to the conflicts then ravaging Central and South America: the Nicaraguan Contra, the civil war in El Salvador or the dirty war in Argentina. The spectre of torture, the disappeared and the violation of human rights was a shadow hanging over the entire American continent.

## Wojnarowicz and Hujar

Wojnarowicz met Peter Hujar in 1980. They were lovers for a short time, but their relationship intensified and evolved into a friendship impossible to categorize. As can be seen in the following area of the exhibition, the two friends portrayed each other on several occasions.

Twenty years older than Wojnarowicz, Hujar was a photographer and a well-known figure in New York art circles, and his portraits were much appreciated. By the time they met, Wojnarowicz had not yet found his true vocation. It was Hujar who convinced him that he was an artist and encouraged him to paint, something Wojnarowicz had never done before. In 1987, when Hujar died of AIDS, Wojnarowicz would declare that he had been "my brother, my father, my emotional link to the world".



DAVID WOJNAROWICZ  
*Peter Hujar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: Saint Sebastian*, 1982  
Peter Hujar soñando/Yukio Mishima: San Sebastián  
Pintura acrílica y pintura en espray sobre tablero de conglomerado  
121,9 × 121,9 cm  
Colección de Matthijs Erdman  
Imagen por cortesía del Estate of David Wojnarowicz y P.P.O.W, Nueva York

## Artist Movies

The videos shown in this and the next room show a selection of excerpts from films shot in the late 1980s. At the end of October 1986 he traveled to Mexico, where he filmed the Day of the Dead festivities and other scenes in Teotihuacan. In these images we can see how the red ants walk along a clock, some bills and a crucifix that Wojnarowicz took with him on his return.

The artist, who had been educated in Catholicism, would affirm years later that Jesus Christ "wanted to bear the suffering of all humanity". When the AIDS crisis intensified, he tried to find a symbolic language that would allow him to synthesize the notions of spirituality, mortality, vulnerability and violence. He began to assemble the images he had shot in Mexico to create a film called *A Fire in My Belly*, which he never finished.

## The pre-invented world

In the mid-1980s, Wojnarowicz's paintings took a new direction, and the compositions and themes became more daring and complex. The titles of these paintings and subsequent photographic collages provide clues to his interpretation of the social, economic, and cultural aspects of contemporary North America and its relationship to Western civilization.

Wojnarowicz used the term "pre-invented" to designate the prescribed order. In his view, we can only know the world before the appearance of man - the world before the



DAVID WOJNAROWICZ  
*History Keeps Me Awake at Night (For Rilo Chmielorz)*, 1986  
La historia me quita el sueño (Para Rilo Chmielorz)  
Pintura acrílica, pintura en espray y collage de papel sobre tablero de conglomerado  
171,5 × 201 × 3,2 cm  
Colección de John P. Axelrod  
Fotografía de Ron Cowie

invention of railway tracks and motorways, expanding cities and industrial complexes, maps and coins - by opposition, an antithetical definition of the contemporary world. The present, therefore, is the prefabricated, "pre-invented" world. A ruthless critic of a society that, in his view, degraded the environment and excluded people living on the margins, Wojnarowicz created compositions packed with symbols of industrialization and colonization.

After this area, various paintings from Wojnarowicz's exhibition *The Four Elements* are shown. These symbol-laden paintings, of enormous technical complexity, are allegorical representations of earth, water, fire and air. In this case, the artist offers a personal interpretation of a theme with a long tradition in European art. By relating his own epoch to a historical theme, he vindicates the lineage of his work, while affirming the singularity and specific violence of the present.

### **After the death of Peter Hujar**

Wojnarowicz was in Peter Hujar's hospital room when his friend died of AIDS-related complications. As soon as Hujar died, he filmed and photographed his friend for the last time. The three delicate images of Hujar that can be seen in this room were collected during this last meeting. Although Wojnarowicz continued to draw and paint after Hujar's death, photography and writing would take on a special prominence until the end of his life.

In the period covered by this room, Wojnarowicz occupied a central position in a series of political controversies related to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). In a letter circulated by the American Family Association to criticize NEA grants for homosexual exhibitions, this religious lobby took some of Wojnarowicz's works out of context. The artist sued them for violating copyright law and won the lawsuit. This room displays Wojnarowicz's affidavit and other documents related to this trial.

Before moving on to the last section, another room collects some works from the only retrospective that Wojnarowicz inaugurated in life, *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame*, which was held at Illinois State University in Normal in 1990. In the run-up to this exhibition, the artist began work on four huge paintings of exotic flowers as a symbol of the AIDS crisis and his own illness.

Also present in this area are other works that, as with previous pieces in the exhibition, reflect that world maps were another fundamental material for Wojnarowicz, who used them to create pictorial collages such as *Untitled (Peter Hujar dreaming)* (1982). The maps play numerous roles in Wojnarowicz's work, and just as they highlight the arbitrary nature of borders and other human divisions, they can be interpreted as a symbol of the divorce between nature and urban civilizations, or as a call to flee cities where AIDS had begun to take root.

## The machinations of power

Wojnarowicz's work deals with the mechanisms, policies and machinations that power uses to give visibility to some lives and deny it to others. The desire to give presence to bodies - the obsession with creating an open space in which to reproduce, through language and images, homosexual representations that are almost never seen - is a restlessness that runs through his entire work and which was exacerbated by the AIDS crisis to give rise to the piece we can see at the end of the exhibition: *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)* (1990-1991) is perhaps Wojnarowicz's best-known work. The silhouette of a child is Wojnarowicz himself.

In the text that surrounds him, the future of this child is described, a future marked by aggressions and homophobia. This piece, like so many others of his, has become a symbol of the spirit of protest, struggle and resistance.

## Catalogue

On the occasion of the exhibition, the Reina Sofia Museum publishes a catalogue which, in addition to including images of the works exhibited, contains a prologue by Adam D. Weinberg as well as texts by curators David Breslin and David Kiehl, and author Julie Ault and a biographical chronology of the artist by Cynthia Carr.

### **Further information:**

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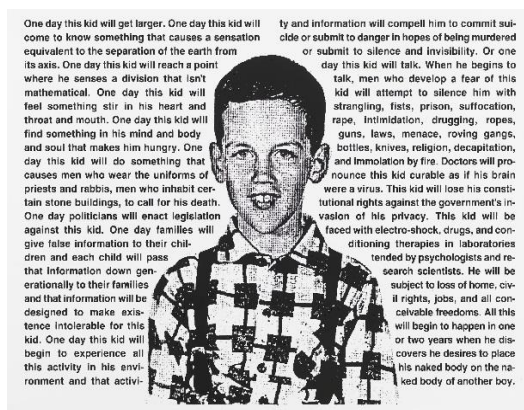
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DAVID WOJNAROWICZ  
*Untitled (One day this kid...)*, Sin título (Un día, este niño...) 1990-1991  
Fotocopia montada sobre cartón  
75,7 x 101,9 x 0,3 cm  
Whitney Museum of American Art, Nueva York; adquisición, con fondos del Print Committee 2002. 183  
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