The Installations and Ephemeral Art of David Wojnarowicz

by

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Introduction

David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) has been described as a “Man of Many Talents” since he started receiving attention for his art back in the early 1980s.¹ This was a fitting designation since he created art, music, and literature while being a proponent of social and political change. Throughout his life, Wojnarowicz struggled with finding a personal sort of honesty about himself and the world in which he lived.² Time and Place were subjects that he continually examined and are seen throughout his entire body of work. He used his artwork as a means to explore the “pre-invented” existence that we are all born into. Every society has had some sort of structure and system of beliefs. Wojnarowicz sought to investigate these structures and chart his reactions to society and its culture.³ His work—independent of media—can be seen as a kind of journal that maps the world as he saw it while repeating images and symbols that he developed into his own visual language. The Pop artists of twenty years earlier used repetition to dilute the messages inherent in certain images, while Wojnarowicz reused images to strengthen and mystify them: a new means of communication at the end of the twentieth century.⁴ In a world of ever-increasing complexity, Wojnarowicz created intricate installations and other thought-provoking ephemeral art that is emblematic of his biography, corpus, and the culture of art in the rapidly changing landscape of New York City in the 1980s, yet we know very little about many of these projects. Through his installations, Wojnarowicz sought to disrupt the stagnancy of society and culture by creating art in unexpected places, while also working through his dark past filled with physical and mental violence. Along with this private violence, he had to face violence in society,

³ Ibid., 61.
⁴ Ibid., 62.
especially the political and religious attacks of the Culture Wars during the AIDS crisis near the end of his life.

While much of Wojnarowicz’s creative output has been examined and written about by politicians who opposed his work, activists who supported his struggles, critics and academics who have grappled with his art and personal history, one gap in the scholarship still surrounds his installations. A caption on a photograph of an installation might read, “Mixed media, installation,” but that brief unspecific description does not allow us to extrapolate much about its various components (Figure 1). Wojnarowicz is one of the quintessential artists in post-war America. Beyond the labels of artist, writer, musician, performer, filmmaker, photographer, and activist, he was a man trying to make sense of the world. After growing up in a violent home in the New Jersey suburbs, Wojnarowicz found himself living on the streets of New York hustling money and turning “tricks” as a child prostitute in Times Square.5 This sense of fear and marginalization gave him the strength to see the world for what it was and propelled him to work out ways in which to communicate and respond accordingly. At a young age and out of necessity he had to learn what security, ethics, and mortality meant in the unrelentingly cruel world. Wojnarowicz not only reflected what he saw in society, but he created an alternative kind of language and history in all aspects of his creative projects. The lexicon of recurrent images in almost all his work was layered either in meaning or materiality—he wanted to say more than one thing at once and present compacted information because that was how the world appeared to him.6 This

A relational and interdisciplinary approach came at a time when Installation Art was beginning to take form as a recognizable practice.

Many of Wojnarowicz’s installations were created in the 1980s at now defunct galleries in Lower Manhattan and the East Village, as well as at smaller institutions around the United States. This may explain why this aspect of Wojnarowicz’s body of work has been overlooked but does not excuse it. His installations were complex works of art with a life cycle: an installation would be assembled, open to the public, and be taken down or destroyed within a matter of weeks or a couple of months. The ephemeral nature of installation and its interdisciplinary qualities allow it to be almost entirely relational and engage the space it was presented in, the context of the things around it, and the time in which it was situated. Not only did Wojnarowicz accomplish the feat of incorporating these aspects to match his vision, he frequently recycled and reused motifs and objects multiple times in other installations or as individual art objects themselves. While we have some photographs and descriptions of these installations, they still seem like memories or dreams where only one or two images remain clear. Therefore, art historians are faced with the challenge of understanding these works, curators must deliberate whether to attempt recreating them and how to in an appropriate manner, and conservators search for details to inform how they will care for them without the presence of the artist.

The primary function of this thesis is to describe and analyze Wojnarowicz’s installations while incorporating other related ephemeral works throughout distinct parts of his artistic career. These chapters will survey the Installation Art by Wojnarowicz, both

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7 Murals and graffiti have disappeared, site-specific paintings have been painted over (“411” at Public Illumination Picture Gallery, 1982; Wojnarowicz’s solo show at Milliken, 1982-1983; “Urban Pulses” at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, 1983; “Walls” at Norton Gallery of Art, 1986), and buildings have been destroyed or renovated (Ward Line Pier, 1984; Kentucky Lithograph Building, 1985).
visually and critically, while drawing lines connecting his work in other media and events in his life. Sur Rodney Sur (1954–), co-director of Gracie Mansion Gallery, said of Wojnarowicz’s work, “Once the installation was done and people could see it, and he could realize it, he was thrilled.” After many of Wojnarowicz’s items in the 1984 *Untitled (Burning Child)* installation at Gracie Mansion sold, Sur recalled the idea of selling an installation as a whole: “I don’t think that was within our thinking, and even if it was, the only people that could buy it would be someone like the person [Robert Mnuchin] who commissioned the thing for his place or a museum.”

With this in mind, the premise of this thesis to identify the components of these installations and consider their meaning and implications within Wojnarowicz’s body of work becomes imperative since there is very little in the way of preliminary sketches or checklists for these installations. Furthermore, this document should serve as a foundation for further research, interpretation, and understanding of Wojnarowicz’s art in both its meaning and history.

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Multi-Media Practices and Collaborations

In the 1980s, Installation Art was just beginning to take shape as a recognizable practice in the art world. To be sure, the practice of assembling a roomful of various media and presenting it as a cohesive entity had been around for decades—even centuries or millennia.\(^9\) Minimalism of the 1960s shown in big South of Houston Street (SoHo) loft studios and galleries was gasping for air and the plethora of mini-art movements of the 1970s that interrogated medium and message were losing steam, so people were waiting to see what would come next in the 1980s.

The Lower East Side, where Wojnarowicz lived, was one of the poorest and most dangerous areas of Manhattan in the mid-1970s, but since it was also the cheapest, it attracted a lot of musicians and artists. The music scene, centered around the bar CBGB & OMFUG, was fertile ground from which Punk and New Wave arose.\(^{10}\) It was from this pretext that the so-called “East Village Art” scene developed, while the art being created there had little or no overarching qualities or characteristics aside from its geographic location and its young, energetic, and eccentric galleries, dealers, and artists. The Lower East Side was a hotbed of creativity and socialization in the span of years that saw the birth of Punk and the deaths of far too many during the AIDS crisis.

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\(^9\) The practice of creating art for or adorning a specific space can be seen all over the world throughout history. One could argue that the cave paintings in Lascaux (ca. 15,000 BCE), the Sistine Chapel frescoes (1508-1512) by Michelangelo, and *Proun Room* (1923) by El Lissitzky were all installation art—“art that is made for a particular place, so much so that it cannot easily be moved because the work is not an object but is attached to the surroundings.” Mark Rosenthal, *Understanding Installation Art: From Duchamp to Holzer*, 2003, page 23.

\(^{10}\) CBGB & OMFUG was an acronym and far catchier way to say the name of the music venue and bar: Country, Bluegrass, Blues & Other Music For Uplifting Gourmandizers. See also: Steven Hager, *Art After Midnight: The East Village Scene*, 1986, pages 2-19.
Installation Art was being explored by artists who were combining multiple media and presenting everything at once while critics were historicizing the past decade or two of its practice.\footnote{Rosenthal, 27-28.} Wojnarowicz’s work would prove to be interdisciplinary in nature throughout his career but his paintings, sculptures, photography, and sound projects would later become categorized and quantified in their own aspects of his body of work. As previously mentioned, his projects that incorporated only one of these easily identifiable categories have already been examined, but his multi-media installations have been ignored for a variety of reasons: their ephemeral nature, the ambiguity of their remaining documentation and photographs, and their use and re-use of independent objects and artworks. The trickiest aspect of Wojnarowicz’s installation art was the fact that he incorporated stand-alone artworks into these practices because—in each context—they had their own meaning and message.

Furthermore, Wojnarowicz often worked in collaboration with other artists, filmmakers, performers, and friends. This might seem to complicate or cloud the vision and understanding of his work as an individual, but this communication and these associations are crucial to a deeper understanding of his work. Wojnarowicz went through many stages of his artistic career and these sometimes abrupt changes in direction were a direct result of his feelings towards artistic creation, the art world, and his personal relationships.\footnote{McCormick, 19.} He never entirely gave up on a mode of creation, but rather continually explored the possibilities of communicating his perspective on the society he engaged with publicly and privately while oscillating between media and categorization.

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12 McCormick, 19.
Chapter One: 
Action Installations, Graffiti, and Site-Specific Painting to Disrupt the Norm

Before ever showing art in a gallery, Wojnarowicz was visiting the abandoned piers that jutted out over the Hudson River on the west side of lower Manhattan in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The warehouses out on the piers had been forgotten by almost everyone except the homosexual and artistic communities who reclaimed these spaces for their own use. They became a cruising site for gay men in the 1970s, as well as an unregulated space for artistic production and experimentation. These massive structures were ruins of urban expansion and industry. Wojnarowicz viewed them as fertile ground for sexual exploration, as well as art.

Wojnarowicz had a long and varied relationship with the piers. As a child, he would visit the waterfront to see his father off or welcome him home from the merchant ship on which he worked. In the 1970s, Wojnarowicz was exploring the piers as a site for anonymous sexual experiences with other men when he began to notice graffiti and evidence of other acts of creativity. The piers were simultaneously a private and public place. Then, in 1978, he and photographer Arthur Tess (1940–) visited the Pennsylvania Railroad yards and a dilapidated pier along Hudson River to take photographs. We have evidence of Wojnarowicz’s time out on the piers from this time; several of the photographs in the

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13 The activities that took place out on the abandoned piers are well-documented. For example, Leonard Fink’s photography and “The Piers: Art and Sex along the New York Waterfront” exhibition at Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in 2012; Willoughby Sharp’s Pier 18 (1971); Vito Acconci’s Pier 17 Projects, (1971); Robert Whitman’s “Architecture” (1972); Gordon Matta-Clark’s Day’s End (1975); and Tava’s Murals (1978-1980) were just some of the artistic endeavors out on the piers. See also: Jonathan Weinberg and Annie Wischmeyer (eds.), Pier 34: Something Possible Everywhere NYC 1983-84, 2016.
14 “1978: Apr 22, NY, Human Head III,” 1978; The David Wojnarowicz Papers; MSS 092; Box 1, Folder 6; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.
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*Rimbaud in New York* series (1978-1979) can be placed out on these vacant waterfront haunts (Figure 2).\(^{15}\)

It was on the piers where Wojnarowicz truly began his artistic career. Almost completely abandoned by the shipping industry that had erected them some fifty years earlier, they felt nothing like the city behind them. Like a burnt-out power outlet, electricity no longer flowed in or out of these once bustling hubs of activity for the city but rather would occasionally spark. Wojnarowicz and artist Mike Bidlo (1953–) recognized this and started encouraging artists to leave their studios and galleries for the piers in 1982. They selected Pier 34, which had been the Ward Line shipping terminal at Canal Street from 1932 until the 1950s, as their home-base for these activities.\(^{16}\) Both Wojnarowicz and Bidlo saw the piers as an anti-commercial site for creative expression and artistic exploration. They envisioned it as a community apart from the dealers, the increasing rents, and art world interferences. It was a place where artists had twenty-four-hour access and complete anonymity to dream up anything they wanted with zero inhibition: a platform for artists to act childlike (not childish) in order to quiet the pretensions of the art world and discover their inner creativity.\(^{17}\) Pier 34 became the perfect place for all of this. It was disruptive and novel. This in-between place felt wild and completely unlike the city. Pier 34 was directly above the Holland Tunnel, a route for arrivals and departures, people in transit, a place for transition.

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\(^{15}\) Weinberg and Wischmeyer, 11. NB: The image from the *Rimbaud in New York* series (Figure 2) is not known to be from a visit with Arthur Tess, it is simply an evidence of Wojnarowicz using the piers as a setting for this photograph.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 9-17.

\(^{17}\) David Wojnarowicz and Mike Bidlo, “Pier 34 Statement,” *Benzene*, Fall-Winter 1983-1984. NB: This statement was reprinted in *Something Possible Everywhere NYC 1983-84* edited by Weinberg and Wischmeyer. Also, the original statement was composed in the spring of 1983.
As more artists began arriving and working out on the piers, the art world and the city began to take notice. In June 1983, there was an “opening” that was unofficially organized—unknownst to Wojnarowicz and Bidlo—which spread by word of mouth. In the end, the Port Authority Police showed up, shut it down, and even “arrested” a sculpture (Figure 3). All kinds of work could be found out on the piers: painting directly on the walls of the building, sculpture created from found and bought materials, and performance pieces, among others. Wojnarowicz painted several images out on the piers including a large pterodactyl, a gagging cow, St. Sebastian, a comic panel featuring Krazy Kat, and countless others (Figures 4-7). One often overlooked act of creation was the planting of Kentucky Bluegrass seeds on the floors of the massive warehouse (Figure 8). Wojnarowicz had noticed mushrooms growing inside because of the damp and dark conditions, so he decided to bring more of the natural world into this decaying place. With this simple action, Wojnarowicz completely changed the environment and mood of the space from decay to opportunity and new life. Not only did Wojnarowicz want a place to be outside of the competitive and commercial art scene, he wanted to create beauty and share it with the world while drawing attention to the overlooked and forgotten.

Back in the city proper and during his time of exploration out on the piers, Wojnarowicz was in the band 3 Teens Kill 4 with Doug Bressler, Brian Butterick, Julie Hair, and Jesse Hultberg from 1980 until 1982. While they only recorded one EP with Wojnarowicz, entitled “—No Motive—,” the band frequently performed at clubs and bars around New York City. Wojnarowicz sang, manipulated compiled tape collages of

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prerecorded material, and played with other noise making objects. He used recordings he made on the street, things he heard on television, and the improvised sounds he created to represent things beyond his own experience. These odd sounds and field recordings of modern life predict the manner in which Wojnarowicz would soon collect images and symbols in order to rework them into his own lexicon as a visual artist. To promote their shows, Wojnarowicz started making posters and hanging them up in the neighborhoods of the venues. He noticed that they were being torn down almost immediately, so he decided to start stenciling his images and gig information directly onto the sidewalk, buildings, and even abandoned cars (Figure 9). Wojnarowicz continued stenciling and began putting images of burning houses, persons recoiling, bomber planes, targets, and running soldiers—motifs he would continue to use throughout his career—onto gallery doors and windows in SoHo and around the city. Ironically, it was these images that got Wojnarowicz into many of his earliest group shows and his first two solo shows.19

Before entering the gallery world, Wojnarowicz found himself in front of it. Growing out of his stenciling efforts on the streets and explorations of the piers, he and Hair decided to make a dramatic statement outside one of the New York art world’s preeminent places of business. This legendary “action-installation” occurred in the spring of 1981 when Wojnarowicz and Hair, from 3 Teens Kill 4, dumped a pile of cow bones down the front steps of Leo Castelli Gallery on West Broadway and stenciled images of an empty plate, a fork and knife, a burning house, a bomber plan, and a recoiling figure onto its façade.20

Wojnarowicz and other artists working and showing outside of the SoHo and 57th Street

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19 Those solo shows being “411” at Public Illumination Picture Gallery (June 11-15, 1982) and “David Wojnarowicz” at Alexander F. Milliken, Inc. (December 4, 1982 – January 8, 1983).
galleries saw Castelli and his elite group of artists, dealers, and wealthy collectors as the antithesis of what creating art was about. Wojnarowicz and Hair were working on a project to create images left out of the “International Symbols” stencil set she had: “images of resistance or violence.”

The cow bones and these stenciled images outside of Castelli’s gallery were also a statement about President Reagan’s policies supporting repressive military regimes in Central America. Wojnarowicz acknowledged this as the first item in his exhibition history, affirming its place in the formation of his artistic career.

Wojnarowicz later recalled that this action-installation, which he called *Hunger* (1981), was, “a reaction to what it means to get into Castelli or attempt to, or to have to devote your time to thinking about it.” Castelli represented and had shown countless well-known artists and Wojnarowicz could now say he too had shown at Castelli Gallery. This action-installation was both a social reaction to the world around him and at large as well as a statement about the art world aristocracy, and it became infamous within certain groups of the artistic community. Of another unexecuted action-installation where he envisioned lining up a firing squad and prisoners in a department store and photographing reactions of the shoppers, Wojnarowicz stated, “at the time I was interested in a very direct confrontational event that people could participate in whether they liked it or not…the idea of bringing those ideas, questioning the safety zone—sitting and watching violence in other parts of the world.”

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23 The *Rimbaud in New York* series of photographs pre-dates this, but these were closer to an act of self-actualization than artistic production. Despite Wojnarowicz’s feelings in a 1990 interview with Cynthia Carr, the *Hunger* action installation and the stenciling was a conscious effort to interact with the art world—even if they were a middle-finger to the establishment. See also: Carr, 175-176 and David Wojnarowicz’s CV printed for Civilian Warfare show in 1983 or CV printed on Gracie Mansion Gallery letterhead in 1987—both available at Museum of Modern Art Libraries.
world—dragging the reality of those images out of the abstract has stuck with me.”25 The next year, at Gallery 345: Art for Social Change run by Karin DiGia, he would install a gallery-friendly version of *Hunger* for a group show of the same name.

Again, Wojnarowicz asked Hair to collaborate with him for the version of *Hunger* (1982) presented at Gallery 345 in the spring of 1982. They went out onto the streets and found a wooden chair and a wooden crate that they painted and stenciled with images similar to those with which they adorned Castelli Gallery. The crate was positioned to stand vertically so the top would swing open like a refrigerator and the chair was set up in front of it with ‘EAT’ painted on one side of the door and ‘DIE’ the other; an homage to the *EAT/DIE* (1962) diptych by Robert Indiana (1928–). Inside the crate was a large transparent bag filled with bloody cow bones and a stereo. Visitors were supposed to sit on the chair and put headphones on to listen to the stereo—probably playing one Wojnarowicz’s tape collages, street recordings, or the 3 Teens Kill 4 song “Hunger” (Appendix B)—and consider the makeshift refrigerator filled with bloody cow bones.26 The violence of war in the Middle East and South America was just another news headline to most people in the United States but Wojnarowicz was paying attention and responding the best way he knew how. Both versions of *Hunger* were about power, control, and the cost of achieving them. Wojnarowicz also did a spray-painted piece on a supermarket poster that same year with all the stencils, except the burning house, described in both versions of *Hunger* (Figure 10).

These stenciled images were literally all over Wojnarowicz’s first solo show at Public Illumination Picture Gallery in the summer of 1982. It was a part of “411”—a series of four

25 Rose, 61, 64.
26 Carr, 199.
one-week, one-person shows—and Wojnarowicz held the last slot from June 11-16. This was essentially a street graffiti show hosted in a gallery. Jeffrey Issacs (1954–), the gallery owner—who was known as Zagreus Bowery back then—stated that all the shows were elaborate installations and Wojnarowicz’s was mostly all stencil work applied directly to the walls of the gallery (Figures 11–12).

The imagery for this installation included three sizes of running soldiers, burning houses, an outline of the USA, targets, a rampaging wolf, a wolf-head mask, a small animal skull, bomber planes, crosshairs, explosions, falling men, recoiling figures, a recoiling figure that appears to be stuck with arrows like St. Sebastian, a shirtless Wojnarowicz, and the prone Peter Hujar (1934–1987)—a lover, friend, and mentor throughout Wojnarowicz’s career (Figures 13–14).27 In one corner, he spray-painted the wall to look like brick and placed small running soldiers on it. There was also a suburban-looking scene of houses lining the street and a soldier running towards them. This was an image Wojnarowicz used in *Town Flees Gas Bomb, Self-Portrait* (1979) and in *Diptych II* (1982).28 He was selling these images stenciled onto paper for $20 apiece, according to the handwritten note on the door. A cassette player was playing audio work, again, probably one of Wojnarowicz’s tape collages or something he recorded on the street or with 3 Teens Kill 4, completing the installation.

Graffiti art was certainly taking off at this time and several smaller galleries were showing it, but Wojnarowicz’s imagery had more weight than most others’ work. This was a turn-off for some people who enjoyed the vibrancy and fun seen elsewhere.

This show opened the same day as a group show titled “Fast” at Alexander F. Milliken, Inc. in SoHo where Wojnarowicz had his first diptych featuring, again, the image

27 Carr, 212.
28 *Diptych II* (1982) would later be shown in “Urban Pulses,” at the Pittsburgh Center for Art in 1983.
of Hujar reclining called *Untitled (Green Head)* (1982, Figure 15).\(^{29}\) The owner of the gallery, Alexander Milliken, liked Wojnarowicz’s work enough to offer him a solo show that would take place that winter. It was strange how different these two contemporaneous shows were and yet they contained so much of the same imagery. One was contained and composed on designated surfaces for art and the other was a chaotic assault on the space for art. However, it was fitting: Graffiti in the early 1980s was all about making your mark out in the world and achieved through the sheer number of specific locations you tagged, who saw your images, and the context in which they were situated. The catalog essay for “Fast” stated Wojnarowicz’s stenciled images, “now explode with a new authority and power,” and he, “spotlights society’s inability to adhere to its own structures and confronts the viewer with a vision of anarchy and insanity.”\(^{30}\) This was the first printed critique and evaluation of Wojnarowicz’s art.

Over the next few months, Richard Flood of PS1 was selecting artists to be included in the “Beast” show that Fall. Even after visiting Wojnarowicz’s studio, the curator decided against including Wojnarowicz in the exhibition. Frustrated and feeling left out, Wojnarowicz decided to be involved with the show anyway. This resulted in another infamous action-installation. PS1, which was not affiliated with MoMA at the time, held an opening for “Beast: Animal Imagery in Recent Painting,” on October 17, 1982. Although Wojnarowicz was not selected to participate, he attended the opening night festivities with Hujar and brought along a few other guests. Wojnarowicz had spent that morning at the


\(^{30}\) *Ibid.*
apartment of friend and filmmaker Tommy Turner, gluing cotton-ball-tails and paper-bunny-ears to live cockroaches and released his creations, *Cock-a-bunnies* (1982), at PS1 during the opening. He dropped them in the offices, in the galleries, and even on the three-dimensional artworks throughout the space. Wojnarowicz recalled, “dropping a handful on [a sculptural city], so cock-a-bunnies were running through this city.” People eventually noticed them and it caused quite the commotion. Wojnarowicz, later, would include this as another “action-installation” on his résumé.\textsuperscript{31}

That winter, after Wojnarowicz had participated in the group show “Fast,” the gallery owner asked him to put together some work for a solo show that opened on December 4, 1982. What Wojnarowicz put together for this show was not exactly what Milliken was expecting, although, he did buy two pieces: *Falling Man* (1982) and *Culture in Variation I* (1982).\textsuperscript{32} The announcement for the show had an untitled piece with a supine Hujar head, a bomber plane, a recoiling figure, a target, and rubble stenciled onto a map and the postcard indicated that this was one of six panels. He said that some of the work in the show was, “very adamant homo art,” while other pieces dealt with violence, civilization, money, and other cultural stuff.\textsuperscript{33}

The show also had a corner of the gallery that consisted of stenciled and painted images applied directly to the gallery walls, as well as objects on the ground. This portion of the show, known as *Installation E* (1982), included a TV set with a bull and a running man painted on the screen, a crudely assembled child made of maps with a globe for a head and a

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\textsuperscript{31} Carr, 217.
\textsuperscript{32} Carr, 222.
\textsuperscript{33} Lippard, 139.
red target painted on its chest, a silver head that looked like a Greek statue, a toy shark painted white with two square images on its side, and a stool with branches growing up from it with an image of globe painted on the floor below the seat with an indiscernible image. Leaves were also scattered on the gallery floor (Figures 16–17). All of these elements would be further refined in the years to come.

The walls each had large circles with concentric rings painted on them that looked like big cartoon eyes. The one on the right had a painted image of Earth in the center of a white circle. This was surrounded by a red ring and then a larger green-brick ring. Everything was contained within a black outline that went almost enclosed the circle. Images of bomber planes flew in from the left wall dodging scattered black plus signs. Running soldiers ran along the bottom of the wall beneath a figure, painted black with a yellow interior filled with running soldiers who masturbated in front of a painted TV with a red screen displaying a white bull. The figure stabbed the TV causing it to explode with comic-book-style graphics. Between the figure’s mouth and raised arm was a red falling man, while above was a painted bull baring its teeth, very similar to the one on the TV screen. A blue and red spirit with its tongue hanging out seemed to be shooting out of the bull’s back: Death. The gagging cow would quickly become Wojnarowicz’s signature image which he would later paint in the middle of a street intersection, on the piers, and even on the Berlin Wall (Figure 18).

The wall on the left consisted of a running man, painted again in black, with yellow features. One arm was raised in anger, ready to attack. The man’s stomach was filled with running soldiers, one large and many smaller versions. The man had one eye, his mouth was

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34 Perhaps the image on or below the chair was an unborn fetus in a nest like the one located on a similar wooden chair in *American: Heads of Family/Heads of State* (1990) at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in “The Decade Show” (1990).
open, and there was a red burning house in the center of his face. Bomber planes, in two sizes, covered the wall while avoiding clouds with red targets and red plus signs that become larger red crosses. Two small figures painted in black were underneath the large circle. One figure was pouring something from a beaker onto the other figure’s head and apparently killing them or releasing their spirit, echoing the bull. The circle on the left wall had a green koi fish and some smaller fish swimming in a loosely spray-painted red and yellow pond. This was encircled by a black ring, a blue ring, and a red ring. Outside of these colored rings were green handprints and more red and yellow spray paint. This circle was even closer to being surrounded by a thick black line but it broke near the top and the green handprints left the circle and began to transform into green bomber planes, which then transition to black.

In these early attempts to articulate issues of war, death, nature, and civilization, Wojnarowicz was formulating his visual language and his proclivity to work in multiple media in order to communicate his message while refining his imagery from street stencils to painting. His next installation would be similar to Installation E (1982) but less chaotic visually.

In the fall of 1983, Wojnarowicz traveled to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to participate in a city-wide event, or series of events, dubbed “Urban Pulses: The Artist and the City,” (October 17 – November 17, 1983) coordinated by the Pittsburgh Center for Arts. Eight galleries around the city came together and brought John Fekner (1950–), Keith Haring (1958–1990), Jenny Holzer (1950–), Michael Smith (1951–), and Wojnarowicz to participate in the exhibition. Related events included a panel discussion on graffiti and public art moderated by Lynn Gumpert, a co-curator of the exhibition and curator at the New Museum.
of Contemporary Art in New York City, separate performances by Fab Five Freddie (1959–) and Michael Smith, music and rapping by DJ Spy, break dancing, and double dutch jump-roping. Additionally, nine native-Western Pennsylvania artists also responded to the theme. The ambitious exhibition was, overall, a success with one local art critic claiming that it was the “Most significant art show since ’69.”

Wojnarowicz and Fekner wound up sharing a gallery, each with their own mural on a wall. Just outside the entryway, Wojnarowicz’s *Diptych II* (1982) welcomed the visitors into the gallery (Figure 19). On the left were repeated images of the silhouetted United States partially covering a large target, a stenciled image of a passenger airplane, a crosshair, a burning house, and a boy playing with a toy bomber plane. On the right, a suburban scene was stenciled depicting a falling man and a street lined with houses and a sidewalk. Flanking these two square images were a pair of recoiling figures as well as a crosshair in the center of the two ‘panels.’ The murals in the gallery could be described as visions of a nuclearized and computerized future. These two separate visions belonged to Wojnarowicz and Fekner. While Fekner commented on an increasingly technological and digitized world, Wojnarowicz portrayed an apocalyptic vision of the city.

Wojnarowicz painted a large running figure atop a quickly rolled on black background that did not cover the entire wall. Inside the man was a simplistically rendered cityscape—or rather a handful of red rectangles of varying height—with bomber planes

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flying above while another figure ran the opposite direction (Figure 20). There were also two handprints outlined and highlighted with red paint below the running man’s outstretched arm. A gagging cow with a green head and limbs outstretched occupied the other half of the wall and was struck by a yellow beam of light or energy with tiny black missiles coming from the large running man (Figure 21). Connecting the mural was a small painted globe that floated between the two figures in an unpainted white space. Inside the cow was another cityscape with three stencil figures below an orange and ominous sky. The first figure was falling forward in orange paint. The second figure was painted black and fell backward. The third figure seemed to be transparent and glowing as it fragmented.

The two opposing walls that adjoined Wojnarowicz’s and Fekner’s murals depicted the head of Hujar, Wojnarowicz’s lover and artistic mentor, in varying positions with the final image fragmented. Text accompanied these falling heads, one red and the other green: “Radiation? / What d’ya / mean? / I don’t see / nothin’” and “Soon / all / this / will / be / picturesque / ruins.”40 On the floor of the gallery, three plastic squares with dirt—that are reminiscent of Robert Smithson’s “non-sites”—had audio cassette players placed in the center. These were likely playing one of Wojnarowicz tape collages or something recorded by 3 Teens Kill 4.

Since the theme of this exhibition dealt with the urban pulse of the city, Wojnarowicz’s statements about war, nature, and civilization in the twentieth century were apt and poignant. The threat of mutually assured nuclear annihilation still loomed large over the world in 1983 and the images painted by Wojnarowicz were bleak in this context. The

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40 “Soon all of this will be picturesque ruins,” is a phrase and motif that Wojnarowicz will revisit many times and in many media throughout his career.
suburban homes and the silhouette of the United States over a target in *Diptych II* (1982) combined with the attack and aftermath of war on a city were powerful.

Over the next few years, Wojnarowicz would frequently make site-specific paintings or murals, but they were usually part of a larger installation with multiple components and media. There are a few that simply existed without anything else. In late summer 1985, Wojnarowicz traveled to Richmond, VA to participate in a group show curated by Carlo McCormick, an art critic in the Lower East Side. The show was called “East Village Meets East Broad Street” and resulted in collaborative murals covering every surface of the gallery. McCormick handed out LSD and everyone went off to work in pairs but everything eventually began overlapping as the artists reached their peaks. After the group returned to New York, they did two more shows like this and called themselves the “Wrecking Crew.”\(^{41}\) Another instance of public art installation, in an unusual medium for Wojnarowicz, was his work in the Public Art Fund’s project *Messages to the Public* (1985). This series invited artists to create images to be displayed on the Spectacolor Board in Times Square. Every twenty minutes for two weeks in December 1985, an image of medicine bottles or an image of a loaf of bread and some fruit would appear and then appear again with an overlaid red X.

With these projects, action installations, stenciling, and murals, Wojnarowicz began using his visual language of symbols and images to explore the politics, culture, and himself. The urge to find a way to communicate with the world at large was here and beginning to take form. Wojnarowicz was readying himself for the next step as his ideas were solidifying and he was becoming more articulate and confident in expressing them. There was also a shift in the content and context of much of his work from public critique to personal.

\(^{41}\) Carr, 308-309
introspection. This intense period would prove to be crucial because within five years, Wojnarowicz would be in the national spotlight fighting for his rights, defending his art, and speaking up for countless people who felt that they had no voice in the world.
Chapter Two:
Coping with Physical, Mental, and Spiritual Violence in Society

While the solo show at Milliken’s gallery provided Wojnarowicz a formal introduction to the art world and showing his work in galleries, he was still essentially doing street art and graffiti, it just happened to be indoors. This detracted from the immediacy and the impact of the stenciled or quickly painted images. Milliken was hoping to discover the next Keith Haring in Wojnarowicz which bothered both the artist and gallery owner when they discovered this was not going to be the case.42 This SoHo gallery with an established sort of agenda and style did not fit with what Wojnarowicz wanted to be doing. The two parted ways on mutual terms and by the fall of 1983, Wojnarowicz had caught the attention of another gallerist like Dean Savard of the newly opened Civilian Warfare and Hal Bromm of the eponymous gallery located in the Triangle Below Canal Street (TriBeCa) area, a neighborhood adjacent to Pier 34.43 He would show at both galleries that fall.

Wojnarowicz was also beginning to collaborate more seriously with other young artists after teaming up with Hair for the action installation at Castelli’s gallery, participating with Fekner in the “Urban Pulses” show, and working alongside Bidlo and others on the piers. He also began exploring more complex themes and personal issues in his work. Wojnarowicz’s biography played an important role in his artistic production. After surviving a violent and unstable childhood, living on the streets, and exploring the dark shadows and seedier scenes in New York City, he was attempting to make records of and communicate his experiences. By the end of 1983, Wojnarowicz was collaborating with Kiki Smith (1954–),

42 Lippard, 139.
43 Ibid.
helping her with the installation of her show and exhibition at the Kitchen called *Life Wants to Live* (December 1983) and he had a solo show at Hal Bromm Gallery (November 19 – December 23, 1983).

In this one-man show at Hal Bromm Gallery in TriBeCa, Wojnarowicz further developed his visual and aesthetic sensibilities in terms of installation art. The rawness of painting directly on gallery walls and bringing found objects in off the street was refined and becoming more cohesive. This recent collection of over twenty-five mixed-media paintings and sculptures was arranged so that each work could be viewed by itself, in relation to the other parts, or as part of the whole. Sculptures with painted images on pieces of driftwood were described as “totems,” and one of them in the form of a snake, extended almost twelve feet across the gallery floor resting in a swath of sand. An audio recording of “jungle sounds” was played in the gallery to accompany the artworks. As one critic put it, “Wojnarowicz is one of several artists whose work currently oscillates between the rough trade of the East Village and the more sober marketplace of the established galleries.” He would really come into his own over the next two years, creating and making more installations during this period than any other point in his career. This included the several variations to the “Burning Child” scene in multiple locations.

For a 1984 group show titled “USA” at 51X Gallery—a gallery known for its graffiti shows—Wojnarowicz worked on an installation. This installation was referred to as

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Installation #3 (1984) as well as Reagan Installation (Figure 22).\footnote{The folder in The David Wojnarowicz Papers at Fales Library and Special Collections containing slides of this installation has “Reagan Installation” written on its front in Wojnarowicz’s handwriting.} The walls were covered in newspapers with the occasional hole punched out where a “burning dollar” would hang. One of Wojnarowicz’s plaster head sculptures (Figure 23) was suspended from the ceiling and broken glass was scattered across the floor. A blue light positioned a few feet off the ground in the corner of the gallery illuminated a scene with one unbroken wine glass, a Molotov cocktail made from a bottle of Night Train whiskey bearing a small painting of the White House, and a motorized crawling baby doll with a globe head was covered in maps (Figure 24). Chained to the wall, the innocent children’s toy crawled aimlessly around on the broken glass within an area limited by the chain. Above this hung a portrait of President Ronald Reagan painted on glass and positioned directly in the corner so that the frame touched both walls akin to the manner in which a Russian Orthodox Christian would display the image of Christ. A red light above the “icon” painting, bathed everything in a warm glowing light while a stereo stashed high in the corner behind a pipe played audio selected by Wojnarowicz. This political statement was more oblique and nuanced than previous his previous work which allowed for deeper contemplation and meaning.

The krásnyj úgol (red, bright-shining, or beautiful corner) in the homes of Russian Christians has long been a place for contemplation and prayer adorned with sacred or holy items.\footnote{Timothy Ware, The Orthodox Church: New Edition, 1993, page 310.} The portrait of President Reagan looked down over the plant-like objects made of newspapers placed on the gallery floor hiding the scene of broken glass, Molotov cocktail, and baby doll from most vantage points unless the viewer were to stand next to them and peer down. The portrait of the president situated in the location designated for reverence of a
higher power paired with the Molotov cocktail, the deception inherent in its name, and the destruction it can cause are poignant in the context of 1980s America. Furthermore, the use of a white light overhead, as well as red light and a blue light to illuminate the upper and lower portions of this installation, can be interpreted in many ways. Red, white, and blue could be a reference to the United States flag and America itself or the meaning could be more esoteric; Wojnarowicz used a specific and vibrant blue throughout his work and even stated his thoughts on the symbolism and healing power of blue light. These paper plants, the Molotov cocktail, and the crawling baby doll would appear in several more installations.

The installation at Gracie Mansion Gallery in November 1984 solidified a lot of things for Wojnarowicz’s artistic career. The gallery was painted black and lit with strings of Christmas lights. The floor was covered in sand and aquatic-looking plants made of newspaper and media mogul Rupert Murdoch publications, the same or similar to those in

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48 A Molotov cocktail is a type of homemade bomb or grenade that takes its name from Russian politician and diplomat, Vyacheslav Molotov who worked closely with Joseph Stalin. Molotov was one of the principle authors of the Nazi–Soviet Pact (signed August 23, 1939) and during the Winter War (November 30, 1939 – March 13, 1940) while the Soviets were dropping bombs over Finland, Molotov claimed on State radio broadcasts that the Soviet government was providing humanitarian food deliveries. Finnish soldiers started referring to these bombings as “Molotov bread baskets” and soon began referring to the hand-held bottle firebombs they were using against Soviet tanks as “Molotov cocktails.” See also: John Lloyd and John Mitchinson, The Second Book of General Ignorance. New York: Crown Publishers, 2011, page 76.


50 The paper plants were included in the Untitled (Burning Child) installation at Gracie Mansion Gallery (November 1984), “Neo York” (1984), and Installation #5 (1985) at the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage (May – July 1985). The Molotov cocktail was also included in Installation #5 (1985). The map-covered crawling baby doll, which was bought on Orchard Street according to “James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook Interview,” (Artist Archives Initiative – David Wojnarowicz, Fales Library and Special Collections, 2017) and was included in “Neo York” (1984) and “The Missing Children Show” (1985).
Installation #3. From the ceiling hung a life-size shark, covered in maps suspended above a mannequin of a child, also covered in maps, running with paper flames coming off its arms, legs, and back (Figure 25). The child was positioned looking backward over its right shoulder at the painting that hung on the back wall: Dad’s Ship (1984). The depicted ocean liner was billowing black smoke and flames and there was an inset photograph of a dead dog in the upper left corner (Figure 26). On the ground in front of the painting, six human figures, made by Greer Lankton (1958–1996), surrounded a map-covered cow skull with plastic wristwatches for eyes and a small globe in its mouth (Figure 27). A plaster head, placed in the corner, watched the scene from a distance.

On another wall hung Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins (1984), a painting that used a repeated image of the Parthenon as its ground (Figure 28). Painted atop the images of the Greek temple in ruin are two heads with a loosely painted crowd of figures inside their thick black outlines. Above the heads was a crumbling building that that seemed to be similar in architectural style to the abandoned warehouse Wojnarowicz was familiar with in lower Manhattan. The same image of a dead dog that was found in Dad’s Ship (1984) is present here above the painted structure and the rubble pile that made up the bottom of the painting. There was also an audio component that Wojnarowicz worked on with former bandmate Bressler. A stereo cassette player was buried in the sand and played, among other things,
the horn droning sound of a ship. The references to history, the present day, Wojnarowicz’s personal life all worked in unison here to make a profound statement about the individual and the progress of civilization.

With the success of this show—the installation was pieced out and sold—Wojnarowicz may have realized that he was a successful artist but more importantly, and maybe not even consciously at first, he realized that he was “relieved of all that pressure just to survive—the pressure that had kept him from facing his past.” While he was coming to terms with his turbulent childhood, Wojnarowicz was also grappling with the increasing sense of mortality he faced as more and more people he knew were being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, most significantly his friend, former lover, and mentor, Peter Hujar. Reflecting on his past and thinking about his future, as well as the future of those close to him, Wojnarowicz found himself entering a “really dark period.”

Similar to the installation at Grace Mansion Gallery, and happening concurrently (November 11 – December 16, 1984), Wojnarowicz painted the walls black, brought sand into the gallery, and lit the room with Christmas lights for a group show at the University of California, Santa Barbara called “Neo York: Report on a Phenomenon” (Figure 29). A tree painted blue had the burning dollar bills hanging from it and the newspaper plants were scattered around the room. Another burning child mannequin, a map-covered animal skull holding a globe in its mouth surrounded by small and sinewy dancing figures, and a crawling

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53 “Interview with Sur Rodney Sur,” Artist Archives Initiative – David Wojnarowicz, Fales Library and Special Collections, 2017. NB: Wojnarowicz might have had the whole tape looping, not just his and Bressler’s track. Different people have different memories of what exactly was on this tape and those in other installations.
54 Carr, 276.
55 Ibid.
baby doll were arranged on the floor with a cassette player filling the room with audio (Figures 30–32). This installation can be seen as another iteration of the Untitled (Burning Child) (1984) installation at Gracie Mansion and would be reiterated again in the home of a New York art collector, Robert Mnuchin, the following year. Also exhibited were Wild Boys Busting-Up Western Civilization (1982), the stenciled images that adorned the Civilian Warfare sign (1983), and another unidentified work titled Untitled (1984) which was described in the checklist for the exhibition as a mixed-media work.57

In the fall of 1984, Manuela Filiaci (1945–), curator of the “The Parallel Window,” (1979–1988) which was a display window on the first floor of her apartment building, asked Wojnarowicz to participate in the project. He said yes but wanted to collaborate with Kiki Smith (1954–) and Marion Scemama. This installation included a large photograph of Wojnarowicz, taken by Scemama, with blood on his face as he leaned up against an old bathtub in the streets at night (Figure 33). The photograph was staged by the two to make it look like Wojnarowicz had been “queer-bashed.” The image was so powerful that after Scemama printed it she did not want to use it because it felt too real.58 Smith had created two disembodied hands that were suspended from the ceiling and hung next to a globe. Falling

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58 This photograph would later appear in a collaborative mixed-media painting done for an exhibition at Tim Greathouse Gallery in 1985 and in the poster for Between C and D that Wojnarowicz and Scemama worked on together (Figure 35). See: Sylvère Lotringer and Giancarlo Ambrosino (ed.), “Marion Scemama,” in David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side, page 127.
from the globe were dead leaves that piled and covered the floor (Figure 34).59 The walls of the display window were painted and one had text written by Wojnarowicz.60 It read:

A few months back I was reading the newspaper and there was a small article about a recent Supreme Court ruling which upheld a lower court decision that homosexuals have no constitutional rights against the government's invasion of their privacy… In some areas of the U.S.A. you can kill a man, claim that he was queer and that he tried to touch you and the court system will set you free…

There was also a crudely drawn scene of two people beating another person who lay on the ground. Every element from all three artists worked in unison for this installation. While it is possible to discern that the photograph is Scemama’s, the hands are Smith’s, and the text and globe are Wojnarowicz’s, the message does not get muddled nor does one artist’s voice speak louder than any other voice. This installation spoke out against homophobia and society, and it spoke out against injustice, indifference, and cruelty in the world that was in plain sight.61 Again, this was a development in the articulation and collapse of the private and the public life that Wojnarowicz was experiencing: turning the personal into the universal.

Installation #5 (1985) was assembled in the Anchorage beneath the Brooklyn Bridge in May of 1985 and the show—featuring some twenty or so artists, musicians, and performers—was open through the end of June. “To enter the long deserted chambers beneath the Brooklyn Bridge is to feel slightly subversive,” and to see the installations and performances here was an experience predicated on the remarkable space and its

59 This globe and the falling leaves is very similar to Science Lesson in 3D (1984).
60 This text would be revisited many times and eventually be published in section eleven of “Being Queer in America: A Journal of Disintegration,” in CUZ (1988) by St. Mark’s Poetry Project. This essay was later reprinted in both Tongues of Flame (1990) and Close to the Knives (1991).
architecture.\textsuperscript{62} Wojnarowicz’s installation was set in “one of the anchorage’s most confined and sinister spaces,” and was essentially a cannibalistic family dinner in hell.\textsuperscript{63} There were five human skeletons: two seated at the dinner table, the red one devouring the yellow one while the blue, partially-map-covered skeleton was eating a baby doll with a jumble of Christmas lights on its lap; a second blue, partially-map-covered skeleton sat off to the right of the dinner scene in an old tire with an illuminated globe between its legs and a gun in its mouth; and impossible to ignore, the skeleton of a child, suspended from the ceiling and hung above the dinner table, wearing a white dress and garland of flowers around its neck (Figures 36–39). Wojnarowicz was just beginning to explore the trials and tribulations of his childhood in his art and it was primarily concerned with violence.

Other elements of this installation included the same or similar paper plants that were used in the \textit{Installation #3 / Reagan Installation} at 51X Gallery and the \textit{Untitled (Burning Child)} installation at Gracie Mansion six months earlier. The remains of a bonfire on the table and the shattered wine glass were related to the familial scene, but on the table, there was also a Ray-O-Vac battery. This image would later show up in some of Wojnarowicz’s paintings as well as other installations as a disdainful reminder of progress and innovation. Behind the dinner table, stashed in the corner, there was a pile of what probably seemed like junk to most visitors (Figure 40). Another Ray-O-Vac battery sat upright amid the pile of strewn objects. Both Molotov Cocktails made from bottles of Night Train whiskey—one with a painted image of the White House and the other with a portrait of President Ronald Reagan—were present. A crawling baby doll, whose head had been replaced by a map-covered cow skull, was looking towards the back corner of the room. A pile of small golden

\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Ibid.} and Carr, 286.
skulls, a broken bust of a Native American chief, a few oranges, some packages of seeds, and rusting metal barrels filled out the rest of the pile. A running toy soldier with a bleached white crab claw head stood atop a rock next to some scattered coins (Figure 34). Steve Doughton and Philip Zimmerman helped Wojnarowicz prepare and haul these materials into the Anchorage in addition to recording a sound piece that played in the space which Butterick from 3 Teens Kill 4 mixed.

Wojnarowicz told writer and future biographer Cynthia Carr (1950–) that because of his burgeoning success as an artist making more than just a living, “It was a rough time for me. I had more money than I’d ever had in my life. Which gave me access to time, gave me access to movement…and it shook up a lot in my life. I hit a really dark period. I think I became somewhat self-destructive, just—you know, I was hitting against that whole childhood.” Having the luxury not to worry about your next meal or how to make rent can open up mental space and actual time to dig into the past, find oneself. For Wojnarowicz, at this time, rage was beginning to boil over.

A year after the burning child installations at Gracie Mansion Gallery and the “Neo York” exhibition in California, Wojnarowicz installed a very similar scene in the basement of Robert and Adriana Mnuchin’s East 78th Street and Madison Avenue home on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. This was titled Installation #6 (1985) and featured a burning child mannequin covered in maps with flames coming off its arms and legs, a large multi-panel painting of a giant person in a hazmat suit walking through a city while lighting a building on

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64 A stenciled image of a running soldier with a crab claw head can be seen in *Science Lesson* (1981-1982).
65 Lotringer, “Steve Doughton,” in *A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, 51.
66 Carr, 276.
fire with a hose, and a tree adorned with hanging skulls (Figure 41). Wojnarowicz enlisted friends Steve Brown, Steve Doughton, Tommy Turner, and Amy Turner to help him collect debris and trash from the streets which they then hauled down into the Mnuchin’s basement and covered the floor. Homemade papier-mâché rocks and other objects crafted by Wojnarowicz were also littered about (Figure 42). The apocalyptic scene was completed with a blue strobe light that Wojnarowicz intended to represent a healing power and an audio element: a collaborative piece he put together with Bressler, from 3 Teens Kill 4, that included the sound of marching soldiers, shouting children, and mortar rounds being fired.67

This is one of the few instances when Wojnarowicz sketched out his plan for the installation beforehand (Figure 43).68 We can see that the burning child, the tree with skulls, the audiotape, and the detritus littering the ground were all a part of the plan. The painting, on six Masonite panels extending eight feet high and twelve feet across (Figure 44), was not a part of the sketch. In addition to the giant hazmat clad person spreading fire throughout the city, a flying snake with a human head flung debris from its path. The foreground of the painting was the shore of New Jersey, Wojnarowicz’s home state, which was depicted as a junkyard with a small skeleton child warming its hands by a fire in a makeshift shelter.69 On the far right, a building burst from impact while a spider-like creature with an animal skull covered in money for a body crept toward the child skeleton. The New Jersey wasteland

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67 Probably “American Dreamtime” the same audio cassette that was playing in the burning child installation at Gracie Mansion and the “Neo York” exhibition.
68 There is also a sketch of *America: Heads of Family/Heads of State* (1989-1990) in Wojnarowicz’s journals held by Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University in The David Wojnarowicz Papers, MSS 092. See also: Chapter 3.
69 Carr, 315.
extended onto the Mnuchin’s floor complete with a broken TV, a car fender, and actual live cockroaches.\(^{70}\)

The tree was a reference, although the actual story was misremembered or deliberately adjusted to fit Wojnarowicz’s vision, to the Mayan myth of genesis: Popol Vuh. The legend describes a young woman who enters the underworld and sees the head of a god hanging from a tree. The head spits onto her hand and she becomes impregnated with twins that will individually become the God of the Sun and God of the Moon.\(^{71}\) Other interpretations cast the twins as Earth and Sky, Life and Death, as well as Female and Male, but the underlying point is Duality. In Wojnarowicz’s version, the burning map-covered child—a representation of his own childhood—was fleeing the horrors of the pre-invented world it was born into and finds the tree of skulls. The child supposedly spat on the tree and the skulls became animated helping the child toward rebirth.\(^{72}\) The intricacy of this installation is better documented than any other. With the sketch and the written exegesis on its meaning, we can better understand it as a work unto itself as well as derive meaning for other installations and artworks that used similar motifs.

In early December 1985, Wojnarowicz and five other artists from the East Village—Futura 2000 (1955–), Judy Glantzman (1956–), Rich Colicchio, Rhonda Zwillinger (1950–), and Kiely Jenkins (1959–)—began installing their work in an old lithograph factory building in Louisville, KY that was soon to be converted into apartments. The exhibition was to benefit the Kentucky Child Victims’ Trust Fund and was curated by Potter Coe, a local art

\(^{70}\) Lotringer, “Steve Brown,” in *A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, page 40.
\(^{71}\) Unpublished statement by Wojnarowicz held by the Whitney Museum of American Art. See also: Carr, 315-316.
\(^{72}\) Carr, 316.
dealer. Creative Production House Inc., who was a sponsor, also produced a small
publication to accompany the exhibition which was known both as “The Missing Children
Show” and “6 Artists from the East Village on Main Street.”

Wojnarowicz painted three main images on two walls. The larger wall had a pipe
separating the two distinct images. He included his signature image of a gagging cow—or as
Wojnarowicz described it to a reporter, “a cow exploding with fear”—on one wall and
painted an exploding and torn-in-half house on the other. Directly behind the “main scene” of
the installation which served as a sort of backdrop, Wojnarowicz painted a porthole view of a
landscape of cow carcasses above which floated an image of the Earth, with North America
in center view (Figure 45). The rest of the installation was completed with a larger format
lantern battery, a teddy bear with an animal skull protruding from its face next to an alarm
clock, a pair of gloves, a child’s red baseball jacket, and a yellow skeleton—the same one
from Installation #5 (1985) in the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage—which was suspended face
down from the ceiling over the chair. In front of the chair with a crawling baby on its seat (or
the child about to be abducted) were three paper hunting targets, one of which had a deer
painted on it (Figure 46). The innocence of childhood and nature was in the crosshairs of a
predator.73 Wojnarowicz was replaying the events of his childhood and the affect they had on
him. After his world was torn apart by his parents’ divorce when he was young, his father
suddenly appeared after months of absence and took him and his siblings away from his
mother, moving them to rural Michigan.74

73 Gideon Gil, “Artists Work to Help Fight Child Abuse,” The Courier Journal, Louisville, KY, December 9,
1985.
74 David Wojnarowicz, “Biographical Dateline,” in David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame, edited by Barry
Wojnarowicz collaborated with several filmmakers over the years and explored film himself, but his time spent with Richard Kern (1954–) developing, writing, shooting, and installing an exhibition surrounding their short film *You Killed Me First* (1985) was his most significant in the context of his installation work. After the movie had been filmed, the two teamed up to create an installation at Ground Zero Gallery owned by James Romberger (1958–) and Marguerite Van Cook (1954–). Just days after Wojnarowicz returned from Kentucky after “The Missing Children Show,” he and Kern went to work recreating and depicting the aftermath of the final scene in the movie. The installation was referred to by the title of the film as well as *Installation #8* (1985, Figure 47).

In the film, *You Killed Me First* (1985), a seemingly normal American family is seen enjoying dinner in the opening scene. The viewer soon notices the only three-fourths of the family is stereotypically perfect. Mother and Father figures are conversing with their two children over a homecooked meal when it is revealed that one fits the mold of an ideal daughter and the other does not, instead she is dark and full of angst. Elizabeth (who wants to be called Cassandra) played by Lung Leg (1963–), vented her frustrations about her upbringing and society to her father, Wojnarowicz, and her mother, Karen Finley (1956–), through several scenes while they commiserate over her outlook on life and, in one scene, Wojnarowicz kills her pet rabbit in front of her—something that Wojnarowicz’s father did in front of him as a child.75 The film ends by coming back to the opening scene with Leg’s character shooting her family at the dinner table and screaming “YOU KILLED ME FIRST!”

The installation version of *You Killed Me First* (1985), was set up in a room at the end of a long hallway with a small window looking in on the final dinner table scene (Figure

75 Ibid., 114.
The hallway was constructed to resemble a back alley complete with a painted “NO PARKING 24 HR. ACCESS” sign, graffiti, debris from the street, and dog shit. A blue light flickered overhead while a cassette loop played the blaring of a foghorn. If the viewer was brave enough to venture down the alleyway and peer through the broken window, they would have seen the dinner table scene minus Leg’s character. There were three skeletons covered in faux-rotting flesh and actual blood, probably cow’s blood from the butcher; the remains of the end of the film. A crucifix hung on the wall above the horrific scene and *You Killed Me First* (1985) played on a loop on a TV mounted in the back corner of the room (Figures 49–52).

This installation echoed Marcel Duchamp’s (1887–1968) last work, *Étant donnés* (1946-1966) and allowed Wojnarowicz to see his own childhood from other perspectives: those of a voyeur and from a view similar to his father’s. This disturbed him. He had spent the past year fleshing out these feelings of anger and violence that he kept locked inside for so long and after filming and installing this piece he said, “I was still shaking somewhere deep inside,” and “In trying to put myself into my dad’s head, in trying to manufacture his violence and self-hate, I found myself laying open a strange energy, something that rose out of thick scars into the glare of lamps and refused to be identified.”

After this show at Ground Zero closed out a year filled with installations, Wojnarowicz began working on other projects including paintings for his show April 1986 show at Gracie Mansion Gallery, “An Exploration of the History of Collisions in Reverse.” On New Year’s Day 1986, Wojnarowicz met Tom Rauffenbart and they started arguably the

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76 “James Romberger and Marguerite Van Cook Interview,” Artist Archives Imitative – David Wojnarowicz, Fales Library and Special Collection, 2017.
most serious relationship of the rest of Wojnarowicz’s life. The next day, Peter Hujar’s final show—opened at Gracie Mansion Gallery; Hujar would continue to deal with his health and passed away a little less than two years later, on Thanksgiving Day in 1987. Wojnarowicz was working on his series of paintings depicting the Four Elements which opened at Gracie Mansion Gallery in September. It was likely one of the last shows Hujar would see. Romberger of Ground Zero Gallery recalled seeing him there, “in a terrible state, just completely fucking vaporizing.” One of the paintings, Wind (1987), was dedicated to Hujar.

Coming to terms with the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual violence inflicted on him throughout his childhood and continuing into his adult life as a homosexual was no easy task, but Wojnarowicz was seeking truth and meaning. This fortitude would be paramount in the coming years as the AIDS crisis continued to ravage his community and the Culture Wars emerged. All of the work Wojnarowicz had done up until this point was either a response to societal norms, a political statement, or an investigation of his own past, and yet some of the most trying times were still to come. During the last few years of his life, Wojnarowicz would have to synthesize almost all of the aspects of his private life and public career as an artist in order to maintain a voice in a pre-invented world that was trying to silence him.

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78 Carr, 367.
Chapter Three: The Culture Wars – Politics, Homophobia, and AIDS

The years following the Four Elements paintings and leading to his death in 1992 were filled with loss and rage, but Wojnarowicz channeled these feelings into new work that continued to create mythologies, developed alternative histories, and examine culture while connecting some of the more esoteric themes in his work to tangible figures and events in late 1980s American society. In the late-1980s, AIDS was still essentially a death sentence and the Culture Wars were starting to boil over with funding being revoked from art exhibitions and conservative politicians and religious leaders ignoring the crisis as it escalated in front of them. It seemed as if everything was accelerating and the urgency of every action, statement, and event was being felt more than ever before.

Near the end of the decade, Wojnarowicz collaborated with musician Ben Neill (1957–) to create and perform a piece titled ITSOFOMO (1989), the quick and catchy way to say In the Shadow of Forward Motion, the title of the book and exhibition put together by Wojnarowicz at P.P.O.W Gallery (February 8 – March 4, 1989). The performance piece was first held at The Kitchen in New York City from December 7-10, 1989. While this work is more a performance than an installation, the blending of so many creative endeavors in one work bears inclusion here (Figure 53).

79 A few high-profile controversies surrounded Andres Serrano’s, Piss Christ (1989), Robert Mapplethorpe, “The Perfect Moment” exhibition (1989); and the “NEA Four” (that included Karen Finley) being denied funds for proposed grants (1990).
80 The “mutantrumpet” was a hybrid electro-acoustic instrument developed in the 1980s by Neill and Bob Moog.
There were many components to this work, both scripted and unscripted, but everything seemed to come together in unification: Acceleration was the driving force in this work. Wojnarowicz read texts while Neill added a soundtrack and manipulated Wojnarowicz’s voice electronically. There were sculptures (Figure 54) on stage with dancers and four video monitors with scenes of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual sex as well as a video of historical images and villains.\(^{81}\) Two additional slide projectors displayed images of Wojnarowicz artwork and other images he had collected over the years. Society was moving at such an accelerated pace that humanity seemed to be lost. Fortunately, there is a good amount of documentation of these performances and their components (Figure 55–56).

They toured and performed *ITSOFOMO* (1989) several times in 1990 before a CD version of the audio performance was produced and released in 1992. Another installation and performance was in store for the spring of 1990. Wojnarowicz had been selected in the ambitious exhibition at the New Museum of Contemporary Art called “The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s.” He created a powerful installation for the exhibition that opened May 15, 1990 at the New Museum and did a selection of readings from a few of his essays at The Studio Museum in Harlem on June 15, 1990.\(^{82}\)

Wojnarowicz was given a small room in “The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s” (May 12 – August 19, 1990) with the fourth wall open to the rest of the museum space. In preparation, he sketched out a very detailed and complex plan for the room

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including themes to address and materials needed (Figure 57–59). Only a few photographs of America: Heads of Family/Heads of State (1990) are available, but these images give us an idea of the intricacy of this piece (Figure 60). On the floor in the center of the room, laid out on a bed of branches and flowers, was the skeleton of a child wearing a white dress—the same skeleton that was in Installation #5 (1985). Placed next to the skull of the skeleton was Wojnarowicz’s Brain Time/Blood Brain (1988-1989) sculpture. All of this was in front of a stand covered in text and images that physically supported two television sets. The footage that was playing on the left was from Silence = Death (1990) a documentary chronicling the AIDS crisis in America and on the right footage from the ITSOFOMO (1989) videos. Hanging above all of this was a large and crudely assembled papier-mâché head, blindfolded, with the word “QUEER” scrawled across the forehead in red paint.

Lining the walls of the room were images of conservative politicians and the artist’s parents. The back wall, Wojnarowicz placed a large print of (Untitled) One Day This Kid... (1989-1990) which features an image of the artist as a young boy surrounded by text. The prose was moving and poignant; it obliquely described the feeling of difference which soon became otherness and quickly transformed into discrimination, fear, and violence against the boy who was soon to discover that he was homosexual. This, along with several other objects like Brain Time/Blood Brain (1988-1989), the videos, and the skeleton of the child, appeared in other projects. Behind the televisions running to the back wall was a small village of sorts arranged with twigs, leaves, and various other detritus of nature. There were small houses covered in dollar bills and maps, internally-illuminated globes, a voodoo doll inside of a

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83 “1989-90: Louisiana/NYC/Berlin/Paris/Mexico,” 1989-1990; The David Wojnarowicz Papers; MSS 092; Box 1, Folder 22; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.
84 Carr, 484-485.
Plexiglas cube, a small chair with branches that seem to grow out of the back support, action figures arranged in a way that looked like a meeting of superhuman or supernatural minds, and a copy of *Horton Hears a Who!* (1954) by Dr. Seuss (Figure 61). Obviously, there was a lot of material here to parse and interpret, but it all worked in unison.

The heads of family and heads of state were presented on the side walls of the room. This was a condemnation of those people who had tried and were still trying to subdue the young, bright-eyed boy on the back wall—*One Day This Kid*... Even after escaping a tumultuous childhood, Wojnarowicz was threatened and suppressed by entities bigger than his parents who did not understand him. There were four images lining each wall of the room that represented his oppressors: President George H. W. Bush, a young Ronald Reagan during his time as an actor, Dolores and Ed Wojnarowicz, and a young Dolores on her wedding day; Senator Jesse Helms, Representative William E. Dannemeyer, Cardinal John O'Connor, and Ed Wojnarowicz (left wall and right wall from front to back). These figures were not only in opposition to Wojnarowicz’s lifestyle and artistic work, they were a threat to his sense of freedom and the rights that all citizens of the United States are promised (Figure 62).

The tableau arranged beneath *One Day This Kid*... was the most complex area of this installation. Everything was tightly packed and hidden behind the TV sets. There were three houses of various sizes made of dollar bills and maps: a large house covered in US currency, a medium one made of money and maps, and a small one made of maps. Wojnarowicz frequently used money and maps as a background or a material to cover objects in other

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85 *Ibid.* NB: The chair with branches was inspired by a Michael Brownstein poem according to Wojnarowicz. See also: David Wojnarowicz and Félix Guattari, *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*, 1989.

86 “1989-90: Louisiana/NYC/Berlin/Paris/Mexico,” *The David Wojnarowicz Papers*; MSS 092; Box 1, Folder 22; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.
works. This was a trope that he often employed to express control and freedom. Money could afford one economic freedom, but the lack of it could condemn one to a life of struggle and uncertainty within modern United States society. Maps were similar in that they expanded our knowledge of the world in a quantitative way, yet the arbitrariness of territories and prescribed lines of exploration controlled and often dictated personal experiences and freedom. Wojnarowicz had a cynical and romantic view of the United States. This perspective revolved around systems of pre-invented economic structures propagated by the larger and more sinister side of American culture, and another that strove for the beauty and independence of being a citizen in the land of opportunity and choice.

The simple and suburban-looking houses represented the domestic sites of American families. This was the place that American values and morals clashed with Wojnarowicz’s views. It was this environment where the seeds of homophobia and discrimination were sown and grown, where the larger and established materialism reigned over humanity in the face of the AIDS crisis. In front of the smallest house, there were two cows, to the left was a small object that is difficult to discern from photographs, and to the right a map-covered snake. Between the small- and the medium-sized houses was a small clearing in the leaves and twigs where at least seven Action figures and toys were arranged in a loose circle, looking outwards. Included in this ‘town meeting’ was a robot, an alien, a single large eyeball, Frankenstein’s monster, and a strong blue-and-red superhero. Many of these types of

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87 Wojnarowicz identifies the small Frankenstein’s monster figurine in an essay originally published in the 1989 catalog for “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” exhibition at Artists Space that would spark controversy over NEA funding. See next paragraph. “My friend across the table says, ‘The other three of my four best friends are dead and I’m afraid that I won’t see this friend again.’ My eyes settle on a six-inch tall rubber model of Frankenstein from the Universal Pictures Tour gift shop, TM 1931: his hands are enormous and my head fills up with replaceable body parts; with seeing the guy in the hospital; seeing myself and my friend across the table in line for replaceable body parts; my wandering eyes aren’t staving off the anxiety of his words; behind his words, so I say, ‘You know…he can still rally back…maybe…I mean people do come back from the edge of
objects—i.e. toys, currency (domestic and international), small animal totems, etc.—were later found in Wojnarowicz’s “Magic Box.” This cache gives us insight into the visual language of symbols that he employed throughout his career. Wojnarowicz often saw beauty and meaning in things that were overlooked and otherwise forgotten. His ability to reduce things to their essence and redeploy them for his personal purposes was common in all his work as he sought to speak in a universal language.

In the middle of everything, there was a copy of *Horton Hears a Who!* Following a debacle at Artists Space gallery wherein the National Endowment for the Arts withdrew funding from an exhibition and then reinstated it, Wojnarowicz participated in an event at the gallery decrying the NEA. He wore a President Ronald Reagan mask and read his controversial essay while holding a copy of *Horton Hears a Who!* In the most simplistic terms, that even a child could understand without the social and political associations, this story represented the unheard voice of those suffering from the HIV virus in the face of the huge and seemingly oblivious or apathetic United States government: “A person is a person no matter how small.” A small, hold-in-the-palm-of-your-hand sized globe was next to the book, another object later found in Wojnarowicz’s “Magic Box.” This was yet another way of communicating the reduction and simplistic view so many people had of the world. Wojnarowicz saw this as a negation of so much, and in the case of those rallying against him and those in similar situations, as a negation of his right to exist. He chose to speak up and fight for this right.

Next to the congregation of toys, there was a Plexiglas box with an alarm clock and a black and white stuffed animal inside. An illuminated globe sat atop this box with words written on its surface, encircling the entire object. A second illuminated globe, featuring only the image of the United States repeated around the world, was atop another Plexiglas box directly behind the stand for the televisions and next to the largest house made of money. Spinning globes were included in footage in ITSOFOMO (1989) which played on one of the televisions. The implication here being that, again, Americans were myopic and fearful of otherness from his perspective.

The voodoo doll enclosed in the second Plexiglas box was nailed, through the stomach, to a painted target. On the chest of the doll, the words “US GOV’T” were written. Targets appeared frequently in Wojnarowicz’s early work and were clear in their message: The artist was taking aim. In Wojnarowicz’s painting The Newspaper as National Voodoo: A Brief History of the U.S.A. (1986), a voodoo doll was painted with one eye, just like the one in the box. The object was used differently in each context: In the installation, it was an object of fetish and desire to hold the United States government accountable for their negligence in response to the AIDS crisis, and in the painting, the doll was an object of the personal psyche being abused and confused by modern American life.

The blindfolded, papier-mâché, “QUEER” head precariously hung above the two television sets. The newspaper used to create the larger than life-sized head had articles concerning the AIDS crisis and homophobia in the United States. One could see headlines or fragments of text such as, “Gay-Bashing in Village,” “Condoms & AIDS,” and “Bishops: Safe sex, unsafe and immoral.” The mass media, politicians, and the Catholic Church had been painting one picture of the AIDS crisis, but Wojnarowicz and many others saw it in
another way. The stands were covered in hate mail from conventional and religious folks from around the country who blindly followed their conservative representatives. And it was vicious.\textsuperscript{90} There was “a photo of anti-gay picketers with signs like 'AIDS is a Punishment from the Eternal Father' next to a photo of Nazis destroying the Institute of Sexual Science.”\textsuperscript{91} The televisions below the papier-mâché head were playing footage from both \textit{Silence = Death} (1990), a document of the AIDS crisis, and \textit{ITSOFOMO} (1989), the artistic response to the situation of an accelerating world and the AIDS crisis. For Wojnarowicz, the televisions and the images on them were, “surrogate eyes for [the] blindfolded head.”\textsuperscript{92}

The tension between the political and personal body was strong here. In his journal sketches for this installation, it appeared that Wojnarowicz had wanted to assemble a ladder of handmade sticks that was impossible to climb because it would become increasingly narrow as one ascended.\textsuperscript{93} Instead, there were two objects in each corner of the room. In the back-left corner, there was a large branch propped upright with something hanging from it above the village tableau.\textsuperscript{94} While in the back-right corner, there was a carved wooden chair with branches lashed to the back support and a nest filled eggs on its seat. The dichotomy here was that the man-made and the natural world may be at odds with one another at times and often looks very different, but both the chair and the nest were a place to rest.\textsuperscript{95}

\textsuperscript{90} Wojnarowicz received hate mail after the \textit{700 Club} discussed the “Tongues of Flame” exhibition (Jan. 25 – March 4, 1990) and the American Family Association distorted images of his work in a pamphlet they used to rally against the NEA funding of exhibitions and artists they deemed obscene. See also: Wojnarowicz v. American Family Association (United States District Court, S.D. New York 1990).
\textsuperscript{91} Carr, 485.
\textsuperscript{92} “1989-90: Louisiana/NYC/Berlin/Paris/Mexico,” \textit{The David Wojnarowicz Papers}; MSS 092; Box 1, Folder 22; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.
\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Ibid}.
\textsuperscript{94} It is difficult to discern what the object is from the photographs available.
\textsuperscript{95} A similar chair or stool was included in one of Wojnarowicz’s earliest installations from 1982 in his first solo show. See description of \textit{Installation E} (1982), at Alexander F. Milliken, Inc., in Chapter 1.
Observed from the front, the installation resembled Masaccio’s fresco *The Holy Trinity* (1427-1428). The skeleton below, the wealthy and powerful patrons, the larger than life entity embodied in the martyred figure who helplessly hung in the middle of the composition, and the perspectival recession into space: possible redemption with alternative scales for Father and Son. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are an unholy and despicable trio when viewed as America, the Heads of Family, and the Heads of State in Wojnarowicz’s installation. *America: Heads of Family/Heads of State* (1990) would not be silent, the ideas and emotions Wojnarowicz explored here are still relevant today.

In September of 1990, David Wojnarowicz collaborated with Paul Marcus (1953–) and Susan Pyzow (1955–) to create an installation at P.P.O.W Gallery. It was titled *The Lazaretto* (1990) and announced as a multi-media installation about the current status of the AIDS crisis (Figure 63).⁹⁶ The three artists chose to present this work anonymously “as their interest in this project [was] to give information relating to AIDS and not self-promotion.”⁹⁷ Marcus and Pyzow were married and happened to run into Wojnarowicz after seeing his 1989 show “In the Shadow of Forward Motion” at P.P.O.W gallery. Marcus—who had attended high school with Wojnarowicz—reconnected with him. He was working as an art teacher while volunteering at AIDS outreach clinic and the old classmates began talking about their personal experiences dealing with the AIDS epidemic. Marcus described working in the Bronx with AIDS patients from low-income neighborhoods with little to no information on the virus. He stated in an interview that they “mainly talked about the frustration and anger we both had towards this society and the government that was not doing

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enough.” After more discussions and planning, the three of them assembled an installation that would address the AIDS crisis head-on while also providing information to educate the public: This was *The Lazaretto* (1990).

The installation was envisioned in four parts: a maze leading to the bedroom of a dying person with AIDS, the boat room, the puppet, and the information and AIDS organizations room (Figures 64–71). Visitors would enter the installation by passing underneath an American flag made of crepe paper. This first section was the maze: hallways constructed with black plastic trash bag walls that had statements collected by Wojnarowicz and Marcus rewritten on large hanging pieces of paper. The flimsy walls almost breathed as visitors passed through while also evoking the sense that a body bag might be in the near future for many of those people interviewed for the stories of living with AIDS. The texts were in English and Spanish, and they were brutally honest, as can be seen in this example:

‘No, you must be wrong. AIDS, how the fuck can I have AIDS?’ That's what I thought. The first thing that comes to your mind is the part that everybody thinks, ya know, ‘So who the fuck did I have sex with that had AIDS?’ I didn't know about it. It's really the first thing I thought. I felt bad, I felt embarrassed. I thought if I have AIDS and I caught it sexually through somebody, people are gonna think right away that I'm an easy woman.

After several hard turns in the maze, the visitor would enter living space of a person with AIDS. Marcus had worked with a young Hispanic woman in the Bronx for six months who lived in a fourth-floor walk-up tenement building. After a certain point, she was so ill that she could not leave the apartment. Marcus recalls going over to spend time with her

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98 Lotringer, “Paul Marcus,” *A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, page 118.
99 *Ibid*.
100 *Ibid*., page 121.
101 *Ibid*.
while she slowly wasted away, with no options or recourse for any relief.\textsuperscript{103} The room in the installation contained a decomposing body or skeleton lying on a cot surrounded by garbage on the floor, medication and pill bottles on a nightstand, and a TV set running mind-numbing programs and commercials. Smaller details like dead cockroaches and rat traps may have been lost on some visitors because the stench and the horror of the scene was so visceral, not to mention the message scrawled on the walls in what appeared to be blood:

We are living in a society that has accelerated to such a point that the person to press the button that releases warheads, the person who determines whether some of us have rights to abortion, the person who determines whether men can love men or women can love women or whether I should have to die of lack of access to Health Care because I'm Black or Hispanic or poor + White or Native American - that person no longer has to go to the scene of the crime to do their dirty work. The people making these determinations that affect our bodies and minds need only to do legislative paperwork. It's clean, efficient and leaves no blood or fingerprints on or from the hands of those persons.\textsuperscript{104}

Leaving this haunting room, visitors would have to walk down a hallway lined with blue arms reaching out of the walls with tattooed numbers on them, a strong parallel between the internment of Jewish and other “undesirable” people during WWII and the sentiments of some conservatives during the AIDS epidemic. This led to another room, the boat room.\textsuperscript{105} In a small boat, papier-mâché figures representing Cardinal O’Connor (1920–2000), Senator Jesse Helms (1921–2008), and President George H.W. Bush (1924–) floated in a sea of blood-red material with hundreds of drowning figures, toys, and block letters spelling out names. These figures were singled out because of their position that safer-sex education is morally wrong (O’Connor), their fear-mongering techniques used to scare Americans into discriminating against homosexuals (Helms), as well as their inaction and lack of concern for

\textsuperscript{103} Lotringer, “Paul Marcus,” \textit{A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side}, page 118.
\textsuperscript{104} \textit{The Lazaretto}, DVD.
\textsuperscript{105} Carr, 505.
years as the epidemic developed (Bush).\textsuperscript{106} Atop their vessel hung a crucified skeleton stuck with hypodermic needles. The black walls were adorned with more plaster arms reaching out as well as clocks without hands.\textsuperscript{107} Upon closer inspection, the visitor would notice that the figures in the boat floating safely above the suffering masses were made of money and eating baby dolls while wearing what could be construed as Klan-like robes.

Moving on from the “ship of fools,” the puppet room was the last in the constructed maze space of the installation.\textsuperscript{108} A Howdy Doody puppet danced in a box filled with hanging dollar bills and American flags which talked incessantly:

Hey, How'm I doing? Hey, don't look at me. I'm just a puppet, I'm a politician. I just got sawdust for brains. Hey, it ain't my fault people are dying. Is it your fault? Tell me, is it your fault, huh? What are you doing about the situation, huh huh, tell me, what are you doing? Hey, how'm I doing? Hey, don't look at me. I'm just a puppet, I'm a politician. I just got sawdust for brains.

Throughout the entire installation, visitors were also hearing Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World” (1967) emanating from the boat room. Exiting the maze, visitors would walk into a room with information and groups concerned with AIDS. People representing these groups and pamphlets with information was available for visitors to engage with and take back to their communities.\textsuperscript{109} The title of this installation, \textit{The Lazaretto} (1990), was a


\textsuperscript{108} Carr, 505.

reference to a sixteenth-century Venetian hospital for people with contagious diseases and later the term for boats that were designated for these quarantined people. Lepers, people with the “Black Death,” and people with AIDS all had a similar struggle in their respective societies. A piece of paper hung on the wall with a black globe on it and red handprints across it recall the cover of the controversial exhibition catalogue for “Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing” (1989) organized by Nan Goldin at Artists Space and a court case concerning a religious group misappropriating his images, Wojnarowicz vs. the American Family Association (1990), less than a year prior.
Conclusions

While much has been written about David Wojnarowicz, his creative body of work, and the implications both have had on American art since the 1980s, the lack of attention to his installations is strange. These wildly complex works of art draw from all the creative practices he engaged with and are emblematic of the shift to complex, multi-media work that proliferated in the 1980s and 1990s. While the lack of documentation is an obstacle to truly understanding these installations without having seen them in person, that should not stop us from considering them with care. In static photographs and brief descriptions, the experience is mostly cerebral, but the fact remains: Wojnarowicz was ceaselessly diligent and needed to be heard and understood, especially today. His installations are still vibrant and powerfully alive, we just need to look with attention and patience. Although we lost Wojnarowicz to complications related to AIDS in 1992, his unwillingness to let those in power ignore and even advocate for a whole population’s silencing and potential disappearance is a testament to the artist and the man himself even after he has left us.

David Wojnarowicz is recognized by communities for different accomplishments. Depending on their own proclivities, each community might consider him one of their own: writer, musician, graffiti artists, photographer, painter, filmmaker, installation artist, activist, etc. He was able to accomplish so much and produced a significant body of work in the fifteen or so years he spent contributing to those worlds. Beyond all of this, his work still resonates with people today and carries messages and weight twenty-five years after his death. The impetus to examine his installations is one of both investigation and preservation. The importance of the message and Wojnarowicz’s spirit that he imparted into these
temporal and relational installation pieces is still accessible. His collaborators, friends, gallerists, and dealers are still around. Although many of Wojnarowicz’s generation are gone, there is still life in their artwork. In a journal entry dated July 25, 1976, Wojnarowicz noted: “I saw a face in a passing car that looked like someone I once knew. It’s like that when you move on to other places in your life—memories of faces fading like thin ice sheets in winter sidewalk puddles, they melt, become only part of the water so you can’t separate them ever again, but they do remain there.”

Like memories or a dream where one thing sticks out and the rest is fuzzy, Wojnarowicz’s installations are beyond mere description and cannot fit onto a wall label or in a caption of a photograph. To understand an installation one must communicate with it bringing your own personal history and experience into dialogue with Wojnarowicz’s work, biography, and history. There are many unknown and unknowable variables at play in this type of work, but if we completely ignore them or only acknowledge their esoteric complexities we will get further and further away from the memory and the message. The resources, descriptions, images, and interpretations presented here should be a point of entry. Although we cannot access the installations as they were, they can still speak to us.

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Appendix A: Exhibition History – Installations and Ephemeral Art

_Hunger_ (1981) collaboration with Julie Hair outside of Leo Castelli Gallery (Spring 1981)

_The Ward Line Pier Project_ at Pier 34, collaboration with Mike Bidlo (1982-1984)


_Untitled (Stencil Show)_ (1982) in “411,” at Public Illumination Picture Gallery (June 11 – 16, 1982)


_Untitled Installation_ (1983) at Arts and Commerce (Fall 1983)

_Untitled Installation_ (1983) in “Urban Pulses: The Artist and the City,” at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts (October 17 – November 17, 1983)


_Life Wants to Live_ (1983) collaboration with Kiki Smith at The Kitchen (December 1983)


_Untitled (Burning Child) Installation_ (1984) collaboration with Greer Lankton and Doug Bressler at Gracie Mansion Gallery (November 1 – November 25, 1984)


_Untitled (Window Installation)_ (1984) collaboration with Kiki Smith and Marion Scemama in “The Parallel Window” (November – December 1984)

_Installation #5_ (1985) in “Art in the Anchorage” presented by Creative Time at The Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage (May 15 – June 30, 1985)

_Acid Paintings_ (1985) in “East Village Meets East Broad Street,” at Neapolitan Gallery in Richmond, VA (August or September 1985)

Installation #6 / Untitled (Burning Child) Installation (1985) in Robert and Adriana Mnuchin’s basement (November 1985)


Messages to the Public (1985) a Public Art Fund project on the Spectacolor Board in Times Square (December 16 – 29, 1985)


Appendix B: Full Transcriptions – Lyrics and Texts

“Hunger” – 3 Teens Kill 4 (1982)\(^\text{111}\)

We are non-essential laborers you will die soon enough
you will not live long
all things will change and move on
this course of history
this living and non-living

I see these things every day
I will not live long
grey images of freezing homes
people combing through garbage reefs
so we continue, so we consume
unearthing cars and factories

thirst is continuous

It happened on the street below
in the midst of falling rain
a series of cars collided
impact of motors and glass
a bum was struck in passing
a bum was struck in passing
and all civilization
was at the wheel

You can drink wine from crystal glasses
you can drink wine from paper bags
you can put a gun to your head
or you can turn it on the guilty party
or you can step in from of a car
erasing the sliding world of fact

Text written on the wall of the patient’s room in *The Lazaretto* (1990)\(^\text{112}\)

There is nothing that rips mortality open in a more lonesome or rude awakening than finding yourself on your knees face deep in the toilet bowl violently throwing up. Nothing reveals the structure of the world so clearly. We are living in a society that has accelerated to such a point that the person to press the button that releases warheads, the person who determines whether some of us have rights to abortion, the person who determines whether men can love men or women can love women or whether I should have to die of lack of access to Health Care because I’m Black or Hispanic or poor + White or Native American - that person no longer has to go to the scene of the crime to do their dirty work. The people making these determinations that affect our bodies and minds need only to do legislative paperwork. It's clean, efficient and leaves no blood or fingerprints on or from the hands of those persons. Paperwork erases the distance between manicured hands and the stench and rotting corpses that the… (continued on next wall) …people…legislation like to make…by the degree to which they publicly…of elegance while…most newspapers and…of lack of accountability for…our elected representatives couldn't…research and pre-natal care for…treatment on demand or for housing or food - all…non-existent" dollars just took off to…protect oil company profits…

\(^{112}\) *The Lazaretto*, DVD. NB: The ellipses (…) indicate that the text was indiscernible from photographs.
Texts written on large sheets of paper that hung on the walls in the maze portion of

*The Lazaretto* (1990)\(^{113}\)

- I'm 28 years old and 20 friends and lovers and neighbors have died of AIDS in the last 7 years. I was on the train today and read a poster that said: "Don't ask for AIDS, don’t get it."

- "No, you must be wrong. AIDS, how the fuck can I have AIDS?" That's what I thought. The first thing that comes to your mind is the part that everybody thinks, ya know, "So who the fuck did I have sex with that had AIDS?" I didn't know about it. It's really the first thing I thought. I felt bad, I felt embarrassed. I thought if I have AIDS and I caught it sexually through somebody, people are gonna think right away that I'm an easy woman.

- My doctor is getting burnt out. He treats hundreds of people for free and the costs and work hours are literally driving him crazy. He won't speak about it to anyone, but I can see it on his face. When he arrives in his waiting room and 40 people with AIDS are there and it’s only 10 AM.

- Minority parents of children with HIV-symptoms are given 14-page forms in English only and told to sign in order to gain access to experimental treatment for their kids. The babies are strapped into cribs and IV lines are stuck in their arms. Half are given placebos. Most of them develop serious infections from the IV lines alone.

- The dental clinic in jail won’t do work on any HIV-positive inmate. They won't distribute condoms even though everyone is fucking. Fucking is the only escape in a place like this.

- I was real paranoid about the wheelchair. I felt the cars were right there in front of me, ya know. I was afraid that the person couldn't hold the wheelchair back and have the strength to hold it. Right when you are crossing the street there, you’re at the edge.

- Most of my friends won't call me or return my calls since I got diagnosed. I heard that one of them said, "AIDS is really depressing," and she needs a break from hearing about it.

- The Archdiocese, which has heavy influence in minority communities, has taken the position that it is a more terrible thing to use a condom than to contract AIDS. They are partially responsible for the lack of direct and clear education in schools and in media as well as on trains or buses.

- The landlord saw me in the hall today and said, "I know what you got, you fuckin' faggot. You're gonna die, die!" He wants my apartment because I only pay $225 a

\(^{113}\) *Ibid.*
month. My boyfriend died last year and it was his lease. A legal aid lawyer has been fighting to keep me from being evicted.

- They made me drink a quart of this vile orange goo. I lay inside a machine and it took pictures of my organs. They found a couple of spots on my adrenal glands. Lesions. Lesion means that there’s something in there that is takin’ up space. You can’t determine from the cat-scan what the lesion is. That means they have to do a biopsy.

- I got baptized. All my life I wanted to be baptized, as a matter of fact, because I had never been baptized and I always wanted to be. Because in the Catholic religion, if you're not baptized when you die, supposedly you go to hell, you know. You ain’t got no chance.

- I've been sick on and off the last 8 months. A friend of mine went into a coma last week. I got a call from one of his relatives. They put a pillow over his face and the funeral will be next week. [One poster in English and one in Spanish.]

- I'm just afraid of pain. Give me something that will dope me up, to keep me numb, sort of, you know, for the pain. The sleepy state. Because I know the last hours are the most painful. I’ve heard, you know.

- I hate healthy people. It makes me sick to see them smile and have the ability to just wait and see as AIDS continues to spread and kill more and more people who don't have access to quality health care or information that could safeguard their lives. One day these people will wake up and smell the bodies and finally start to scream. Larry Kramer was right when he told people to riot. One day they'll wish they were healthy enough to do so.

Transcription of Hoody Doody puppet in The Lazaretto (1990)

Hey, How'm I doing. How'm I doing? Hey, don't look at me. I'm just a puppet, I'm a politician. I just got sawdust for brains. How'm I doing. How'm I doing? Hey, don't look at me. I'm just a puppet, I'm a politician. I just got sawdust for brains. Money makes me walk and money makes me talk. I don't represent you unless you scream or organize. We got big bucks. Hey, it's all politics. Hey, it ain't my fault people are dying. Is it your fault? Tell me, is it your fault, huh? Don't look at me, I'm just a puppet. I've got a wooden head and sawdust for brains. What are you doing about the situation, huh huh, tell me, what are you doing? Hey, how'm I doing? How'm I doing? Hey, don't look at me. I'm just a puppet, I'm a politician. I just got sawdust for brains.

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114 Ibid.
As you can see, the images of David Wojnarowicz’s installations most readily available online are not of the highest quality inhibiting closer readings of them in part or in their entirety.
Figure 2 Rimbaud in New York (1978-1979)

Figure 3 Bill Downer Sculpture Being Arrested at an "Opening," June 1983 (1983)
Photography Credit: Andreas Sterzing
Figure 4 "Pterodactyl" (1982-1983) Photography Credit: Unknown Photographer

Figure 5 "Wojnarowicz’s Gagging Cow at the Pier" (1983) Photography Credit: Andreas Sterzing
Figure 6 "Saint Sebastian" (1982-1983)
Photography Credit: Unknown Photographer

Figure 7 Krazy Kat Comic on Wall (1983)
Photography Credit: Peter Hujar

Figure 8 David and Mike at the Pier (1983), Photography Credit: Andreas Sterzing
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Figure 9 "Abandoned Car with Wojnarowicz's stencils" (1981-1982)

Figure 10 Hunger (1981), spray paint on offset
**Figures 11–12** Untitled Installation (Stencil Show) in “411” at Public Illumination Picture Gallery (June 11-16, 1982)  
Installation views left and right
Figure 13 *Untitled Installation (Stencil Show)* in “411”
Public Illumination Picture Gallery (June 11-16, 1982)
Detail of running soldiers, wolf head, brick wall, falling man

Figure 14 *Untitled Installation (Stencil Show)* in “411”
Public Illumination Picture Gallery (June 11-16, 1982)
Detail of target with USA bullseye, bomber planes, recoiling figures, falling man, burning houses, running soldiers, Peter Hujar’s head

Figure 15 *Untitled (Green Head)* (1982), First exhibited as *Diptych* (1982) in “Fast” (June 11 – July 15, 1982), a group show at Alexander F. Milliken, Inc.
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Figure 18 “Gagging Cow on Berlin Wall” (ca. 1984)

“Urban Pulses: The Artist and the City” at The Pittsburgh Center for Art (October 17 - November 17, 1983)
Figures 20–21 *Untitled Installation* including mural, stencils, and cassette player (1983)
"Urban Pulses: The Artist and the City" at The Pittsburgh Center for Art (October 17 - November 17, 1983)
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“USA” group show at 51X Gallery (? -- October 21, 1984)

“USA” group show at 51X Gallery (? -- October 21, 1984)
Detail of crawling baby doll and Molotov cocktail on the gallery floor
Figure 25 Untitled (Burning Child) Installation (1984)
Gracie Mansion Gallery (November 1-25, 1984)
Figure 26 *Dad’s Ship* (1984)  
From *Untitled (Burning Child) Installation* (1984)  
Gracie Mansion Gallery (November 1-25, 1984)

Figure 28 *Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins* (1984)  
From *Untitled (Burning Child) Installation* (1984)  
Gracie Mansion Gallery (November 1-25, 1984)

Figure 27 *Untitled (Skull with Demons)* collaboration with Greer Lankton (1984)  
From *Untitled (Burning Child) Installation* (1984)  
Gracie Mansion Gallery (November 1-25, 1984)
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“Neo York: Report on a Phenomenon,” University Museum of Art, University of California, Santa Barbara
(November 11 – December 16, 1984)
Figures 33 Untitled (Window Installation) (1984) at The Parallel Window, Collaboration with Kiki Smith and Marion Scemama

Figure 34–35 Untitled (Window Installation) (1984) at “The Parallel Window, Detail of globe, hands (Smith), text and drawing (left)
Poster for Between C and D magazine (1985), Collaboration with Marion Scemama (above)

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Figures 41 Installation #6 (1985) in Robert Mnuchin’s basement (top left)
Photography credit: Peter Hujar

Figure 42 Detail of Installation #6 (1985) (top right)
Photography credit: Peter Hujar

Figure 43 Preliminary sketch (bottom left)
Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU

Figure 44 Untitled (Cityscape)
Acrylic on six Masonite panels 97 x 216 inches, overall
Photography credit: P.P.O.W Gallery

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Henry, 82
Figure 45  *Untitled Installation* (1985)
“The Missing Children Show” / “6 Artists from the East Village on Main Street,” Louisville, KY

Figure 46  Detail of chair and crawling baby doll from *Untitled Installation* (1985)
“The Missing Children Show” / “6 Artists from the East Village on Main Street,” Louisville, KY
Figure 47–48 *Installation #8 / You Killed Me First* (1985) at Ground Zero Gallery (December 12, 1985 – January 5, 1986)

Figures 49–52 Details from *Installation #8 / You Killed Me First* (1985) at Ground Zero Gallery
Photography credit: Andreas Sterzing
Video documentation of these performances is available at Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU
The David Wojnarowicz Papers, MSS 092

Figures 54 *Media Wolf* (1989) from *ITSOFOMO* performance at The Kitchen (December 7-10, 1989)
This mask was one of many sculptures included in the performance of *ITSOFOMO*.
Object held by Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU
The David Wojnarowicz Papers, MSS 092
http://brooklynquarterly.org/media-wolf/

Documents held by Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU
The David Wojnarowicz Papers, MSS 092

Documents from Wojnarowicz’s journals are held at Fales Library and Special Collections, NYU
The David Wojnarowicz Papers; MSS 092.

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Henry, 87
“The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s,” at the New Museum of Contemporary Art
Figure 63 The Lazaretto: A Multi-Media Installation about the Current Status of the AIDS Crisis (1990) at P.P.O.W Gallery

Details of installation captured via screen shot while viewing a DVD provide by P.P.O.W Gallery