

Close to the Knives

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

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YOU MIGHT NOT BE familiar with the American artist and activist David Wojnarowicz's name, but if you're of a certain age, you've probably seen at least one image by him. His photograph of buffalo tumbling off a cliff was used as the cover of U2's *One*, taking his art to a global audience a few months before his death in 1992 of Aids-related complications. Wojnarowicz was only 37 when he died, but he left behind an extraordinary body of work, particularly considering the uncongenial circumstances of much of his short life. A refugee from a violent family, a former street kid and teen hustler, he grew up to become one of the stars of the febrile 1980s East Village art scene, alongside Kiki Smith, Nan Goldin, Keith Haring and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

His paintings were what made him famous – livid, densely symbolic visions, a kind of twentieth-century American Dreamtime. But paint was by no means his only medium. His first serious work of art, made in the early 1970s, was a compelling series of black and white photographs of a man wearing a paper mask of the poet Arthur Rimbaud. This enigmatic,

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expressionless figure drifts through the piers and diners of New York, a dispossessed flâneur.

In the years that followed, Wojnarowicz worked with film, installation, sculpture, performance and writing, making things that testified to his perspective as an outsider, a gay man in a homophobic and violent world. One of the greatest and most abiding of all these works is *Close to the Knives*, an autobiography-cum-essay collection first published in America in 1991. A memoir of disintegration, he called it, alluding both to its chopped-up, collaged structure and to the landscape it maps: a place of loss and danger, of transient beauty and resistance.

Wojnarowicz was driven to document the undocumented, to record and bear witness to scenes that most people never encounter. As a small boy, he and his siblings were kidnapped by their alcoholic father. In the suburbs of New Jersey they were beaten repeatedly, while neighbours pruned their flowers and mowed their lawns. Later, during the plague years of the Aids crisis, he watched his best friends die horribly, while religious leaders pontificated against safe-sex education and politicians advocated quarantine on islands.

It filled him with rage, the brutality and the waste: 'and I want to throw up because we're supposed to quietly and politely make house in this killing machine called America and pay taxes to support our own slow murder, and I'm amazed that we're not running amok in the streets and that we can still be capable of gestures of loving after lifetimes of all this.'

Knives opens with a visceral essay about Wojnarowicz's homeless years: a boy in glasses selling his skinny body to the paedophiles and creeps who hung around Times Square. He recalls days on broiling Manhattan blocks when he was so exhausted and malnourished he began to hallucinate that rats were carrying children's arms and legs in their mouths. As a young man, Wojnarowicz had been inspired by the Beats, and that rangy, jagged tone is everywhere in his work, conjuring the strident world of the streets with an energy that recalls John Rechy's *City of Night* or Genet's *The Thief's Journal*.

Being homeless was a nightmare that took years to emerge from, but the streets were also a place of wildness and freedom, a source of attraction throughout Wojnarowicz's life. Much of the most beautiful writing here concerns cruising on the derelict Chelsea piers, looking for sex in the vast decaying rooms that extended out over the filthy Hudson River. 'So simple,' he writes, 'the appearance of night in a room full of strangers, the maze of hallways wandered as in films, the fracturing of bodies from darkness into light, sounds of plane engines easing into the distance.'

What does it mean if what you desire is illegal? Fear, frustration, fury, yes, but also a kind of political awakening, a fertile paranoia. 'My queerness,' he once wrote, 'was a wedge that was slowly separating me from a sick society.' In an essay entitled 'In the Shadow of the American Dream', he describes what it's like to live like this, with the knowledge that 'some of us are born with the cross-hairs of a rifle scope printed on our backs or skulls'. Out on the road, driving across the deserts of Arizona, he picks up a stranger in the restroom at Meteor Crater. They

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drive down a service road to embrace: two humans licking each other's bodies, each with one eye fixed to the windscreen, the rear-view mirror, watching for the spark of a trooper car in the distance; each knowing that their act of desire could lead to a beating or prison, even to death.

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And then death did come, in the most brutal way imaginable. The blind terror of life in the plague years: 'the people waking up with the diseases of small birds or mammals; the people whose faces are entirely black with cancer eating health salads in the lonely seats of restaurants.' One by one, friends die; 'piece by piece, the landscape is eroding and in its place I am building a monument made of feelings of love and hate, sadness and feelings of murder.'

The heart of *Knives* is the title essay, which deals with the sickness and death of the photographer Peter Hujar, Wojnarowicz's one-time lover, his best friend and mentor, 'my brother my father my emotional link to the world'. Nothing I have ever read matches the fury and grief of this writing, the sheer horror of watching a loved one flailing against a premature death sentence. There was no reliable treatment for Aids back then. Wojnarowicz describes a nightmarish drive with the emaciated, furious Hujar to Long Island to visit a doctor who claims to have had good results with typhoid shots. He isn't really a doctor, it turns out, though his waiting room is filled with dozens of desperate Aids patients.

Hujar died on 26 November 1987. Unflinching as ever, Wojnarowicz recorded his passing, standing by his body to take

twenty-three photographs of 'his amazing feet, his head, that open eye again', before raising his hands in helplessness and breaking down. Ragged with grief, he was plunged into a confrontation with mortality, especially after his own diagnosis a few months later. As a young man, he'd often engaged in self-destructive behaviour, dabbling with heroin, treating himself with reckless disregard. Now he wanted to grapple with those dark impulses, to understand their cause.

In the final, gargantuan essay, 'The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole', he investigates the suicide of a friend, mixing his own reflections with interviews with members of their shared circle. Again, the writing is remarkable: a full-bore, high-stakes confrontation with mortality. It closes with an unsparing description of a bullfight in Merida, Mexico. An incantation repeats like a tolling bell: 'Smell the flowers while you can.' It sounds simple, until you remember the many forces geared against health and love, the courage it took to commit to pleasure.



Of all the many voices from the margins, Wojnarowicz is among the most commanding, writing at a pitch of white-hot urgency. And yet *Close to the Knives* is not simply a diatribe, let alone anything resembling dry political analysis. Instead, it's a kind of intensely alive hybrid: a work of radical honesty that uses the most intimate of experiences, particularly sexual, as a way of prying open the devastating way in which political systems work to exclude and silence the unwanted.

'It is exhausting, living in a population where people don't

‘speak up if what they witness doesn’t directly threaten them.’ Wojnarowicz was not only alert to his own experience. Politicised by his sexuality, by the violence and deprivation he’d experienced, he was attentive to anyone whose experience was erased by what he called ‘the pre-invented world’ or ‘the one-tribe nation’. During the course of *Knives* he touches repeatedly on other struggles, from police brutality towards people of colour to the erosion of abortion rights.

It’s twenty-four years since Wojnarowicz died, and yet his struggle has lost none of its relevance. We might like to think that the world he documented ended with combination therapy, or with marriage equality, or with any of the other liberal victories of the past two decades. But the forces he spoke out against are as lively and malevolent as ever. Even his old enemies are back in circulation.

The presidential candidate Ted Cruz is on record praising the late Senator Jesse Helms, a civil-rights opposer dedicated to fighting federal funding for work by gay artists (Wojnarowicz was a particular target). As for Hillary Clinton, she provoked a furore by celebrating the Reagans at Nancy Reagan’s funeral for starting a national conversation on Aids, ‘when, before, nobody would talk about it’. As if. In fact the Reagan administration was notable for its long refusal to mention the issue of Aids, a silence that had appalling consequences.

As the rallying cry of Aids activists made clear, ‘Silence = Death’. From the very beginning of his life Wojnarowicz had been subject to an enforced silencing, first by his father and then by the society he inhabited: the media that erased him, the courts that legislated against him and the politicians who con-

sidered his life and the lives of those he loved expendable.

In *Knives* he repeatedly explains his motivation for making art as an acute desire to produce objects that could speak, testifying to his presence when he no longer could. 'To place an object or piece of writing that contains what is invisible because of legislation or social taboo into an environment outside myself makes me feel not so alone,' he writes. 'It is kind of like a ventriloquist's dummy – the only difference is that the work can speak by itself or act like that magnet to attract others who carried this enforced silence.'

Clinton apologised for her statement at Nancy Reagan's funeral, but that didn't entirely quell the furore. Within hours of her comment, a photograph began to circulate on social media. It showed a lanky man from behind, wearing a denim jacket hand-painted with a pink triangle and the words IF I DIE OF AIDS – FORGET BURIAL – JUST DROP MY BODY ON THE STEPS OF THE F.D.A. (the Food and Drug Administration, then dragging its feet over Aids research).

It was Wojnarowicz, of course: still finding novel ways to be heard, to counter untruths. Not long before he died, he made a photograph in the desert of his own face, eyes closed, teeth bared, almost buried beneath the dirt, an image of defiance in the face of extinction. If silence equals death, he taught us, then art equals language equals life.