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'SOMETHING LIKE AN X-RAY OF CIVILIZATION': PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE ART OF DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

Louis Shankar

> My mind cannot contain all that I see. I keep experiencing this sensation that my skin is too tight; civilization is expanding inside of me. [. . .] I am experiencing the X-ray of Civilization.
>
> David Wojnarowicz, 'Post Cards from America: X-Rays from Hell' (1989)[1]

David Wojnarowicz's writings are peppered with neologisms and idiosyncratic coinages: in this essay, I hope to make sense of two that feature heavily in his late writings, namely, the 'preinvented world' (sometimes 'pre-invented') and an 'x-ray of civilization'. What does an 'x-ray of civilization' look like? Moreover, what is the utility of such a vision? I will draw on a body of work presented at *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*, a solo exhibition by Wojnarowicz that was open from 8 February to 4 March 1989 at the P.P.O.W. Gallery (figure 1). It was Wojnarowicz's first presentation of new work in New York City since 1987.

In the intervening time, several significant events had occurred in his life: his friend and mentor Peter Hujar died of AIDS on 26 November 1987; soon after, he visited Europe and stayed with his sister Pat in Paris when she gave birth; and, shortly after his return, Wojnarowicz received a diagnosis of AIDS-related complex (ARC). Wojnarowicz produced a typed and hand-xeroxed catalogue to accompany the show, with notes on each of the thirty-one artworks displayed at the gallery. Of *Untitled (Buffalo)*, he wrote: 'a metaphorical image for the title of the show . . .'[2] He added: 'something about the structure of things that angered me – like the sensation I've had after coming out of hospital after a long illness and seeing everything as if for the first time; with more clarity that one can be expected to endure; something like an x-ray of civilization'.[3]

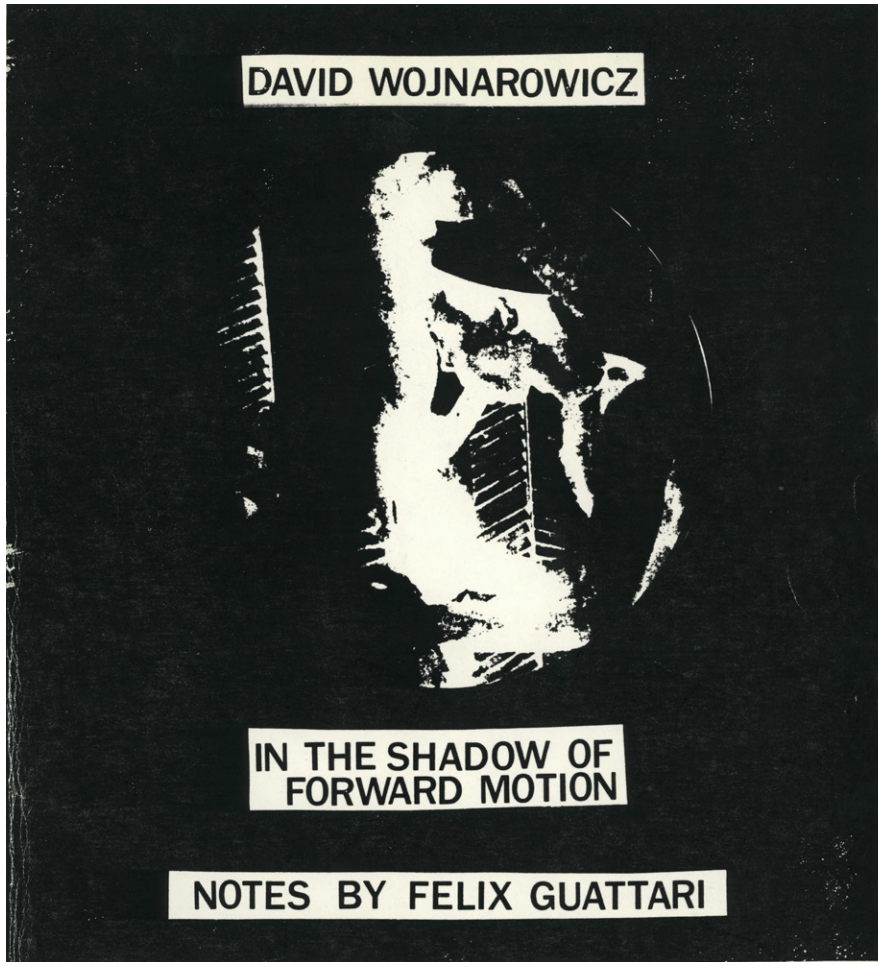

Figure 1 David Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow of Forward Motion (ITSOFOMO)* (detail), 1989. Photocopy, 216 × 279 mm. © Estate of David Wojnarowicz. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

I propose that we might align the preinvented world with the Symbolic order, as understood in the work of Jacques Lacan. Thus, an x-ray of civilization becomes a way of seeing through the trappings and structures of the Symbolic. And the visual dimension of such an x-ray is essential: I draw on Wojnarowicz's various writings to understand these ideas, then assess how he puts them to work in his visual art. Indeed, Wojnarowicz's conceptualisation of

civilisation, as contrasted with the 'primitive', which he evokes elsewhere, has many psychoanalytic resonances. For Sigmund Freud, the so-called primitive offered the opportunity to analyse modes of thinking that are unconscious in modern, 'civilised' humans – ideas explored most importantly *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930).[4] In both cases, 'civilisation' is a mask of something more universal that lies beneath, which is in turn the true focus of study.

There has been relatively little writing on Wojnarowicz's mixed-media artworks and his late paintings. Scholarship tends to focus on his photography, video work, or writings, or puts his work into dialogue with other activist practices.[5] Moreover, with a few brief exceptions, there has been no sustained application of psychoanalytic theory, despite the clear utility of such theory, as I will demonstrate in this paper.[6] At this moment – that is, 1989 – themes of trauma and mourning are central to Wojnarowicz's work and psychoanalysis offers a body of theory to approach such dynamics. Psychoanalytic theory has been utilised amongst cultural responses to the HIV/AIDS crisis since the late-1980s. Indeed, I will circle around to Tim Dean's 'The Psychoanalysis of AIDS' in order to situate Wojnarowicz's work within the broader discourse of the AIDS epidemic.

First, I will propose a perspective on understanding the preinvented world, illustrating this with a work from *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*. Then, I pivot to a number of contemporaneous works that illustrate the x-ray of civilization, before concluding by situating this dynamic within a broader context of visual culture and AIDS activism.

i – 'it's the heaviness of the pre-invented existence we are thrust into'[7]

I propose that we understand Wojnarowicz's notion of the preinvented world as analogous to a Lacanian Symbolic order. Throughout his writing, a number of core Lacanian ideas can be identified, most importantly the three registers of Lacan's psychoanalytic thought (also described as orders): the Symbolic, the Real, and the Imaginary. Broadly speaking, the Symbolic is the realm of intersubjective communication, linked to culture and to language; the Imaginary is the world of imagined and fantasised mental processes; and the Real covers that which cannot be reduced to either of the other orders, that which escapes communication and resists imagination. The three registers are distinct but interlinked. This, as well as a plenitude

of other Lacanian thinking, can be evidenced in the following passage from *Close to the Knives*, specifically in an essay Wojnarowicz wrote in response to Peter Hujar's death:

> First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. The Other World is where I sometimes lose my footing. In its calendar turnings, in its preinvented existence. The barrage of twists and turns where I sometimes get weary trying to keep up with it, minute by minute adapt: the world of the stoplight, the no-smoking signs, the rental world, the split-rail fencing shielding hundreds of miles of barren wilderness from the human step. A place where by virtue of having been born centuries late one is denied access to earth or space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world. The world of coded sounds: the world of language, the world of lies. The packaged world; the world of speed in metallic motion. The Other World where I've always felt like an alien. [. . .] Traveling into primitive cultures allows one a sudden and clear view of the Other World; how the invention of the word 'nature' disassociates us from the ground we walk on. While growing up I was constantly aware of the sense of all this in the same way one experiences a vague fear yet can't distill the form of it from the table or the cup one is holding or the skies rolling beneath the window frames.[8]

We can think of 'the World' as the Real and 'the Other World' as the Symbolic – a connection made most explicit in his description of this 'Other' world as 'the world of language, the world of lies'. On a more direct level – incidental, it should be noted – this world is described as 'Other' with a capital O, thus aligned with Lacan's 'big Other' (specifically spelled with a capital O; or represented by a capital A, for *Autre*). The 'big Other' identifies the trans-individual, sociolinguistic structures that construct and configure our intersubjective relations and relationships. The designation of 'nature' within the Symbolic severs it from the experience of nature – 'the ground we walk on' – in the Real.

As Jane Gallop proposes, in *Reading Lacan*: 'Lacan has written another version of the tragedy of Adam and Eve'.[9] She elaborates: 'Just as man and woman are already created but do not enter the human condition until expelled from Eden, so the child, although already born, does not become a self until the mirror stage. Both cases are two-part birth processes: once

born into "nature", the second time into "history"'.[10] What appeals to Wojnarowicz is a state of nature that lies beneath (or before) the imposition of culture and civilisation.

This is not to say that the preinvented is synonymous with the Symbolic but that, by understanding the preinvented as a Symbolic construct, we might theorise and understand Wojnarowicz's particular perspective to society. In seeking to then communicate this perspective – indeed, to represent the structures themselves – Wojnarowicz adopts a relationship to the preinvented that parallels a Lacanian psychosis. This is a structural relationship, not a diagnosis or a pathologisation.

Such a perspective is best expressed in *My Father was a Sailor, My Father was the Century* (1988–89), a large mixed media piece created for the P.P.O.W. show (figure 2).[11] As the title suggests, the work links to a litany

Figure 2 David Wojnarowicz, *My Father Was a Sailor/My Father was the Century*, 1988–89. Acrylic and mixed media on masonite, 1283 × 1588 mm. WOJ-619, © Estate of David Wojnarowicz. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

of psychoanalytic ideas of family and child development. The painting of the squid that dominates the work is an outlier in Wojnarowicz's oeuvre: he makes no mention of squids in his writing, although whales appear in various essays. That it is painted here in ink – fittingly, for a squid – gives it a translucent, spectral quality that seems to situate it on the same plane as its collaged ground, continuing seamlessly across the three dominant colours.

Right of centre and toward the top, there is an embedded photograph, a distorted, solarised image of David being held by his father, Ed, whose head is at the top right, a flash of white (for clarity, I will refer to members of the Wojnarowicz family by their first names in this section). The same photo, without inversion, is reproduced in the catalogue, alongside another picture of the pair. He writes on the opposing page: 'The childhood photo of me as a baby in the arms of my father/ the century . . .'[12] 'My father' and 'the century' become interchangeable – a metonymic slippage – the father accumulating a power and meaning beyond his conventional signification.

David noted the cruelty of his father: '1962 [. . .] My father became more brutal. He would shoot guns off in the living room missing us and sometimes put the guns to our heads. He killed our pet rabbit and fed it to us claiming it was 'new york steaks' [*sic*] . . .'[13] In an earlier work, *You Killed Me First: Installation #8* (1985) – which incorporated a film of the same name, *You Killed Me First* (1985), directed by Richard Kern and co-written by Wojnarowicz – David revisited these feelings and played the father in the film. 'As both performer and co-writer, he incorporated memories of his abuse at the hands of his own father', explained gallerist James Romberger.[14] In the installation, he escalated these feelings from re-enactment to symbolic patricide, with a corpse of the 'cruel patriarch' on the right-hand side of the installation.[15]

David explained: 'I did this painting recently called, 'My Father Was A Sailor, My Father Was The Century' [. . .] It's about him as a sailor, but it's also about transportation, about moving out where a century ago most people wouldn't know what was beyond the bend in the road outside their door'.[16] He continued: 'The painting touched on that idea of collapsed distances, but also, more personally, it touched on the psychosis and danger of the world – like my father's psychosis – a world bent on death and destruction'.[17] This work is about madness and danger, hidden behind the surface, as we see with the gun where the posters peel away. Perhaps this explains the significance of

the squid, too, an unknown and unknowable danger beneath, here brought forward to be one with the pictorial plane that is imminent and watching.

David elsewhere directly contrasts the head of the family – indisputably the domineering figure of Ed for the Wojnarowicz household in New Jersey – with the head of state. In 1990, he exhibited an installation and video work entitled *America*: *Heads of Family, Heads of State* (1989–90). In *Close to the Knives*, he writes: 'Heads of Family; Heads of State. Whereas, I can step back from the forms of violence, psychic and physical, that I may have experienced as a child at the hands of Family – I step forward with the shield and sword to confront the State'.[18] Such confrontation will become a recurring theme and, indeed, rallying call for Wojnarowicz.

Heads of Family; Heads of State; the Father the Sailor; the Father the Century – what to make of this? The parental figure as metonym or master signifier is crucial for much psychoanalytic thinking, from Freud's Oedipus complex onwards. In his return to Freud, Lacan introduced the notion of the Name-of-the-Father, to explain his concept of the symbolic order and the individual's entrance therein: 'It is in the name of the Father that we must recognise the support of the symbolic function which, from the dawn of history, has identified his person with the figure of the law'.[19] Lacan reworked Freud's Oedipus complex, distinguishing three 'times': the pre-Oedipal phase of a dual relation between child and mother; the interruption by the Father, bringing with him the Symbolic Order; and castration, wherein the subject understands their fundamental lack, the cause of all desire. Writing on the 'psychosis of freedom', Todd McGowan notes: 'Though law takes on many different forms, all these forms have their basis in the foundational act of law – creating the social bond through universal prohibition of direct satisfaction'.[20] We are united in our lack.

An incomplete or defective Oedipal operation is at the root of psychopathological structures, like psychosis and neurosis. Psychosis, according to Lacan, develops due to the foreclosure of the primordial signifier, this Name-of-the-Father. This derives from a reconsideration by Lacan of Freud's notion of *Verwerfung*: 'I will thus take *Verwerfung* to be foreclosure of the signifier. At the point at which the Name-of-the-Father is summoned [. . .] a pure and simple hole may answer in the Other; due to the lack of the metaphoric effect, this hole will give rise to a corresponding hole in the place of phallic signification'.[21] Foreclosure treats that which is foreclosed

as if it did not exist, and thereby is distinct from repression, whereby the repressed reappears in the unconscious; the psychotic lacks the primordial signifier and, as such, presents difficulties understanding and relating to the symbolic order and social discourse. 'For the psychotic, the law exists, but it does not derive from a social authority. Instead, it represents an arbitrary restriction that an illegitimate external authority imposes on the subject'.[22] One of Wojnarowicz's recurring examples of a 'pre-invented' structure is the traffic light. He notes how people would instinctively, passively, and obediently stop and go based on this ultimately arbitrary system: 'we're born into a structure that starts with traffic lights and goes up to governmental decrees in Congress'.[23] It is important to note the escalation here: from a relatively minor example of arbitrary authority, the traffic light, the same attitude escalates upwards, metonymically, to cover the law itself. Incidentally, Lacan, according to Jacques-Alain Miller, his son-in-law, was intolerant of red lights: he ran them all the time and, as passenger, would exit the car if the driver submitted to its ambient power.[24]

A key trait of psychosis as theorised by Lacan is the notion of an 'imposed speech', that is, an awareness or belief that speech and language are somehow being imposed on the psychotic speaker, that their words are not their own. Of course, one of Lacan's most significant contributions was to explain how this is true in differing degrees for all of us, a fundamental function of language. 'How do we not sense', Lacan asked, 'that the words we depend on are imposed on us, that speech is an overlay, a parasite, the form of cancer with which human beings are afflicted'?[25] It is the psychotic who is acutely, intensely, often worryingly aware of this fact. Jacques-Alain Miller provides the previous quote second-hand, adding, 'If we identify ourselves with the psychotic it is insofar as he is, like ourselves, prey to language, or better, that *this is what he teaches us*'.[26]

If the psychotic teaches this, then Wojnarowicz shows how we are constructed by the inheritance of the preinvented world, the predetermined structures of our subjectivity (and intersubjectivity). This is a sentiment that recurs through Wojnarowicz's notes and journals: 'In these moments I hate language. I hate what words are like. I hate the idea of putting these preformed gestures on the tip of my tongue or through my lips . . . I hate language in this moment because it seems like so much bullshit'.[27] Identifying these 'performed gestures' is important, separating words into discrete units,

letters (in writing) and sounds or phonemes (in speech). While words convey meaning, these smaller units lack any inherent meaning, they signify nothing in isolation. As Lacan explains, 'If the neurotic inhabits language, the psychotic is inhabited, possessed, by language'.[28]

The use of printed supermarket posters in *Hujar Dead* – seen also in *My Father Was a Sailor . . .*, but here intermixed with shredded US currency – is a return to an earlier motif in Wojnarowicz's work. In a series from 1983, he painted and printed on top of supermarket posters, usually bold text on plain backgrounds, such as *Jean Genet Masturbating in Metteray Prison (London Broil)* (1983).[29] There's an obvious awareness of New York Pop Art here, Warhol specifically; however, rather than sleek brand advertisements, these were, in the original series, discarded screen-printed posters that promoted the 'sales of the week' – they were temporary and transient and disposable. They are emblematic of suburban America: with its conformity, standardisation, and mass consumption.

Addressing his seminar audience, Lacan explains: 'compared to you the psychotic has this disadvantage, but also this privilege, of finding himself a little bit at odds with, askew in relation to, the signifier'.[30] Such an 'askew' relation reveals the universal characteristics of the signifier and signification alike. The psychotic breaks apart language in order to remake it. In *My Father Was A Sailor . . .*, Wojnarowicz breaks apart words and signs stolen from advertisements, reducing them to formal elements and flattening them into material surface.

With *My Father Was A Sailor . . .*, two distinct perspectives are presented simultaneously, at once submerged: the squid, in the dark depths of the ocean, staring back at the viewer, and above water, the ship sailing across the surface of the sea. The viewer is required to be looking straight on and sideways at once (in fact, fragments of text read from all four directions, up, down, left, and right). The painting of the squid gives a rounded depth to the piece, despite the emphasis on surface. And then, even this surface peels away.

Tim Dean, in his paper on the psychoanalysis of AIDS first published in 1993, characterises the American public response to HIV/AIDS as psychotic, in the Lacanian sense, due to lacking a master signifier.[31] There were too many meanings, associations and metaphors, and too much misinformation, in what Paula Treichler termed an 'epidemic of signification'.[32] 'WHEN

I WAS TOLD THAT I'D CONTRACTED THIS VIRUS IT DIDN'T TAKE ME LONG TO REALIZE THAT I'D CONTRACTED A DISEASED SOCIETY AS WELL [*sic*],' Wojnarowicz wrote in 1989.[33] The disease of the individual parallels the diseased society, with the body serving as metonymy for the body politic. A psychotic response to society thus becomes an appropriate and understandable reaction to society's wider psychosis.

ii – 'that moment of the x-ray of civilization'[34]

In the exhibition catalogue, Wojnarowicz describes the x-ray of civilization as: 'the structure of everything revealed in the simple immobility of the legs before the red of a traffic light and the whole street rushing with humans'.[35] He writes this in relation to *Untitled (Falling Buffalo)* (1988–89), a key work of this moment and a 'metaphorical image for the title of the show'.[36] However, I want to explain how it is *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* that best articulates and deploys this neologism, the 'x-ray of civilization', within this body of work. It is his first artwork to incorporate screen-printed text – and his own writing, rather than a found text – a strategy he would increasingly utilise in the subsequent years. The text complicates the image plane, appearing on top of both the photographs and collage. As Jennifer Doyle notes: 'The text intervenes directly in the structure of spectatorship: the artist deploys writing in order to force the spectator to become a reader, and that reading is hard because the text is written as a breathless rant.'[37] The focus of the work are the photographs of Hujar in the centre – and yet, 'this text forces us to get physically close to the work, but it also pushes us away from the image at its heart'.[38] This push-and-pull forces a reflexive, active engagement with the work on the part of the spectator.

Wojnarowicz and Hujar had a complicated intense relationship, one that became vital for both of them. What started out in January 1981 as a sexual affair became a platonic friendship, 'a very complicated friendship/relationship that took time to find a track to run along,' Wojnarowicz summarised.[39] Wojnarowicz explained that Hujar 'was like the parent I never had, like the brother I never had . . . After a couple years knowing each other, it really solidified'.[40] Early on in Wojnarowicz's artistic career, Hujar pored over his sketches and portfolios, gave critical feedback, 'told him he [had] to become a visual artist'.[41] Wojnarowicz recorded some of the advice Hujar gave him

in his journals: 'That I shouldn't start compromising and trying to adapt to other people's taste.'[42] We can therefore understand the development of his artistic practice as intimately bound up with his relationship to Hujar – and that his work produced after Hujar's death was similarly affected by his absence and Wojnarowicz's mourning.

After Hujar was diagnosed with AIDS, at the very start of 1987, Wojnarowicz described his priorities to his partner, Tom Rauffenbart: 'My work, Peter, and you. In that order.'[43] In 1993, after Wojnarowicz's death, Rauffenbart recalled: 'They were both more than and less than lovers. [. . .] They were kindred souls. Part of David was missing after Peter went'.[44] Wojnarowicz was by Hujar's side when he died: 'I surprised myself: I barely cried. When everyone left the room I closed the door and pulled the super-8 camera out of my bag and did a sweep of his bed . . .'[45] He then took 23 photographs of his body, eyes still open. He marked the envelope that contained these contact sheets: '23 photos of Peter, 23 genes in a chromosome, Room 1423'.[46] Four of these images, reproduced in a three-by-three grid, form the core of *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* (figure 3).[47] It is intensely confrontational, addressing the viewer in an acerbic, righteous tirade. No longer is death natural or passive – it is deliberate and there is blame. Wojnarowicz weaponises the images of Hujar's dead body to affront the viewer, to affect change.

I want to draw attention to Lacan's 'Schema L,' which demonstrates the unconscious movement for the subject from the Imaginary dyad to the Symbolic trinity (figure 4). The schema illustrates how the symbolic relation, between the Other and the subject, is blocked, to a certain degree, by the imaginary axis, which runs from the little other (or specular image) to the ego. The arrow from the big Other (A) to the subject (S) passes through the imaginary relation, the vector between the little other (a') and the ego (a): on the schema, this arrow turns from a solid to a dotted line. This is often described as the unconscious traversing the Imaginary 'wall of language' – the 'true' discourse of the Other reaches the subject in an inverted and incomplete form.[48] Here, the object of utmost anxiety is identified – in the title that is not a title, *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* – in as direct and unfeeling terms as possible. The photographs of Hujar – which attempt to capture the loss experienced at that moment, and necessarily fail at doing so – pass through the very literal wall of language that Wojnarowicz prints atop the images.

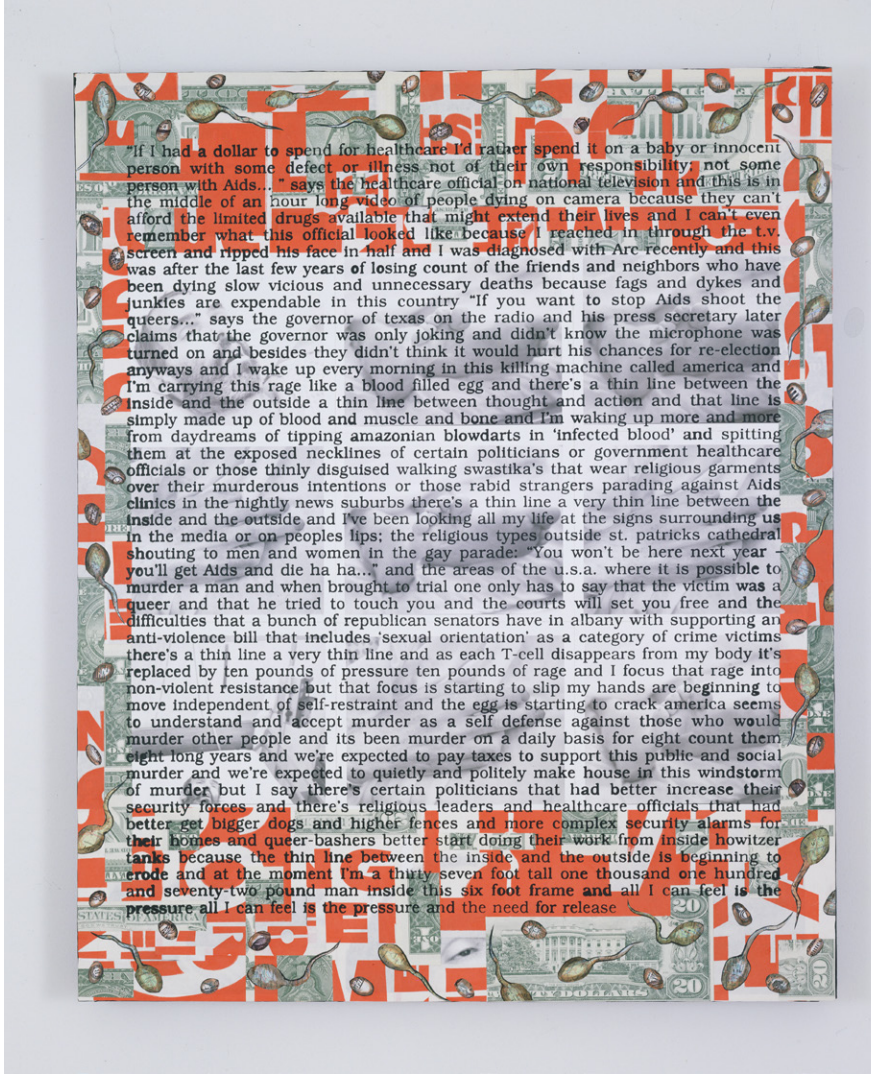

Figure 3 David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, 1988. Black and white photograph, acrylic, text and collage on masonite, 990 × 812 mm. WOJ-284, © Estate of David Wojnarowicz. Courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

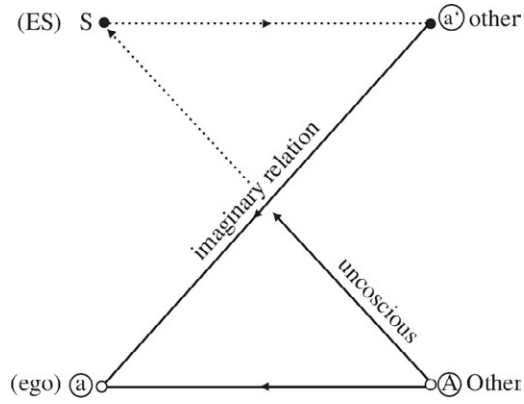

Figure 4 Jacques Lacan, *Schema L.*

Thus, the x-ray of civilisation might be this process in reverse, from the subject (S) to the unconscious (A), seeing through the 'wall of language'. The wall of language is a function of society, to restrict, nullify, or disperse the destructive 'discontent' of the unconscious. It makes the wall of language visible in order to break apart this same wall. Such a confrontation with the object of anxiety might, in being exposed to the nothingness at the core of subjectivity, precipitate the breakdown of the coherent subject. And this risk thus flies in the face of the functioning of the unconscious for the 'normal', 'healthy' subject – I evoke both words with a heavy sense of irony – and this is the function of the screen, to mask, to defer.

I also want to draw on Hal Foster's conceptualisation of the Lacanian gaze, specifically in postmodern art.[49] In considering the obscene, the abject, and the traumatic in art after 1970, he mentions the AIDS crisis offhand when, I believe, artistic responses to HIV/AIDS from this period – caught as they are within the 'crisis of representation' that coalesced around the epidemic – are crucial to understanding these critical terms.[50] 'I want to suggest,' Foster writes, 'that much contemporary art refuses this age-old mandate to pacify the gaze, to unite the imaginary and the symbolic against the real. *It is as if this art wanted the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist, in all the glory (or the horror) of its pulsatile desire, or at least to evoke this sublime condition*' (italics in original).[51] Death operates within the Real – beyond signification and imagination – and in this work, the images of Hujar, dead, provoke a feeling of glory and horror, radiant, a retinal burn. ('And his death

is now as if it's printed on celluloid on the backs of my eyes,' Wojnarowicz would write.[52])

A border of banknotes and collaged supermarket posters surround these central images: connoting consumerism and capitalism – the epitome of post-war America and, here, the American healthcare system. For both Hujar and Wojnarowicz, it was expensive to die. The sperm signify both reproduction – the perpetuation of this corrupt system – and contamination, with semen being a significant vector for HIV transmission. These sperm threaten to escape the frame of this image: a risk to us all.

Banknotes, like maps, are a motif in Wojnarowicz's mixed media pieces ('printed money from a joke store,' he notes, as destroying or decaying federal currency is a criminal offence).[53] Money points outwards, towards all economic interaction. It is part of a system of exchange, yet is used to disguise. In *The Redesign of the Dollar Bill* (1988–89), also first shown at this exhibition, this is confronted directly: 'What I'm doing with the money is cutting holes in it and putting photographs inside the holes that will reflect a new design for money, or what money is actually used for: either consumption, control, or whatever'.[54] Wojnarowicz exposes the arbitrary nature of such systems; he tries to show what exists and goes on behind, in terms of systems and signs. 'I like to subvert the intended use of printed materials in that way,' he summarises, 'The same thing with the supermarket poster, with the map, with money.'[55] *Pre*-printed materials neatly embody the *pre*-invented: material inheritance, designed and printed according to predetermined conventions and systems. Our economic system and cash money specifically requires a shared belief; a bank note is a deferred promise. Indeed, capitalism has been theorised in these same terms as a form of collective psychosis – the master signifier foreclosed from our common symbolic weave.

In being collaged, these posters draw attention to the surface of the work, evoke its function as (psychoanalytic) screen (figure 5). 'The meaning of this last term, the screen,' writes Foster, 'is obscure. I understand it to stand for the cultural reserve of which every image is one instance. Call it the conventions of art, the schemata of representation, the codes of visual culture, this screen mediates the object-gaze for the subject'.[56] Here, the screen is formed of the very substance of mediation and codes: paper currency, the basic fungible unit of economics, posters broken down into fragments of words or isolated letters, the building blocks of language and its symbolic order.

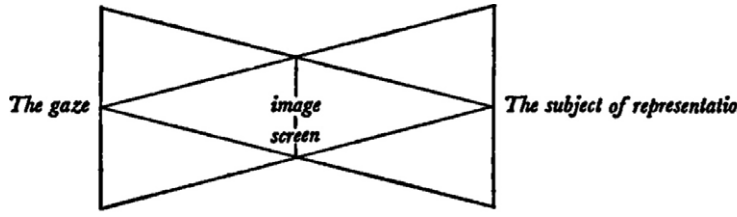

Figure 5 Jacques Lacan, diagram of the screen.

In *My Father Was A Sailor . . .*, the same posters peel away, we see behind the curtain: a gun, violence, ever present. In the catalogue text, Wojnarowicz describes this as the 'splitting of the image before the eyes to reveal the underpinnings of the image – the structure of support beneath the occurrence.'[57] 'To this end,' Foster writes, postmodern art 'moves not only to attack the image but to tear at the screen, or to suggest that it is already torn.'[58] This is precisely how the obscene and, more pertinently, the traumatic is put to use by Wojnarowicz. This work thus functions to enact an x-ray of civilisation. If we align the image screen with the preinvented world and locate the gaze of the Real (or, the Real of the gaze) to the far side of this screen from the subject-viewer, such an x-ray seeks to *reach through the screen* and expose the horror hidden behind. Another example is Wojnarowicz's *Sex Series (for Marion Scemama)* (1988–89), first exhibited at the same exhibition, with its circular insets peering through appropriated images of a tornado, a train, and New York City – a technique also used in creating the cover for the *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* catalogue (figure 1). Beneath these trappings emblematic of American civilisation are revealed sex, blood, and, once again, banknotes – all rendered in negative to make strange for and alienate the viewer.

With *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, the central square seems carved out of the pictorial plane, visibly behind the text, but also recessed into the collaged surround. The text is screen printed over the central images and their collaged border. It reads as the topmost visual register, on the side of the viewer – or subject. In the text within the piece, Wojnarowicz writes of a fantasy where he 'reached in through the T.V. screen and ripped his face in half' – a sense of reaching through is inherent in the work itself.

iii – 'the splitting open of the image we come to accept in daily life'[59]

'One of the main aims of AIDS activist cultural practice,' writes Simon Watney, 'is to explore and expose the gaps between such rhetorical terms as "the nation", "the family", and "the community", and the complex reality that they mask'.[60] Wojnarowicz's art serves such purposes, a practice of exposition and revelation through elegant and complex means. His work peels back, or tears apart, the illusory consistency of civilisation, what Wojnarowicz describes as 'the day-to-day illusion of the ONE-TRIBE-NATION [*sic*]'.[61] 'Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference,' Wojnarowicz explained; 'What happens next is the possibility of an X-ray of Civilization'.[62] This sense of possibility remains key, too: these works do not necessitate a revolutionary or emancipatory experience but open up the possibility for such dynamics, not a certainty but a constant, insistent potential – a hope.

Lucy Lippard notes the 'apocalyptic tone of Wojnarowicz's work', linking it to a lifelong interest in risk and danger: 'From an early age, the artist took risks; this was simply part of a life that could never be taken for granted'.[63] Apocalypticism is a particularly astute description of Wojnarowicz's practice, given the term's etymological roots in notions of revelation or uncovering, with religious and spiritual overtones. Wojnarowicz wrote in 1989 of 'an X-ray of Civilistion, an examination of [civilization's] foundations' and the desire to 'lift the curtains surrounding the control room', both apocalyptic gestures in the truest sense of the word.[64] After the advent of AIDS, such apocalypticism became increasingly prevalent – although often in a pessimistic and catastrophic tone. Wojnarowicz's work shows how similar sentiments can be put to use for activist ends, breaking apart the illusory consistency of the Symbolic in order to approach it anew – and offer the opportunity to reinvent the preinvented.

Notes

1 David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1992), 122 (hereafter cited as *CK*). Italics in original.
2 David Wojnarowicz, *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* (New York: Primary Information, 2020), n.p. (hereafter cited as *ISFM*).
3 *IFSM*, n.p.

4 Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1966–1974) (hereafter cited as *SE*).
5 Fiona Anderson, *Cruising the Dead River: David Wojnarowicz and New York's Ruined Waterfront* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Mysoon Rizk, 'Nature, death, and spirituality in the work of David Wojnarowicz' (PhD diss., University of Illinois, 1997). Mysoon Rizk, 'Looking at 'Animals in Pants': The Case of David Wojnarowicz,' *TOPIA: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies,* 21 (Spring 2009), doi.org/10.3138/topia.21.137.
6 Jacob Mullan Lipman, 'Queer Heritage/Queer Horizons: Disruptive Temporality in the Works of David Wojnarowicz,' *Cambridge quarterly*, 47, no. 4 (2018).
7 *ISFM*, n.p.
8 *CK*, 87–88.
9 Jane Gallop, *Reading Lacan* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 85.
10 Gallop, *Reading Lacan*, 85.
11 I will refer to this work as *My Father Was A Sailor . . .*
12 *ISFM*, n.p.
13 Cynthia Carr and David Wojnarowicz, 'Biographical Dateline,' in *David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night*, eds. David Breslin and David Kiehl (New Haven and London: Yale University Press: 2018), 307–308.
14 Melissa Harris, ed., *David Wojnarowicz: Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* (New York: aperture, 2015), 121.
15 James Romberger in Harris, ed., *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*, 121.
16 Sylvère Lotringer, *David Wojnarowicz: A Definitive History of Five or Six Years on the Lower East Side*, ed. Giancarlo Ambrosino (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2006), 162, 167–68.
17 Lotringer, *A Definitive History*, 168.
18 *CK*, 273.
19 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), 67.
20 Todd McGowan, 'The Psychosis of Freedom: Law in Modernity,' in *Lacan on Psychosis: From Theory to Praxis*, ed. Jon Mills, David L. Downing (London: Routledge, 2018), 48.
21 Lacan, *Écrits*, 191.
22 McGowan, 'The Psychosis of Freedom,' 53.
23 Barry Blinderman, 'The Compression of Time: An Interview with David Wojnarowicz,' in *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame*, ed. Laurie Dahlberg (Normal, IL: University Galleries, 1990), 52.
24 Jamieson Webster, 'Riding in Cars with Jacques Lacan,' *The New York Review of Books*, 21 August, 2019, www.nybooks.com/online/2019/08/21/riding-in-cars-with-jacques-lacan/.
25 Cited by Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Teachings of the Case Presentation,' in *Returning to Freud: Clinical Psychoanalysis in the School of Lacan*, ed. and trans. Stuart Schneiderman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1980), 49.
26 Miller, 'Teachings of the Case Presentation,' 49. Emphasis mine.
27 David Wojnarowicz, *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journals of David Wojnarowicz*, ed. Lisa Darms and David O'Neill (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018), 148 (hereafter cited as *WE*).

28 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Gregg (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1997), 285.
29 In fact, LONDON and (likely) BROIL can be seen on *My Father Was A Sailor . . .*, both upside down, top-centre and upper-right, respectively.
30 Lacan, *The Psychoses*, 322.
31 Tim Dean, 'The Psychoanalysis of AIDS,' *October*, 63 (1993).
32 Paula A. Treichler, 'AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse: An Epidemic of Signification,' *October*, 43 (1987), 31–70 https://doi.org/10.2307/3397564
33 *CK*, 114.
34 Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz* (London and New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2012), 179 (hereafter cited as *FB*).
35 *ISFM*, n.p.
36 *ISFM*, n.p.
37 Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 128.
38 Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, 131.
39 *FB*, 178.
40 *FB*, 179.
41 *FB*, 193.
42 David Wojnarowicz and Amy Scholder, ed., *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 2000), 182.
43 *FB*, 356.
44 *FB*, 357.
45 *CK*, 102.
46 *FB*, 377–78.
47 The grid of images actually continues beneath the collaged border: up close, you can see shadows of Hujar beneath the posters or slivers of his features where to fragments nearly meet.
48 Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), 84, 173.
49 Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).
50 Treichler, 'AIDS, Homophobia, and Biomedical Discourse'.
51 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 140.
52 *CK*, 102.
53 *WE*, 125.
54 *ISFM*, n.p.
55 *WE*, 125.
56 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 140.
57 *ISFM*, n.p.
58 Foster, *The Return of the Real*, 140.
59 *IFSM*, n.p.
60 Tessa Boffin and Sunil Gupta, eds., *Ecstatic Antibodies: Resisting the AIDS Mythology* (Lewes: Rivers Oram Press, 1990), 71.
61 *CK*, 120.

62 *CK*, 121.
63 Lippard, 'Passenger on the Shadows,' in Harris, ed., *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape*, 23–24.
64 *CK*, 121, 123. See Thomas Lawrence Long, *AIDS and American Apocalypticism: The Cultural Semiotics of an Epidemic* (Albany, NY: SUNY Preess, 2012).