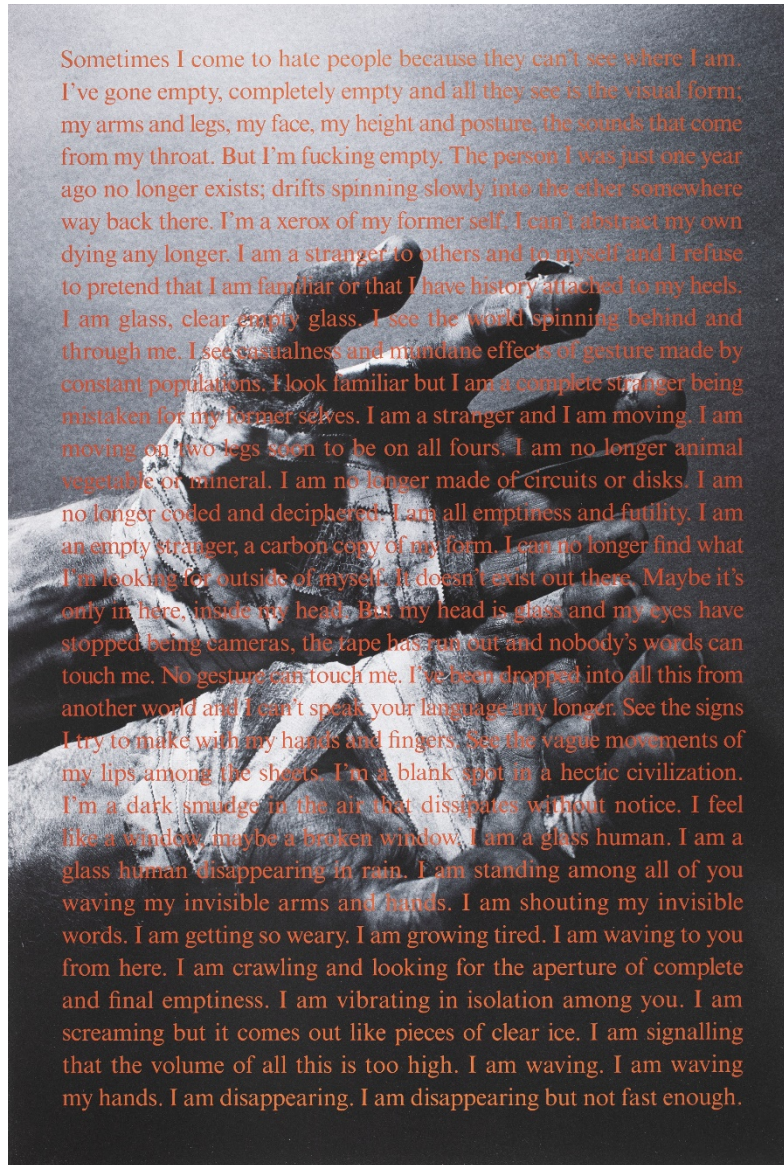




David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Sometimes I Come to Hate People)*, 1992



Screen print on gelatin silver print, 47 1/2 x 35 in.

Frank and Roa Birch Endowment Fund purchase, 1992.40

At the moment of diagnosis, I fully gave up that desire to fit in, and started realizing that those places where I didn't fit and the ways I was diverse were the most interesting parts of myself.

– David Wojnarowicz ¹

¹ Barry Blinderman, "The Compression of Time: An Interview with David Wojnarowicz," in *Tongues of Fire* (1990)



Artist Biography

An artist and activist, David Wojnarowicz (American, 1954—1992) expressed himself in many mediums: photography, drawing, painting, writing, filmmaking, and performance. As a teenager, he escaped an abusive and turbulent homelife for the streets of New York City where he got by hustling, mingling with artists and social outcasts, and sporadically attending the High School of Music and Art in Manhattan. His visual art and writings, which frequently chronicle his own experiences of queer life in America, incorporate collage techniques, texts, found images, and his own photographs, in an exploration of American myths and their ramifications and in critique of social codes that punish cultural differences.

In 1981 Wojnarowicz met photographer Peter Hujar. The two men had a brief sexual affair before developing what Wojnarowicz described in a 1990 interview as a “very complicated friendship/relationship.”² Wojnarowicz was greatly influenced by Hujar, who encouraged him to paint. In the same interview, Wojnarowicz explained, “[Peter] was like the parent I never had, like the brother I never had. He helped me drop a lot of the shit I carried from the streets—the pain, the fear, the guilt. Everything I made, I made for Peter.”³ A close friend of both men observed of Wojnarowicz, “Although David was much younger than Peter... he was much, much more mature. By which I mean David had to navigate the world in a way Peter never could... He wasn’t as damaged. Even though he had a childhood just as damaging, he was much stronger.”⁴

He began his art career by stenciling on out-of-service subway cars and walls around the city and formed an art band called 3 Teens Kill 4 that was active between 1980 and 1983. He began showing his work in galleries around 1982. In 1985, his inclusion in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s biennial exhibition brought him a degree of recognition. Wojnarowicz was also a prolific writer. He kept a diary from the age of seventeen until nearly the end of his life, eventually filling over thirty journals. He published five books during his life, including *Sounds in the Distance* (1982), the autobiographical *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991), and *Memories that Smell Like Gasoline* (1992).

When Hujar became ill from AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), Wojnarowicz was his primary caretaker, and was with Hujar in the hospital when he died. In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz reflected on these experiences and describes how, in the moments after Hujar died, he photographed and filmed his friend’s body, trying to capture his beauty, the sense of flesh, and the light in his eye. Wojnarowicz’s work was often highly sensual, even starkly sexual, and ultimately came under fire from the Catholic church and conservative politicians. After Hujar’s death in 1987 and his own HIV (human

² Wojnarowicz interview with Cynthia Carr, quoted in Marvin J. Taylor, “Some Sort of Grace: David Wojnarowicz’s Vision,” 58.

³ Ibid, 178-79.

⁴ Melissa Harris and Fran Lebowitz, “Close friend to both David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar, writer Fran Lebowitz renders an intimate portrait of both artists....” *Aperture* no. 137: *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* (Fall 1994), 73.



immunodeficiency virus) diagnosis, Wojnarowicz became an activist and advocate for people with HIV/AIDS. His artwork concurrently became sharply political in nature and AIDS went from an occasional to a perpetual subject.

Many artists and performers living in New York at the time became involved in raising awareness of the AIDS crisis through the organization ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), which was founded in 1987. Wojnarowicz was one of them, along with the likes of Keith Haring, Marsha P. Johnson, and Nan Goldin. In addition to criticizing the inflated price of medications used to treat AIDS, the lack of funding for medical research, and the government's homophobia, Wojnarowicz was outspoken on issues of the censorship of artwork and exhibitions that received public art funding, along with the legal rights of artists. In 1989, in response to an essay Wojnarowicz wrote for the catalogue accompanying an exhibition curated by Goldin, the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) pulled its funding from the show. The following year, Wojnarowicz sued the American Family Association for copyright infringement for reproducing his artwork in pamphlets attacking the NEA.

Wojnarowicz died from AIDS-related complications at the age of thirty-seven on July 22, 1992. The same year, inspired by words written by Wojnarowicz in *Close to the Knives*, ACT UP staged a political funeral on the lawn of the White House, spreading the ashes of loved ones who had died of AIDS. Four years later, in 1996, Wojnarowicz's own ashes were sprinkled on the White House lawn. Almost fifteen years later, his work still had the power to incense, when his video piece *Fire in My Belly*, which was critical of the Catholic church, was pulled from an exhibition of LGBTQ art entitled *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*, on view at the National Portrait Gallery from 2010-2011.



Location

Untitled (Sometimes I Come to Hate People) is currently installed in the Ruth and George W. Mead Gallery 17. To view this artwork in person, see the Chazen's website for the latest information about open hours and entry. Admission is always free.

Visual Description

Untitled (Sometimes I Come to Hate People) is a large black and white photograph created by David Wojnarowicz in 1992. The vertical photograph measures forty-seven inches tall and a half inches by thirty-five inches and depicts at its center a pair of hands wrapped in bandages. The hands are next to one another, palms up with fingers slightly curled as if waiting to receive something. Each hand is partially wrapped in white gauze, or bandages, across the top of the palm from edge to edge and along the outer edge of the hand to where the wrist meets palm. The bandages seem old as evidenced by tattered edges in many places.

Red text in regularly spaced lines as if written on a computer has been superimposed over the whole image by use of screen printing. The red text reads: Sometimes I come to hate people because they can't see where I am. I've gone empty, completely empty and all they see is the visual form; my arms and legs, my face, my height and posture, the sounds that come from my throat. But I'm fucking empty. The person I was just one year ago no longer exists; drifts spinning slowly into the ether somewhere way back there. I'm a xerox of my former self, I can't abstract my own dying any longer. I am a stranger to others and to myself and I refuse to pretend that I am familiar or that I have history attached to my heels. I am glass, clear empty glass. I see the world spinning behind and through me. I see casualness and mundane effects of gesture made by constant populations. I look familiar but I am a complete stranger being mistaken for my former selves. I am a stranger and I am moving. I am moving on two legs soon to be on all fours. I am no longer animal vegetable or mineral. I am no longer made of circuits or disks. I am no longer coded and deciphered. I am all emptiness and futility. I am an empty stranger, a carbon copy of my form. I can no longer find what I'm looking for outside of myself. It doesn't exist out there. Maybe it's only in here, inside my head. But my head is glass and my eyes have stopped being cameras, the tape has run out and nobody's words can touch me. No gesture can touch me. I've been dropped into all this from another world and I can't speak your language any longer. See the signs I try to make with my hands and fingers. See the vague movements of my lips among the sheets. I'm a blank spot in a hectic civilization. I'm a dark smudge in the air that dissipates without notice. I feel like a window, maybe a broken window. I am a glass human. I am a glass human disappearing in the rain. I am standing among all of you waving my invisible arms and hands. I am shouting my invisible words. I am getting so weary. I am growing tired. I am waving to you from here. I am crawling and looking for the aperture of complete and final emptiness. I am vibrating in isolation among you. I am screaming but it comes out like pieces of clear ice. I am signaling that the volume of all this is too high. I am waving. I am waving my hands. I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough.



Content and Context

If I'm heading towards a rendezvous with death, then I want to experience it in as real a state as it can get.
– David Wojnarowicz⁵

At the time that Wojnarowicz died, there was no effective treatment for HIV infection. What would later become known as the AIDS epidemic was first recognized in 1981, but the virus that caused it was not identified until two years later. The U.S. government was slow to respond to the disease, which was initially concentrated among gay men and intravenous drug users. In 1982, some researchers began using the term GRID (Gay-Related Immune Deficiency), which reinforced an inaccurate belief that HIV only infected gay men. HIV/AIDS confronted Americans with the realities of homosexual life and culture, long hidden or quietly ignored, and the result was a wave homophobia. In *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz responded to religious leaders who announced that AIDS was a punishment from God and politicians who demanded that people afflicted with HIV be labeled with tattoos or isolated in camps. He condemned the increase in violent acts against homosexuals. He also wrote of the desperation of people infected with HIV in seeking a cure and trying dangerous therapies, such as injections of other viruses to trigger the immune system or the ingestion of gardening chemicals.

Untitled (Sometimes I Come to Hate People) is the last work of art David Wojnarowicz created before he passed away. The red text, screen printed over a black-and-white photograph of soiled and bandaged hands, describes in poetic prose the artist's feelings and frustrations in the face of imminent death from AIDS. Wojnarowicz drew this deeply personal text from what appears to be the last entry in his own diary, written August 1, 1991:

"I just hate myself sometimes. I'm sick of feeling like a fucking empty Xerox version of my former self. Myself of last year is gone, is totally away in the past, floating like a rag in the wind. I'm blank, I'm a copy of my features. I look similar to a year ago but that sense of living, of fantasies, of hope, of purpose, of need, all of it's gone. I'm empty in regards to what used to touch me. I have no fantasies, even sex is a blank for me other than recognizing beautiful bodies: my kind of beauty. It's a bore to think about sex [...] People, even when I explain some of this, tend to just yak away about their lives or say, 'Why don't you go away, take a trip, do something fun?' They don't know what they're talking about. There is no fun. Being sick in a hotel in the woods is worse than being sick in a familiar bed. I've lost the faint degree of hope I always mustered inside of drift or fantasies. None of it works anymore. So what, right? It's just what it is and nothing I say or do can touch it. Nothing anyone else says or does can touch it. I'm empty, other

⁵ Barry Blinderman, "The Compression of Time: An Interview with David Wojnarowicz," in *Tongues of Fire* (1990)



than of illness and dark thoughts. I want to die but I don't know to die. There's no answer right now."⁶

While Wojnarowicz had previously incorporated text into his artworks prior to 1988, works such as this one composed entirely of photographs and text (primarily screen printed) began at that time. The first such montage was entitled *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* and was made for an exhibition entitled *Still Trauma*.

Wojnarowicz made this work as part of a series contemplating death, but only completed two of the prints in the anticipated series of three—this one and *Untitled (When I Put My Hands on Your Body)*, completed in 1990. That print superimposes red text over an excavated burial ground. The photograph Wojnarowicz used in the present work was from an earlier project, in which the artist took images of the same wrapped hands holding various objects. In one, incorporated into a work titled *Silence through Economics* (1988-89), the hands hold coins. In another, they cup a bird's nest.⁷ Here they are empty; but not silent. The band-aids suggest woundedness, but the worn and soiled athletic tape implies the hands of a fighter, someone who has struggled. After completing *Untitled*, Wojnarowicz was too sick to concentrate on writing and could not complete the series. He died from AIDS-related complications at the age of thirty-seven on July 22, 1992.

Although diagnosed with a then-incurable and unrecoverable illness, Wojnarowicz used the activities of writing, artmaking, and activism to gain empowerment and control while ailing. His practice served to refute those who saw individuals stricken with HIV/AIDS as victims, rather than individuals living with the disease, as they preferred to be seen. Resilience does not always mean overcoming an obstacle, but rather, coming to terms with a situation so that one might thrive within the parameters available. Wojnarowicz's creative output between 1987 and 1992, and his use of his HIV diagnosis as motivation for his activism and art, written and visual, are a testament to his resiliency.

⁶ David Wojnarowicz and Amy Scholder, *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Grove Press, 1999), 265-266

⁷ David Wojnarowicz. *Untitled (Hands and Nest)*, 1989. Gelatin silver print. Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.



Discussion Questions

1. Wojnarowicz references his whole body in the text of this artwork, yet we only see a pair of hands. Why do you think the artist chose to focus only on hands? What can we know about this person from just looking at their hands?
2. In looking at this image, what do you notice first—the hands or the text? Are you able to see both the hands and the text at the same time? How does the text impact your reading of this work? Would this artwork have the same impact if one of these elements were to be removed (the hands or the text)? If so, why?
3. The artist likens himself—both physically and emotionally—to glass at least five times in his text. Why did he choose glass as a metaphor? If you had to liken your current condition to an inanimate object or idea, what would it be? Why?
4. How have you, in the past or in this present moment, used writing or artmaking to come to terms with something traumatic?

Collection Connections for Further Engagement: *Unless otherwise indicated, the following works are not currently on view. Click the titles to learn more about them.*

Lesley Dill (American, b. 1950), [Arms, from A Word Made Flesh](#), 1994, Photolithograph and intaglio, 30 x 22 3/8 in., Ruth Chase Gamroth Bequest purchase, 1996.20a.

Artist Lesley Dill also combines an image of hands with text in this work from a series of four mixed-process prints entitled “A Word Made Flesh.” The series incorporates images of a woman’s body and lines drawn from Emily Dickinson’s poetry.

Andy Warhol (American, 1928—1987). [Ladies and Gentlemen \(Marsha Johnson\)](#), January 1974. Polacolor Type 108, 4 1/4 x 3 3/8 in. Gift of The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc., 2008.40.94.

Like Wojnarowicz, Andy Warhol also explored sexuality, queer identity, censorship, and death in his artworks. This Polaroid features activist, performer, and self-identified drag queen Marsha P. Johnson (1945—1992), who was a prominent figure in the 1969 Stonewall Inn uprising and an AIDS activist.



Additional Resources

David Wojnarowicz's diaries are in the collection of the Fales Library and Special Collections at NYU and have been digitized here: <http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/fales/woj/dscref11.html>

An excerpt from David Wojnarowicz's last public reading, at a benefit for the Needle Exchange held at the Drawing Center in 1992. It was filmed by Ed Lachman and produced by John Carlin, who also produced *No Alternative* and included this excerpt with added animation from Suzan Pitt.

<https://vimeo.com/279866845>

Melissa Harris and Fran Lebowitz, "Close friend to both David Wojnarowicz and Peter Hujar, writer Fran Lebowitz renders an intimate portrait of both artists...." *Aperture* no. 137: *Brush Fires in the Social Landscape* (Fall 1994), <http://www.jstor.com/stable/24471716> [pdf available to faculty on the Chazen's Canvas site]

Marion Scemama, *Self-Portrait in 23 Rounds: a Chapter in David Wojnarowicz's Life 1989-1991* (2018), 78 min. Excerpts can be found on youtube:

Wojnarowicz on his diagnosis <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La1icHoWpyo&t=3s>

discussing arts funding, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfmtkjA_HGU&feature=youtu.be

Marvin J. Taylor, "Some Sort of Grace: David Wojnarowicz's Vision," in *David Wojnarowicz: History Keeps Me Awake at Night*, edited by David Breslin and David Kiehl (New York, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2018)

U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and supported by the Minority HIV/AIDS Fund, "Timeline of HIV and AIDS," *HIV.gov*, <https://www.hiv.gov/hiv-basics/overview/history/hiv-and-aids-timeline>

David Wojnarowicz and Barry Blinderman, *David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame* (Normal, IL: University Galleries of Illinois State University; New York: Distributed Art Publishers, 1990)

David Wojnarowicz and Amy Scholder, *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz* (New York: Grove Press, 1999)