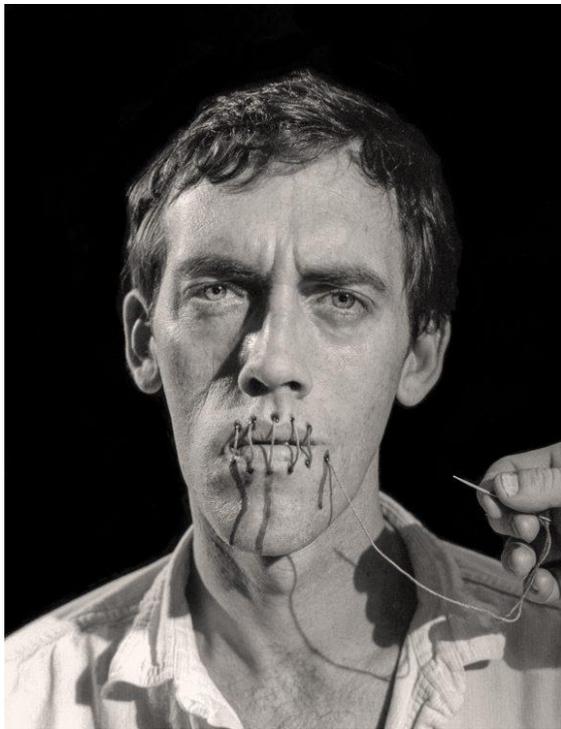


A Revolution Only Surface-Deep: How David Wojnarowicz encapsulates the superficiality of revolutions

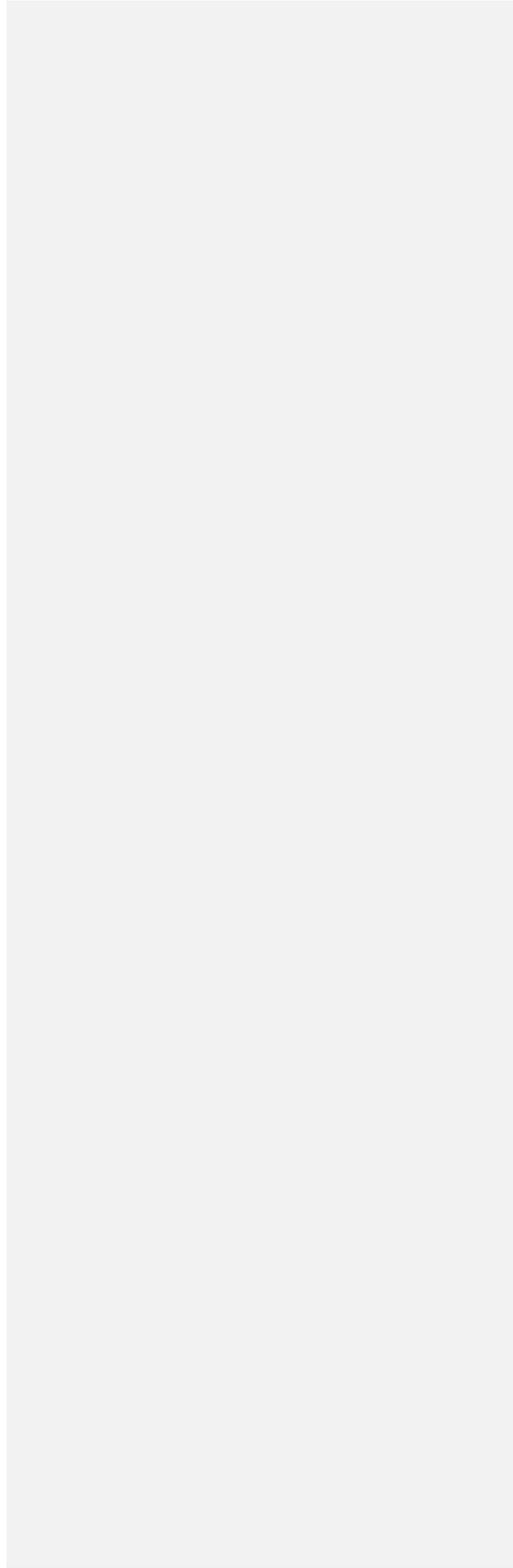


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Roaming the washed-out grays and blues of Berlin, I stumbled upon the KW Institute of Contemporary Art—a small, modern building hidden between the inconspicuous block-buildings of the city. For a fee of twelve dollars, I was able to enter their current exhibition of David Wojnarowicz, “Photography and Film, 1978-1992.” The entire collection took over two floors, in which every wall was haunted by his films and photography encapsulating his experience of the AIDS epidemic in late twentieth-century America. Many of the pieces included graphic images of decay, death, sickness, and political satire as a protest to the silencing of the gay community and victims of the AIDS crisis, hence his main piece which is displayed on the museum’s main website, “Silence=Death.” In all the scenes depicted in this exhibit, it became clear that the artist took advantage of the shock value of his own sexuality and violence in order to draw attention to his work and the issues which they addressed. His expression of his own sexuality and the abuse he experienced as a gay person with AIDS could be labeled as revolutionary in itself, as it introduced a controversial display of rather risqué images for what was socially acceptable at the time of a conservative, Reagan-esque America. However, as I conducted research and began to uncover the surrounding artistic movements and how they relate to present-day America, I concluded that the work of David Wojnarowicz adversely serves as a symbolic representation of the surface-level value of many “revolutionary” movements, through its reliance upon shock-value, bourgeois privatization of display, and non-unique sales-pitch as protest art. Thus, my research of David Wojnarowicz further supported my definition of what the word “revolution” really is: a label often attached to periods of partial social awakening, in which some reform takes place, but then abandoned once the movements are dulled and archived as “revolutions.”

Until the age of eighteen, David Wojnarowicz worked as a hustler and moved from couch to couch, exploiting himself to gay men and adding fuel to a fire that would lead to the production of his violent pieces spread throughout New York City’s urban canvases—cracked

walls, abandoned cars, and bridges¹. His “guerilla” artistry continued until he was discovered later in life as a credible artist and his pieces began to be displayed in New York’s most notable art museums, such as The New Museum and Artists Space². In newspapers throughout his lifetime and even up to current day, David Wojnarowicz is celebrated as a revolutionary artist that rose from the ashes of abuse and disease to create art that confronted society and served as the catalyst for political and social action in the face of the AIDS epidemic³. However, the sustainability of his tactics in the interest of the rights of gay men and the AIDS community is questionable, nor is it uncharacteristic of the art being produced at the time. So then what makes him the face of a revolution, and is a revolution that relies solely upon shock value credible when the ideas become normalized?

In conversations published in the New York Times at the time his work was being produced, David Wojnarowicz was defined as “an artist who seeks every opportunity to unnerve⁴.” Observe the graphic “Silence=Death⁵” portrait, the satanic imagery of “A Fire in my

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¹ “Fresh Air: Terry Gross Interviews David Wojnarowicz.” Accessed April 3, 2019. <https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/38052>.

² “Fresh Air: Terry Gross Interviews David Wojnarowicz.” Accessed April 3, 2019. <https://whitney.org/WatchAndListen/38052>.

³ Cotter, Holland. “A Guerrilla Artist From the Past; [Review].” *New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast)*; New York, N.Y. July 13, 2018, sec. C.

⁴ Kimmelman, Michael. “An Artist Who Seeks Every Opportunity to Unnerve.” *New York Times*. 1990, sec. Arts & Leisure.

⁵ Andreas Sterzing, *David Wojnarowicz (Silence = Death)*, 1989, New York, Photograph, Courtesy the artist, the Estate of David Wojnarowicz, and P·P·O·W, New York

Belly⁶,” or perhaps the most disturbing portrait of the deceased Peter Hujar⁷, and it would be difficult to disagree. America in the 1980’s was a heavily conservative atmosphere under-exposed to homosexuality and gay-violence, so the work of David Wojnarowicz was a clear capitalization off the discomfort it would likely cause its viewers⁸. While this tactic proved successful for a time, audiences became desensitized to the over-flow of graphic images displayed in the public eye, leaving little other reasoning left to keep people talking about Wojnarowicz and the AIDS crisis.

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Furthermore, to align with Holland Cotter and claim that this artist was an exception to other artists of the time is to completely disregard the hundreds of other activists that were finding ways to confront society with the AIDS epidemic through shocking expressions of sexuality and death. In 2014, Davidson College presented a collection of AIDS art that depicted similar themes of sexuality and violence, including Albert J. Winn’s “Chest Patch” and a digital video “Positiv.”⁹

⁶ “A Fire in My Belly.” Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://www.nowness.com/picks/a-fire-in-my-belly>.

⁷ Peter Hujar, as photographed by the artist. Untitled, 1988. Photograph: David Wojnarowicz/The Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W. Gallery, New York

⁸ Francis, Donald P. “Deadly AIDS Policy Failure by the Highest Levels of the US Government: A Personal Look Back 30 Years Later for Lessons to Respond Better to Future Epidemics.” *Journal of Public Health Policy*; *Basingstoke* 33, no. 3 (August 2012): 290–300. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/10.1057/jphp.2012.14>.

Fox, Ann; Wessner, David “Re/Presenting HIV/AIDS” *Van Every/Smith Galleries*, (2014).⁹



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When placed next to David Wojnarowicz's pieces from 1988 and 1990, the argument that Wojnarowicz was an artist easily distinguished from other protest artists of the time and should be considered a revolutionary becomes muddled. Themes of bodily imagery and hospital aesthetic are repeated through several exhibits set in protest to the AIDS epidemic and were especially not specific to any artist at the time.



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The fact that Wojnarowicz was not one of a kind, and there were in fact several other artists releasing similar works simultaneously to him, as well as years after his death, debunks

¹⁰ Albert J. Winn, *The Band-Aids Series: Chest Patch*

¹¹ *Positiv*, from *Panic Bodies*, still, 1998, digital video

¹² David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992), *Untitled*, 1987 (printed 1988)

¹³ David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992), *I Feel A Vague Nausea*, 1990

the theory that his works were revolutionary, but also introduces a new problem with shock-value as a means of revolution. In the history of American revolutions alone, the utilization of controversial images and slogans has been recycled throughout the sexual revolution of the seventies, the AIDS protests, gay pride parades, and the recently tokened “pussy hats” of the neo-feminist movement. While the influx of such images may initially spark conversation, they also lead to public desensitization toward their own movements. When a public becomes so used to certain ideas being constantly plastered across billboards and marches, the line that distinguishes acceptance from apathy can easily become blurred. Susan Sontag addresses this idea in her book, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, in which she explains that “image-glut keeps attention light, mobile, relatively indifferent to content.”¹⁴ The constant influx of shocking bodily images within the art community throughout the 1980’s, then, created a self-destructive movement that overwhelmed audiences to the point of apathy. This issue is exacerbated when one discovers the fact that it was not just an influx sprouting from Wojnarowicz either, but from several other influential gay artists throughout the 1980’s and 1990’s. Holland Cotter himself addresses the persisting issues regarding AIDS and the gay community in America despite the “revolution” thirty years prior:

“[David Wojnarowicz] is an omniscient being who looks back to human disasters of the past and sees them repeating themselves in the present and future, which is exactly what’s happening in the country right now.”¹⁵

¹⁴ Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017.

¹⁵ Cotter, Holland. “A Guerrilla Artist From the Past: [Review].” *New York Times, Late Edition (East Coast)*; *New York, N.Y.* July 13, 2018, sec. C.

While these displays of controversial ideas may spark conversation, they feign acceptance when their topics become dull and consequently less circulated through the press. It would be more accurate to label these movements as “periods of shock” rather than “revolutions,” given that the issues they address are yet to be fully resolved and the communities they represent continue to be oppressed.

The second issue with identifying David Wojnarowicz’s works as entirely revolutionary for the AIDS epidemic is the privatization of his exhibitions within museums. Mary Stuart Petty discusses how curated exhibits and national campaigns of the like “distorted” the image of what the AIDS epidemic looked like to localities separate from the ones which the pieces originated¹⁶. While Wojnarowicz’ pieces may have been relevant to the experiences and problems of the AIDS epidemic within the gay community of New York City, his call for political activism and sexual acceptance was hardly relevant to cities such as San Francisco, where AIDS education and awareness had already been made a priority by the early 1990’s¹⁷. By placing his art in museums and spreading them across the country, AIDS communities local to the cities where his art was being displayed were misrepresented and did not have open-access. If his pieces were intended to be revolutionary in spreading awareness to entire communities, it is logical to require that it was accessible to the poorer, minority communities he was directly addressing, as well as relevant to their own struggles. Unfortunately, such was not the case, and activist art such as his

¹⁶ Petty, Mary Stuart. “Divine Interventions: Art in the AIDS Epidemic.” Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 2000.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/304615336/abstract/92F455D715C341D4PQ/2>.

¹⁷ Petty, Mary Stuart. “Divine Interventions: Art in the AIDS Epidemic.” Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 2000.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/304615336/abstract/92F455D715C341D4PQ/2>.

generalized the crisis and left grassroots efforts not as widely reported as those of New York to not see themselves as legitimate cultural activists¹⁸. In this case as with many others, the creation of nationally-sponsored campaigns translate authority back to those already in power and away from the localities fighting for a voice, generalizing communities and distracting from what is necessary to be revolutionized in each specific niche of the oppressed.

Regarding the general nature of famous protest art, David Wojnarowicz cannot be credited as the legitimate leader of a revolution due solely to the fact that his work is widely displayed throughout the world. The unsettling imagery within his works and his origins as a New York artist nearly guarantee attention toward a museum displaying his work—aspects of his art that make him particularly enticing to museums given that “in the age of dwindling budgets and in an attempt to remain relevant, the advantages of collecting and exhibiting protest art are numerous.”¹⁹ Essentially, to name him and his art as revolutionary is a profitable move by museums searching for more attention. As a result, David Wojnarowicz becomes yet another superficial symbol of a revolution that was not distinct, wholly representative, nor achieving of a final solution to the issues it addressed.

In my critique of the revolutionary associations made between David Wojnarowicz and characteristics of revolutions, I in no way mean to discredit the merit, talent, and significance of his work. It is undeniable that when walking amongst his work, I was filled with overwhelming

¹⁸ Petty, Mary Stuart. “Divine Interventions: Art in the AIDS Epidemic.” Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania, 2000.
<http://search.proquest.com/docview/304615336/abstract/92F455D715C341D4PQ/2>.

¹⁹ Williams, Mary Elizabeth. “A Noble Balancing Act: Museums, Political Activism and Protest Art.” *Museum International, English Ed.; Oxford* 69, no. 3–4 (2017): 66–75.
<http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.lib.davidson.edu/10.1111/muse.12173>.

sensations of loss and frustration—at the treatment of AIDS victims, the experiences he endured, and the lack of political action taken against the epidemic. Rather, I aim to expose flaws in which we define revolutions, and the problems which arise by archiving dulled feelings of uneasiness and labeling them as “revolutions” before issues are fully resolved.

The labeling of David Wojnarowicz as a revolutionary exposes the superficiality of social revolutions within America. The civil rights revolution, feminist revolution, and AIDS era have all been defined as revolutionary periods for their erratic confrontation of social issues and resistance of the oppressed. There is no question that each of these periods in history mark significant actions taken by the people against oppressive systems. However, I believe labeling these periods as revolutions becomes counter-productive to the goals of the operations of the activists. In each case, rights violations were brought to light and some policies were created in response. Naming these times as distinguished periods of revolutions created a distinct line between then and now, encouraging complacency toward the problems that remain. For those communities unaffected by oppressive systems but in power to make change, there develops a sense of comfort when thinking that these revolutions have concluded, and all their objectives have been satisfied. Yet, the harsh realities are that African Americans make up 25% of fatalities at the hand of the police force, despite making up only 13% of the United States’ population²⁰; the average working woman makes about eighty cents to a man’s dollar²¹; and as of 2016, men

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²⁰ “Mapping Police Violence.” Mapping Police Violence. Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>.

²¹ Kiersz, Sonam Sheth, Shayanne Gal, Andy. “6 Charts That Show the Glaring Gap between Men and Women’s Salaries.” Business Insider. Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://www.businessinsider.com/gender-wage-pay-gap-charts-2017-3>.

engaging in homosexual intercourse account for 83% of HIV diagnoses amongst males in the United States²².

David Wojnarowicz, along with other activist artists at the time, excellently capitalized upon the nature of shock-value and protest art, but to define their work as the complete revolution implies that the AIDS crisis and the oppression of gay communities are issues of the past, when in reality, there remains a significant amount of progress to be made. In turn, it would be more accurate and in better interest of the achievement of full rights for both the AIDS and gay community if we recognized this period and those like it as periods of reform. This way, we can pay respect to the efforts of activists and artists pushing toward change throughout past times, while simultaneously honoring their efforts by recognizing that there still lies work ahead before we can archive the issues as objects of the past.

²² “AmfAR :: Statistics: United States :: The Foundation for AIDS Research :: HIV / AIDS Research.” Accessed April 24, 2019. <https://www.amfar.org/about-hiv-and-aids/facts-and-stats/statistics--united-states/>.

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