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## “In these Moments I Hate Language”: Reading David Wojnarowicz’s Typewriter and Tape Recorder

Joule Zheng Wang

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David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) was a multimedia artist, a writer, and an activist. This paper examines how Wojnarowicz navigates the tension between the limitations of language and its use as a medium for articulating his queer life and death through his typewriter and tape recorder. While Wojnarowicz detests language as part of the structural oppression in the US, he relies on language and writing as an expressive outlet and a political tool against the oppressive system. Focusing on *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) and *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journals of David Wojnarowicz* (2018), this paper explores his thinking and experimental writing practices. Combining both Lacanian psychoanalysis and German media theory as a bridge between the symbolic and the material, it interprets how Wojnarowicz transforms his senses and body from the unconscious mind to the concrete political reality through the operation of media technologies.

Keywords: David Wojnarowicz, typewriter, tape recorder, German media theory, language and writing



Fig. 1: David Wojnarowicz, *History Keeps Me Awake at Night*, 1986; acrylic, spraypaint, and collage on masonite, 72 x 84 ins. (182.9 x 213.4 cm); copyright Estate of David Wojnarowicz; courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

David Wojnarowicz (1954–1992) was a multi-media artist, a writer, and an HIV/AIDS activist closely associated with the East Village art scenes in New York City. In his 1986 collage painting, *History Keeps Me Awake at Night (For Rilo Chmielorz)*, Wojnarowicz offers a vision of precarity and chaos in a crumbling US society (see fig. 1). The images (mostly stencilled or industrially printed materials) of a monstrous body, a blue organ, a man holding a gun pointing towards the viewer, assembly lines, and a falling classical column and statue are presented against the backdrop of torn-up world maps, US dollar bills, coupons, and a picture of the human anatomy. These pre-existent motifs are recycled as representation of imperialism, capitalism, and violence that intrude into the unconscious, appearing as restless dreams of the man underneath. This work is representative of Wojnarowicz's political thought, affect, and lived experience as a gay man in the US during the peak of the AIDS crisis: his oppressed sexuality, his anxiety, and his rage and hatred against the preestablished sociopolitical structures, which he repeatedly refers to as the "preinvented world" or "the Other World" (*Knives* 87). While Wojnarowicz expresses these emotions through circulating motifs in his visual arts, they are unrepresentable for him, especially in the form of letters and words: "the idea of all the sensation being reduced to a word called panic is insulting" (*Weight* 146).<sup>1</sup>

Wojnarowicz's relation to language is self-contradictory. On the one hand, he regards language as part of the preinvented system, incapable of capturing his lived experience and all the conscious and unconscious elements crowding his mind:

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 through my lips or through the inside of my mouth [...] it seems like so much bullshit. It just seems like sounds have been uttered back and forth now over centuries. And it always boils down to the same meaning in those sounds, unless you're intense in uttering them, or you precede them or accompany them with certain forms of violence. (*Weight* 148)

On the other hand, the limitation of language did not stop him from writing. As a prolific, hybrid writer and a keen correspondent during his lifetime, Wojnarowicz considers writing to be both a compulsion and a refuge, a means of processing his emotions and confronting his fears: "if I were to ever become ill and so weak that I couldn't leave the house, [...] at least I could write. I could write my way out" (94). While seeking to articulate his queer experiences (the signified) beyond language, he unavoidably relies on the preestablished signifiers to do so. With this paradox as a focal point, I ask: how does the dilemma between writing as both an access and obstacle to Wojnarowicz's body and senses shape the ways he conveys meaning? How does Wojnarowicz navigate his love-hate views on language in his very use of it? To unpack this tension, I will examine Wojnarowicz's thinking on writing and the ways in which he practices it—characterised

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, Wojnarowicz's *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* is cited as *Knives*, his *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journal of David Wojnarowicz* is cited as *Weight*.

by its intense fragmentariness, detailed and visualised description of day-to-day events, and blunt exposure of his thoughts, emotions, imagination, and desire. I will focus on the role of writing instruments in shaping such style, bringing together *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (1991) and *Weight of the Earth: The Tape Journals of David Wojnarowicz* (2018), respectively demonstrating how Wojnarowicz engages with the typewriter and the tape recorder. *Close to the Knives* is a collection of eight creative essays in which Wojnarowicz applies visual analogies to not only travel through time and space to retell his queer life—one that is constantly disrupted by past trauma, erotic fantasies, illness (HIV/AIDS), and death—but also to visualise the preinvented world that is invisible and abstract to him. The incoherent, disintegrative characteristics of his life are embodied in the technique of automatic writing that Wojnarowicz employs, as if he were a typewriter that mechanically “shake out” his sensations and streams of consciousness without alteration and pauses (Carr 107). *Weight of the Earth* includes the transcription of eleven cassettes that Wojnarowicz recorded in 1981, 1982, 1988, and 1989; he labelled these as his “tape journals.” It covers periods missing from his written journals and has received limited critical attention. As noted on the back cover, these recordings “capture Wojnarowicz’s ideas unfolding in real time,” intimately revealing his love life, his previous night’s dreams, his reflections on life and art, and his struggle with his HIV/AIDS diagnosis together with his fear of death. However, the book itself, edited by Lisa Darms and David O’Neill and published posthumously, creates a temporal and material gap between what Wojnarowicz produced and what the readers encounter today, ultimately affecting the experience of reading and interpretation.

Acknowledging my lack of access to Wojnarowicz’s original recordings and his manuscripts, I will approach the two works not just as texts but as mediation of Wojnarowicz’s thinking and demonstration of his writing practices—under the circumstance of language’s paradox. I will begin with Jacques Lacan’s seminal text “The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious,” which draws parallels between the concept of the “letter” as a basic differential element of language and as a material substrate that foregrounds the unconscious. While Lacan’s essay is useful for interpreting Wojnarowicz’s uneasiness with the preinvented language, it does not address the materiality of language, namely how it is put into work through technologies of writing in the (post)modern period. I will therefore turn to German media theory, which critiques French poststructuralism’s fixation on discourse and calls attention to the materiality and technicity of language and media. Combining both approaches as a bridge between the symbolic and the material, I will first examine Wojnarowicz’s paradoxical perception of writing and language in the context of existing scholarship, before offering a close analysis of his two works. In addition to texts, my reading will attend to Wojnarowicz’s typewriter and tape recorder, which—in light of German media theory’s, particularly Friedrich Kittler’s approach to literature on a material level—operate texts and ontology in the concrete reality.

## Writing's Contradiction and Materiality

In the title essay of *Close to the Knives*, Wojnarowicz describes the political conditions of living in the preinvented world:

First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. [...] A place where by virtue of having been born centuries late one is denied access to earth nor space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world. The world of coded sounds: the world of language, the world of lies. (87–8)

What Wojnarowicz means by “the World” is not a natural world without human mediation—without politics, economics, or culture—but a world that allows one to assert agency: “A place that might be described as interior world [...] where movement was comfortable, where boundaries were stretched or obliterated: no walls, borders, language or fear” (108). This world exists prior to it being alienated into “the Other World”; the latter is a world where spaces and bodies are “owned” and privatised, a world inflicted by class conflicts and heteronormativity and regulated by language. But what is language's role in this process?

Lacan makes a similar argument regarding how “language and its structure exist prior to the moment at which each subject at a certain point in his mental development makes his entry into it”; each subject is, in Lacan's words, “the slave of language” (112–3). Here, he is not advocating for the artificial alteration or abolishment of pre-existing language but rather emphasising the historicity and contingency of language as an irreplaceable, inescapable means of intercourse. This resonates with Wojnarowicz's wrestling with language: while cynically expressing his hatred towards words and sounds of unchanged meanings that “have been uttered back and forth now over centuries,” he goes on to claim that this can be challenged if “you're intense in uttering them, or you precede them or accompany them with certain forms of violence” (*Weight* 148). I argue that what Wojnarowicz rejects is not language itself, but the ways in which language is exploited by the ruling class for ideological purposes. As a tool, it must be utilised with intensity or violence in order to contest the discourses of “the Other World.”

Through a similar Lacanian lens, both Jacob Mullan Lipman and Louis Shankar argue that Wojnarowicz's portrayals of queerness serve as pathways to achieve the Lacanian “Real” (a state of nature irretrievably lost through the acquisition of language) beyond the preinvented existence.<sup>2</sup> Yet, their readings point to more than the unconscious or queer representation. For Wojnarowicz, the use of language—namely writing and publicising marginalised voices—is a means to a political end, as concluded in previous research. Some scholars emphasise the politics of the body: Lauren DeLand designates the motifs of diseased and deceased bodies in Wojnarowicz's works as “useful

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<sup>2</sup> For a Lacanian reading of Wojnarowicz's notion of “the Other World,” see Shankar 53–60.

corpse" for "expos[ing] the ravages of the AIDS crisis" (34); Tomasz Sikora considers his works and activism as "counter-necropolitics," a form of bio-resistance that reclaims and employs the "symbolic markers of death" (e.g., corpses, ashes, etc.) for "affective-political mobilisation" (84). Others focus on rhetoric. Jonathan Sedberry also analyses Wojnarowicz's paradoxical relationship with language, but through the perspective of William S. Burroughs' influence; both writers recognise language as a mechanism of control while seeking to "manipulate" it (27). As he interprets, "Wojnarowicz decided that if he could not escape language, he would turn the weapon against itself and against his enemies to spark others to activism" (28). Such usage of language is termed as "counter-rhetoric," namely confronting conservative, homophobic rhetoric with "brutally honest, colloquial, often vulgar rhetoric" (23).

Following this definition, I read "imagination"—with its ability to "adap[t] and stret[ch] the boundaries of the Other World"—as central to Wojnarowicz's counter-rhetoric, despite his acknowledgement that it remains "encoded with the invented information of the Other World" (*Knives* 88). In practice, Wojnarowicz writes of violent or erotic visuals and events that are not present in reality or to his senses: "At least in my ungoverned imagination I can fuck somebody without a rubber, or I can [...] douse [Senator Jesse] Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire" (120). Jack Halberstam theorises this rhetoric as "imagined violence," arguing that "[f]or Wojnarowicz, language itself becomes a weapon, a tool, and a technology and the act of imagination becomes a violent act" (193). In his analysis, Wojnarowicz's writing opens up the possibility of retaliating violence with violence in queer politics and transforms the "force of [violent] fantasy" into "productive fear" (195). Besides rhetorical violence, Wojnarowicz also resorts to the envisagement of eroticism, interpreted by Lipman as a "queer horizon-space" detached from the Lacanian symbolic order; in other words, true queerness, for Wojnarowicz, is utopian and pre-symbolic and therefore cannot be represented through (pre-)existing semiotic structures (364–5). This again resonates with Lacan's contention that subjectivity is paradoxical: "I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think" (126). Because of the asymmetry between the signifier and the signified, the "I" as the thinker and speaker of the "I" are "excentric" to the "I" who is thought and spoken of by the "I"; the former fixates on conscious discourse, the latter on unconscious discourse (125; see also Muller and Richardson 167–8).

What Wojnarowicz aims to achieve in his artistic creation is precisely to disrupt this subjective dissent and to access his unconscious self, or, in his words, to "search for some kind of self-truth" (*Weight* 120). It is through imagination that he "turn[s] upside down" his subjectivity formed under the preinvented world, calling for a utopia where there are "no longer countries, no longer borders, no longer governments or wars" (*Weight* 121–2). In *History Keeps Me Awake at Night*, for example, Wojnarowicz plays with the irony between the dreaming of cultural symbols in Western civilisation and the title suggesting the wakefulness of the "I" who creates the painting. The two selves presented here demonstrate Wojnarowicz's politics in artmaking: the mechanism of US imperialism is

deeply incorporated into the unconscious mind of the sleeping, ignorant self (the painted subject), whereas Wojnarowicz (the painter) brings that intangible mechanism to the conscious awareness by literally cutting visual motifs of “the Other World” into pieces and rearranging them to subvert their original meanings and functions and to invent new ones.

How does Wojnarowicz apply this approach to his writing for the emancipation of oppressed subjectivities, when discourse itself can only be severed into the basic structure of letters? One may argue that his achronological, fragmentary, and highly visualised way of writing was drawn from Burroughs' cut-up mode and use of parataxis, which allowed him to “explore the contingencies and literary potential of cinematic and queer time” (Anderson 125 ; see also Sedberry). What I am interested in, however, is Wojnarowicz's use of the typewriter and the tape recorder in this process—technologies that materialise language in the first place.

Contemporary to Wojnarowicz's most active years was the emergence of German media theory in the 1980s, aiming to “reconceptualize media by moving away from the established ‘logocentric’ narrative that starts out with the immediacy of oral communication” (Siegert 52). As the German response to French poststructuralism, it redirected critical theory's focus from the “representation of meaning” to the “conditions of representation,” namely from French theory's preoccupation with discourse to the external and material conditions which constitute discourse in the first place (50). This material turn calls attention to the significance of media technologies, discourse operators, and pedagogical practices—placed under the umbrella term of “cultural techniques” (*Kulturtechniken*)—to “intellectual and cultural shifts” (50). Furthermore, the terminology “cultural techniques,” as the discipline's development in the 2000s, reflects its tie to the traditional, bourgeois construction of “culture,” which associates the maturation of an individual with the acquisition of literacy through the technical skills of reading and writing (*Bildung*) (57). In other words, the conceptualisation of cultural techniques does not aim to simply challenge the “sovereignty of the book” but to emphasise how new media technologies are also subject to the same paradigm of cultural hegemony (57).

Wojnarowicz recognises the same problem, using instruction manuals as a metonymy for the exploitation of cultural techniques for political agendas. As he claims, the people who faithfully read and follow instruction manuals are “in positions of power,” because they are the same “people who control the means of image production [...] Owners of newspapers and owners of tv stations are the ones who have the most power” (*Knives* 139). In what follows, I will examine how Wojnarowicz, while aware that writing is imprisoned by language and its instruments, uses the typewriter and the tape recorder to transform his transient thoughts, senses, and body into the enduring media of text and sound, minimising the loss inherent in linguistic mediation, thereby allowing for the publicisation of queerness and death.

## Wojnarowicz's Typewriter



Fig. 2: *Untitled (David typing at his sister Pat's home in France)*, 1979; black and white photograph, 5 1/4 x 3 1/2 ins. (13.3 x 8.9 cm); copyright Estate of David Wojnarowicz; courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

In 1978, on his 24th birthday, Wojnarowicz arrived in Paris to briefly live with his sister, who bought an Underwood typewriter for him as a birthday gift (see fig. 2). As he loitered in Paris to look for marginalised characters for his creative project, he would “walk the streets and accept the return of those senses and return home and push them through the typewriter” (Carr 120). According to Wojnarowicz's biographer Cynthia Carr, it was also around this time that Wojnarowicz found his voice as a “visual writer”: “David kept trying to access his subconscious through lofty imagery and a kind of automatic writing, hoping no doubt that something ‘real’ would shake out” (107). This approach is crucial for understanding Wojnarowicz's later texts, particularly his journal writing in *Close to the Knives*. Throughout his life, Wojnarowicz wrote both by hand and on his typewriter. While I am unable to verify the actual writing and editing process of *Knives*, some chapters or paragraphs are distinctly typewritten, most prominently in the opening essay “Self-Portrait in Twenty-Three Rounds.” Originally published in 1984, the six-page text recounts Wojnarowicz's teenage years as a street hustler with little attention to grammar or

orthography. According to Sedberry, this chapter is a practice of the “spontaneous prose” developed by Jack Kerouac, who, alongside Burroughs, was a pioneer of the Beat Generation literary movement that inspired Wojnarowicz. This style, as Kerouac defines, follows “free deviation (association) of mind into limitless blow-on-subject seas of thought” (qtd. in Sedberry 26). It “reflects [Wojnarowicz’s] energy, as he cannot contain his expression within properly punctuated sentences” (Sedberry 26). Letters and words run through the keyboard—as if even the typewriter could not catch up with the speed of the typist’s stream of consciousness—as Wojnarowicz recalls his street friend, his sleepless, homeless nights, and his sex work. Random details are often added in clauses without contextualisation, which makes the unpunctuated text even more difficult to follow. But Wojnarowicz also enjoys greater freedom in manipulating the language that he struggles to escape. For example, in the chapter’s last sentence, which spans over three pages, Wojnarowicz writes about one of his clients:

[...] and then there's the fetishist who one time years ago picked me up and told me this story of how he used to be in the one platoon in fort dix where they shoved all the idiots and illiterates and poor bastards that thought kinda slow and the ones with speeth spitch speeeeeeech [sic] impediments that means you talk funny he said and I nodded one of my silent yes's that I'd give as conversation to anyone with a tongue in those days and [...] (*Knives* 7)

It is unclear whether the “speeth spitch speeeeeeech” here is a typo that Wojnarowicz corrects by excessively pounding e’s out of frustration or a problematic mockery of speech disorder. In either case, the process of typewriting is hinted at in the misspelling that appears conspicuously peculiar in publication, actively engaging the reader by calling for extra effort to interpret.

I will further elaborate Wojnarowicz’s use of the typewriter through the lens of Friedrich Kittler, one of the key scholars in German media theory. In tracing the history of the typewriter, Kittler examines how its invention and popularisation transformed not only the epistemology of writing but also ontology: “when writing was withdrawn from the origin of its essence, i.e., from the hand, and was transferred to the machine, a transformation occurred in the relation of Being to man” (*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* 199). That is, the traditional dichotomies of man and animal, culture and nature are predicated on the handwritten word that represents literacy, but the typewriter strips the humanity of the word, “degrad[ing]” it to a mere means of communication and a series of meaningless material signifiers on the keyboard (*Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* 199). As noted by Kittler, the earliest typewriters were designed for blind people without the function of seeing instantly what has been typed, while the new model by Underwood in 1897 made possible “immediate visual control over the output” (203). Its “singular and spatialized, material and standardized” keys ensured that typewriting “can and must remain a blind activity,” contrary to handwriting that requires the eye to follow the image of the written words (203, 229). As Kittler theorises, “Underwood’s innovation unlinks hand,

eye, and letter," replacing the aforementioned dichotomies with "the play between type and its Other, completely removed from subjects. Its name is inscription" (*Discourse Network* 195). In other words, the construction of identity is no longer philosophised through one's relation to the "Other" but the technology of writing, which is what materialises the notion of self and the Lacanian "letter"; the basic structure of the symbolic is transfigured into the tangible signs on the keyboard and the space between them, retaining "complete certainty" without having to rely on the human senses (193n83). How does this ontological shift enable Wojnarowicz to fish "something 'real'" through texts? Foregrounding upon his early typewriting practices in Paris, Wojnarowicz later developed a more methodical visual analogy for representing everyday queer life, particularly in "In the Shadow of the American Dream: Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins." As the third essay of *Knives*, it consists of journals that he kept during his cross-country road trip to Arizona in 1985. Driving days and nights, alone, with his eyes fixated on the road, Wojnarowicz starts eroticising the "empty and pressured landscapes" in front of him: each car passing by contains a potential cruiser for his sexual fantasy and is a reminder of his sexual encounters in the past (*Knives* 26). This triggers him to ponder the relation between vision and memory:

There is really no difference between memory and sight, fantasy and actual vision. Vision is made of subtle fragmented movements of the eye. These fragmented pieces of the world are turned and pressed into memory before they can register in the brain. Fantasized images are actually made up of millions of disjointed observations collected and collated into the forms and textures of thought. (*Knives* 26)

In this passage, Wojnarowicz analogises his eyes as both a camera and a projector: every lived experience is recorded in fragmented images composed in different camera angles and movements and archived in his brain for later usage. When indulging in memory, fantasy, or dreams, he sees in his mind the snapshots retrieved from the past and, in a Freudian fashion, projected onto his vision. Does this process change both the acts of writing and reading into an act of watching? Or, as Wojnarowicz asks: "If light does come from within does that make us moving movie projectors? Are we casting forms onto a dark screen?" (52–3). As Wojnarowicz transcribes the archived images into text, the role of the camera/projector is transferred from the eyes to the typewriter, a machine that allows him to lay down his thoughts/visions without hesitation, reconsideration, or alteration while instantaneously gaining a sight of how they are textualised on the paper. It is precisely the liberation from visibility on the keyboard that enables Wojnarowicz to employ automatic, visual(ised) writing. Whatever visions he has in mind—real or imagined—and whatever sensations he feels are pounded through the concrete keys, while rapid shifting of subjects and visual motifs in his texts is accommodated by the typewriter's mechanical speed. As readers, we are not reading the text but are "hooked" into the "filmic exchange" between "vision and memory"—as Wojnarowicz is—seeing through the text as if watching a slide show or a video from a projector screen (27). Through this process of image-text-image, Wojnarowicz illustrates a

queer temporality that is constantly distracted and disrupted by eroticism and/or violence.

The analogy between the eyes and the camera/projector also enforces a distance between Wojnarowicz as a subject seeing and inscribing his vision and a subject within the vision itself, as if he is an observer of his own life; he calls this “sub-vision,” in which his “eyes had disconnected from the nerves of the brain” to observe himself (*Knives* 24). By imagining the duplication of or disconnection from his body, Wojnarowicz is in control of epistemology. It is a visualisation of how the self knows the self. This, I argue, is parallel to Kittler’s account of how the typewriter displaces the subject of writing. Working as an active operator that determines the basic structure of discourse, the typewriter shifts writing from an embodied, affective human action to an intersubjective engagement with machines, in the same way as Wojnarowicz changes his subjectivity to objective observation of the political reality he is situated in.

Zooming out, Wojnarowicz imagines monitoring himself “from miles above the earth” to understand more clearly how his body is placed against the broad political landscapes beyond his control; he calls this an “X-ray of Civilization” (*Knives* 112). For example, in a long, unpunctuated paragraph in which Wojnarowicz describes the death of his friend Keith Davis from HIV/AIDS, he observes himself standing next to the deathbed from a bird’s eye view as his vision moves outwards and upwards from the hospital to various seemingly irrelevant locations:

[...] and I’m totally amazed at how quietly he dies how beautiful everything is with us holding him down on the bed on the floor fourteen stories above the earth and the light and wind scattering outside the windows and his folks at this moment standing somewhere on the observation deck of the empire state building hundreds of stories up in the clouds and light and how perfect that is to me how the whole world is still turning and somewhere it’s raining and somewhere it’s snowing and somewhere forest fires rage and somewhere else something moves beneath dark waters [...] and at the moment I’m a sixteen-foot-tall five-hundred-and-forty-eight-pound man inside this six-foot body and all I can feel is the pressure all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release. (82–3)

The speed of typewriting can be “felt” in the text: the absence of punctuation, the use of polysyndeton, along with the accumulation of acrophobic images, represent the escalation and acceleration of Wojnarowicz’s emotions from witnessing death and from revisiting the event in his typewriting. His helplessness and vulnerability are mapped out against a whole world that is still turning, a world that refuses to recognise the AIDS crisis. Death is trivialised by the US government, analogous to how the flickering of natural and urban sceneries trivialises the tiny human figures mourning in the hospital. The camera eventually returns to his own body and the measurement of it—a body that is too small to contain the immensity of his sadness and anger. Through his fusing of vision/memory and his observer vision, Wojnarowicz is no longer a writer but a typist of his visions. As the typewriter emancipates the writer from vision and reduces words and letters to raw,

signifying materials, it renders the writing act mechanical as well. His typing hands are only used for transcribing what he sees and feels, rather than mediating or intervening, as if the typewriter is an image-to-text machine from within—from the position of the signified. The many kinds of visions, imaginations, and voices are laid bare, presenting—without reservation—the imageries of sex, violence, and mourning, imageries that are censored by the preinvented world.

The interplay between image and text is further explored in Wojnarowicz's late multi-media works, including *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* (1988–89), *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)* (1990), and *When I put My Hands on Your Body* (1990). Particularly, *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* mourns the death of Wojnarowicz's closest friend and mentor Peter Hujar, who died of HIV/AIDS in 1987 (see fig. 3). The work features three prints of another piece by Wojnarowicz: *Untitled (Peter Hujar)* (1988), which consists of photographs of Hujar's corpse on his deathbed; they are surrounded by images of letters taken from supermarket posters, torn to the point of unrecognisable, fragments of US dollar bills, and world maps cut into sperm-cell shapes, signifying the transmission of HIV. Above this assemblage, Wojnarowicz screenprints a text in a serif typeface that would be later published as the coda to "Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch-Tall Politician" (see *Knives* 160–2). Composed using Burroughs' cut-up mode, the text is a collage of clauses and sentences from Wojnarowicz's earlier writings—many of which also appear elsewhere in *Knives*—to channel his rage against homophobic speeches from religious and political leaders. Here, Wojnarowicz's own use of language overlays his manipulation of pre-existing symbols, plasticising the process of protesting rhetoric with rhetoric and image with image.

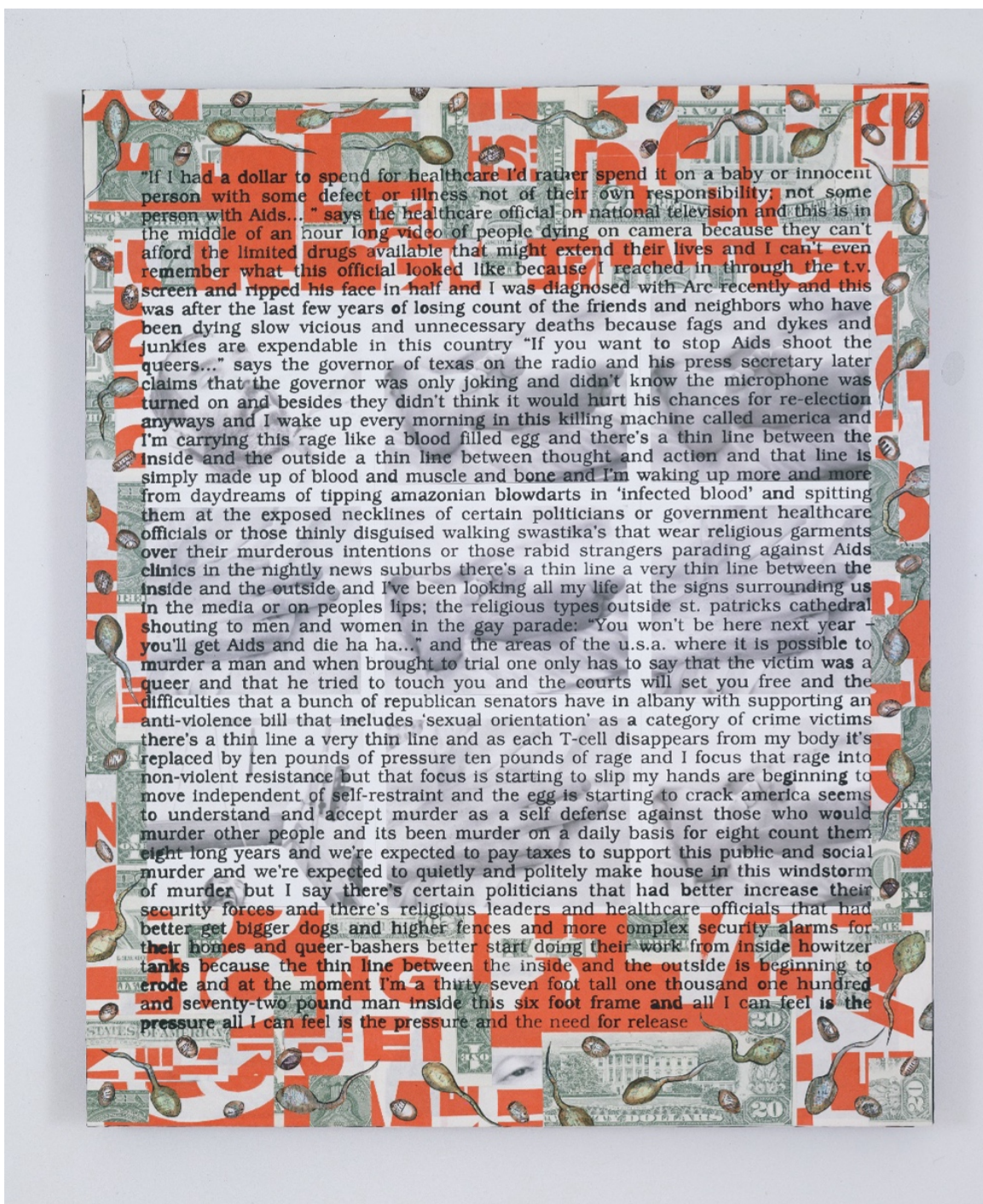


Fig. 3: David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*, 1988; black and white photograph, acrylic, text, and collage on masonite, 39 x 32 ins. (99 x 81.2 cm); copyright Estate of David Wojnarowicz; courtesy of the Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P·P·O·W, New York.

## Wojnarowicz's Tape Recorder

Whenever Wojnarowicz was asked what instrument he played in *3 Teens Kill 4*, a musical group based in the East Village which he was a member of, he would always reply: "Tape recorder" (Carr 168). Besides singing, lyric writing, and playing with objects for sound effects, Wojnarowicz used "his tapes of traffic and street talk and random bits from the radio" in their performance (Carr 168). His experimentation with the tape recorder also features in the last and longest essay in *Close to the Knives*. Titled "The Suicide of a Guy Who Once Built an Elaborate Shrine Over a Mouse Hole," it investigates the life and death of Wojnarowicz's friend Dakota, a social outcast whom Wojnarowicz deeply empathises with. In this chapter, each entry details the media of the source materials, such as "Tape Recording," "Phone Call," "Journal Entry," and "Dream." Transcriptions of interviews with Dakota's friends are intersected with Wojnarowicz's own life-writing. As Tasia M. Hane-Devore argues, in this essay, Wojnarowicz conflates and mingles his "personal bodily experiences with those of others," mourning not only the death of Dakota but also his own death in the future and the collective death of the queer community: he "feels his own body, and thus his own corporeal death, inextricably linked" (103). Building on her interpretation, I emphasise the role of the tape recorder in mediating Dakota's presence not through his own voice, but through the voices of those who remember him. In this way, the absence imposed by death is collectively testified and embodied.

The use of the tape recorder is recurrent in contemporary literature and art, especially in the second half of the 20th century (see Edmond; Kim-Cohen; Stadler; Teague). As Argentinian artist Eduardo Costa claims in his *Tape Poems* (1969), "[t]he tape recorder is already as necessary as the typewriter" (qtd. in Rottner 103). Indeed, as Jessica Teague suggests, tape recording technology enjoyed a special status in the history of literary engagement because, unlike the phonograph, it was recognised as "a sound technology that writers could actually use"; its portability enabled sound recording beyond the studio, promoting the emergence of the "bootleg culture in both music and poetry" (95). Despite its prominence, the mediality and technicality of sound-recording technology were overlooked in the field of philosophy upon its invention (Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter* 94). Alongside the typewriter, which standardised letters, film and gramophone "were engulfed by the noise of the real—the fuzziness of cinematic pictures, the hissing of tape recordings"; the three media from the late 19th century jointly terminated the monopoly of words, separating "optical, acoustic, and written data flows, thereby rendering them autonomous" (14). Particularly, Kittler draws on semiotics and psychoanalysis to underscore phonograph's ability to "record all the noise produced by the larynx prior to any semiotic order and linguistic meaning"; the freedom to "babble" in the talking cure as a means of reaching the "Real" of the unconscious parallels the capacity of sound recording technology to capture all the undecipherable noise in speech (16). Wojnarowicz's tape journals in *Weight of Earth*, however, are devoid of noise—the noise of "cars rushing past, birds chirping, and ghostly snippets of long-gone radio"—except for the occasional footnotes that notify the inaudibility of the tapes; this

is because, published as a book, his tape recordings were transcribed intermedially, correctly punctuated, and edited posthumously (Darms and O'Neill 16). What has also been lost in the text is, as noted by the editors, "the intonation and cadence of his voice, the regular click of his cigarette lighter, and an undeniable bodily presence" (20). While the editors/listeners of the tapes can no longer verify the phonemes uttered by him, the prevalent ambient sounds remain representable in the system of writing.

Wojnarowicz discovered this new medium for journaling in March 1981, only a few months after *3 Teens Kill 4* performed their first gig. Similar to his typewritten essays in *Knives*, he usually starts a recording after waking up in his room; looking out the window while speaking, he would often spot some guy down the street and start indulging in the sexual reveries focused on his body. In the first two tapes, dated in the same month, Wojnarowicz tirelessly analyses why a lover named Bill never calls. He examines his desire for a relationship with Bill, recounting details of their get-togethers and the long wait for Bill's response on the answering machine in-between. Through talking into the recorder, Wojnarowicz eventually convinces himself that he needs to break it off with Bill. After an intense fight, they calm down and have dinner for the last time. Wojnarowicz describes this scene as "almost filmlike or drama-like": "It was this sensation of being inside my own body, sitting at a table, going through motions that were almost not believable to me. [...] it was like I had so many thoughts contained" (*Weight* 53). The disconnection between thoughts and body, a vision also present in *Knives*, is embodied by the tape recorder, which materialises and concretises thoughts and feelings that are too intense and transient to be represented in written forms.

In the next tape from 1982, labelled as the "Junk Journal," Wojnarowicz records lengthy illustrations of his hallucinations and dreams under the influence of heroin. Like in *Knives*, Wojnarowicz uses the vision/film analogy to recreate his senses in the form of words and sounds: images of "bizarre paintings" and "animal-type things" change in his vision "like the flickering of a single-frame film in extremely vivid colors" (*Weight* 68). Wojnarowicz subsequently stopped his tape journals until 1988—after the death of Hujar and his own diagnosis of HIV/AIDS. Wojnarowicz's reflection on art has become more profound, his tone more melancholic, and his fear no longer centres around loneliness, but death, which permeates the rest of the eight tapes:

I realized that I was just afraid of dying, and somehow it's hard for me to look at that. I look at it and just say, "OK, you know, yeah, I'm afraid of dying." In that odd moment of thinking of death, I don't want to go, I don't want to die. Or I don't want to see it coming. (93)

The use of quotation marks here suggests that the speech is not directed to the recording device but to Wojnarowicz himself, which distances him further from his self, as if he is tentatively convincing the self's second entity that death is not that scary. Nonetheless, Wojnarowicz needs to say it out loud to be able to face his fear of death. In this moment, the tape recorder becomes not merely a tool for externalising thoughts but a

confessional space for confronting the extreme vulnerability of his own mortality. Such space possesses a tangible materiality, as the physical presence of the recording machine can be gripped in the author's hands, connecting his unconscious mind, through his voice, directly to a potential audience in the future.

However, as *Weight*'s editors reflect, citing Carr: "'The central struggle in [Wojnarowicz's] life was about how much to reveal. Who was safe? What could he tell?' [(Carr 5).] Are we, as readers of this book, 'safe'?" (Darms and O'Neill 20). While the ambience and the "level of intensity and tenderness" in the tapes are unrepresentable in book form (Darms and O'Neill 20), the intimate, naked immediacy of his spoken words—his authorship—has already been altered by the very process of recording, affected by the limitations of the technology and by his insecurity in using it:

I just can't stand my self-consciousness when I talk into this thing. I think it's because I'm afraid of getting at all this stuff inside my head and the idea of someone witnessing this tape. It's just something I've always found in the past, but if I keep talking into it, I lose the self-consciousness and I can just do it and get at stuff that's deep underneath all this. (*Weight* 78)

Wojnarowicz is again being self-contradictory with the act of writing/recording: on the one hand, there is the anxiety arising from the potential for others to hear these deeply personal reflections, especially in a form that renders them permanent, legible, and open to interpretation; on the other hand, speaking his thoughts out loud towards the tape recorder as his audience is the only way for him to alleviate his anxiety, to reach his unconscious mind.

Parallel to his urge to simultaneously "get at" and do away with his unconscious (*Weight* 78), Wojnarowicz's impulse to record and his fear of being listened to reflects Jacques Derrida's "archival turn" in relation to Freudian psychoanalysis. Derrida namely argues that the archivist's desire to preserve is overcome by the death drive to "destroy the archive," because the act of archiving is "anarchic"; it inevitably leads to oblivion (Derrida 10; see also Huang). In this sense, the tape recorder is used as a medium between disclosure and concealment. The unconscious is where anxiety is repressed and hidden "deep underneath"; in order to be released from the latter, Wojnarowicz must access the former through talking to the tape recorder (*Weight* 78). However, the exposure of himself to the recorder generates a new circle of anxiety, which is again something buried in the unconscious, something unexplainable, "something [he has] always found in the past" (*Weight* 78). Wojnarowicz's split-mindedness about tape-recording is linked to his use and hatred of language, further capturing the ambivalence of the queer archive. His works function as "text-as-records" of queer counterpublic histories (Guenther 75) and align with Ann Cvetkovich's archive of feelings—the documentation of queer ephemera and affects as resistance and a response to the trauma throughout queer history. Yet, queer representation in the archive also risks having queerness "universalized," and therefore should not be treated as a solution to trauma, as Sara Edenheim critiques (47). Following Wojnarowicz's logic, the archive, like language, is an institutionalised, preinvented existence but at the same time has the

power to revolt itself if used with intensity and violence. Through a reading of Wojnarowicz's typewriter and tape recorder, the act of "reading" itself is changed to that of watching or listening, and the act of writing is changed to the application of cultural techniques as an act of resistance against the erasure of Wojnarowicz's body and identity. The visions that he typewrites—visions of eroticism, imagined violence, and the tiny, unimportant figure of his self against the political landscape amid the AIDS crisis—along with the sad, anxious, intimidated voices that speak of insecurity and death become a "dismantling tool" against the preinvented world, resisting both the silence enforced by death and the US government's necropolitical silencing of death (*Knives* 121). Language, for Wojnarowicz, is detestable when systematised for political oppression, but in his aspirations to eradicate the gap between typewritten/spoken texts and his body and senses through his writing instruments, Wojnarowicz exercises a practice of writing that defies the very process that constricts writing.

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