

## David Wojnarowicz's Graven Image: Cinema, Censorship, and Queers

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Since the 1980s, the queer artwork has been the object of a double censorship in the United States. "Double" because both the attackers and defenders of this work tend to demonize, sanitize, or blindly endorse its content. Even when being defended, the artwork is automatically reframed as an instance of political speech. In the advocacy process, the work's content and form must be made to seem less consequential. Defenders must focus on the act of expression itself and thus evacuate the work's aesthetic specificity. Understanding how and what the artwork communicates is, from the standpoint of legal and political advocacy, a distraction. Elaborating content would concede to a contraction of free speech. The pragmatic issues of constitutional protection have dominated popular defenses of the queer artwork's public display, and so the public is left with a constricted view of already censored artworks.<sup>1</sup>

For example, we can assume that many people know Robert Mapplethorpe as one of the artists whose works were publicly censored in the 1980s and early 1990s because of their apparently obscene content. Some people could identify Mapplethorpe's hyper-classical images and his pristine portraits, but few understand what nourished his aesthetic or ask what motivated it. Indeed, there have been odd moments when critics calling for censorship often supply more developed readings of an artwork than do those advocates working to defend its public display.

In 2010, the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) at the Smithsonian Institute removed the artwork of another gay artist, David Wojnarowicz. His film *A Fire in My Belly* (1986/1987/2010) had been included in a group exhibition entitled "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture." The NPG's timidity could already be detected in the absence of "gay," "lesbian," or any moniker of queerness in the title of this show, the Gallery's first exhibition organized around representations of queer Americans. Immediately after the show opened a group called the Catholic League characterized *A Fire in My Belly* as a form of anti-Christian hate speech and an indication that NPG was out to disgrace Christianity, during Christmas season no less. Buckling quickly under this attack, and perhaps fearful of the further repercussions threatened by vocal upstarts from the Republican Party, the Gallery's administrators removed the film from the exhibition.<sup>2</sup>

The NPG debacle struck many Americans as a deeply troubling form of déjà vu: a return to the culture wars of the 1980s, when many artists had their works censored and their federal funding withdrawn. This new controversy exposed the rhetorical and ideological mechanisms that attempt to insulate the public sphere from various forms of queer expression and reiterated the fragility of queer public culture, the apparitional quality of non-heterocentric forms of political presence. Few artists capture the connection between this social vulnerability and its consequences to democracy more fiercely than Wojnarowicz himself. The debates around the censoring of queer art put into dramatic relief the ambitions of Wojnarowicz's work, which have too often been simplified, refracted, and retrofitted by liberal and art-market agendas. Twenty years after his untimely death from AIDS-related complications, Wojnarowicz's work continues to speak forcefully to the complicated question of living queerly and to protest prevailing methods of accounting for the value of queer lives.

My essay begins to undo this censorship by asserting this particular artwork's prescience as well as its—and Wojnarowicz's—relevance to a critical valuation of queer living in the face of constricting notions of American public culture. This story already has a happy ending in a way. In a wonderful inversion, the NPG's capitulation to the Catholic League led to the *A Fire in My Belly*'s distribution well beyond any audiences the gallery could have accommodated, since *The Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, and *New York* magazine all posted links to the video which were widely watched.<sup>3</sup>

*A Fire in My Belly* is an awkward work that at first glance can appear to be both hyperbolic or overreaching and inconsistent or contradictory. This short film resembles a travel log, an illustrated lecture, or an educational slide show that mixes the un pitying gaze of a *mondo cane* film (unwrapped mummies with gaping mouths, unusually disabled bodies performing daily tasks, animals forced into fighting by their human captors) with the deliriously overwrought expressionism of 1980s music videos (spinning eyeballs aflame, strobed flashes of milk splashes). The film also recalls major moments in the visual avant-garde of the twentieth century by invoking 1920s surrealist iconography, aping Eisenstein's clunkier intellectual montages, and echoing the idolatry of Kenneth Anger's films which themselves borrow from the formal idioms religious and exploitation films. *A Fire in My Belly* overtly conflates symbolic registers and gains momentum by joining documentary footage of workers performing precarious tasks or snakes devouring their prey to staged studio shots of symbolic transactions involving leaking blood, throwing money, spinning globes, or torched marionettes.

The production history of *A Fire in My Belly* is complicated. The film exists in multiple versions, including one that has a brilliant but disputed soundtrack of Diamanda Galas's music. It has also been seen widely in the form of postmortem edits like the one displayed in the NPG's show. What also makes it difficult to pin down as an object is how the film recycles passages or images from the artist's other well-known works and how its various versions have been transferred to different media formats/platforms.<sup>4</sup> While this history complicates the task of analysis, the film's endlessly multiplying versions and its complicated status as a single art object are also emblematic of Wojnarowicz's work in general, which almost always undercuts its originality and singularity with brazen gestures of appropriation, citation, and duplicity, and refuses to proclaim allegiance to any one medium or genre. Since a controversy surrounding Wojnarowicz's work has yet again revealed just how dangerous America's retrograde cultural politics are to the physical, social, and intellectual health of our nation's queers, we must be careful to understand what exactly *A Fire in My Belly* is telling us.

In what follows, I propose a critical description of this film and argue that Wojnarowicz's sense of the proper modes of public engagement can be found in the formal language of his work and the spectatorial challenges it presents to its viewer. I have organized my description around five iconographic registers that define this film and this artist's work as a whole: the Catholic, the Denatured, the Graven, the Desecrating, and the Democratic. I first approach Wojnarowicz as an artist who produces a Catholic Image and here I address both the religious and the non-religious senses of the word "catholic." Next I consider his images as "denatured" for how they capture nature in its most toxic and adulterated states. The only way we can see the world now, these images suggest, is by looking through pollution, wading through toxicity, and living through putrefaction. From this perspective, we can see how the more figurative aspects of Wojnarowicz's work suggest a queer ecology that rejects normative reproduction. In the third section, the Graven Image, I explore how his images aspire to be at the center of controversy by invoking a centuries-old debate over conflicting approaches to the representation of suffering. Here I also consider current debates about

whether to see the film as a work about the politics of AIDS, and I suggest that we may find guidance on this issue from the film's attention to an optic of public martyrdom. My subsequent discussion of the Desecrating Image takes this flirtation with controversy one step further, examining why art-making for Wojnarowicz very often involved defiling or vandalizing his surroundings. Finally, in the Democratic Image I return to the topic of censorship and describe how Wojnarowicz's brilliant inversion of the idea of public decency aimed to protect liberty for all. Ultimately, I believe there are critical lessons to be learned from looking at the precise aesthetic means by which Wojnarowicz refused to relinquish the public sphere to the queer-bashing antics of the radical right's grandstanding. His revision of a humanist optic and its kneejerk moral posturing of understanding, sympathy, and pity, for example, was based upon a re-appropriation of public space and the politics of what it means to make democratic art. I want to suggest that Wojnarowicz pursued a national agenda that would provide a kind of "publicity" for queers beyond the limiting parameters of liberal tolerance. He sought to broaden the range of what it meant to live as a queer in America, and for that reason he was very important to a generation of young queer men in the early 1990s (myself included). However, Wojnarowicz was also committed to a politics beyond identity, an understanding of America that ferociously held on to the radical liberties of democratic life.

### I. The Catholic Image

By labeling Wojnarowicz's work "catholic," I mean to identify it neither as an official product of the Catholic Church nor as a reflection of the religion per se. Instead I am speaking broadly about the "catholic" as a cultural mode of representation. Many 1980s artists, including Wojnarowicz's accomplices in the East Village art scene, borrowed a pictographic idiom of saints and crucifixes drawn from the quotidian idolatry practices of the Caribbean, Latin American, and Southern Europe. As with many works from this period, *A Fire in My Belly* juxtaposes Super 8mm footage from the artist's travels in Mexico with close-ups of lotteria/chapula cards, figures from Day of the Dead celebrations, icons of saints, crucifixes, and images of people burning in hell that appear to be borrowed from Christian publications and follow the style of pulp fiction covers. Like this film, many of his works are often cluttered with relics from various symbolic systems, returning again and again to Catholic corporeality: the suffering body stands as the primary icon of surrender and sacrifice. Many censorship battles in US history have involved artists similarly appropriating Catholic iconography. Andres Serrano's "Piss Christ" (1987) remains an icon of the culture wars of the late-1980s and early 1990s. This work triggered a watershed of negative attention that led the NEA to withdraw funding for exhibitions and artists.

One of the most important US federal judicial rulings on the censorship of visual art concerned a film and was initiated when a Catholic organization protested a Catholic director's film about a Catholic subject: Roberto Rossellini's *The Miracle*. This short narrative feature, which was included in two different omnibus films, *L'amore* (1948) and *The Ways of Love* (1950), depicts a shepherdess who becomes pregnant after sleeping with a man she believes is Saint Joseph. From the perspective of the present, it is hard to see what made this film's timid images of sexuality and pregnancy so controversial. However, vocal members of the American Catholic community condemned the film, calling it "vile and harmful."<sup>5</sup> The Legion of Decency launched a campaign that eventually led to the Board of Regents of New York State banning the exhibition of the film.<sup>6</sup> The film's distributor, Joseph Burstyn, who had earlier in the decade brought the important postwar films *Rome Open City* (Rossellini, 1945) and *Bicycle Thieves* (Vittorio De Sica, 1948) to the US, fought the ban with the help of lawyer Ephraim London. After a series of appeals, Burstyn and London won their case in the US Supreme Court, which overturned New York State's ban by ruling that "motion pictures are a significant medium for the communication of ideas."<sup>7</sup> This decision categorically changed the legal

status of the motion pictures from commercial products to works of art, thus protecting them under the Constitution's First Amendment. This suggests a much longer history that would place the upper-case Catholic image at the center of debates over censure and censorship in the United States.

Yet Wojnarowicz's images also appear Catholic in more than just a thematic way when we compare him to Robert Mapplethorpe. Both men were raised as Catholics. Both artists were gay, and like too many queer men of their generation, they died prematurely of HIV/AIDS. In the years just before and after their deaths, public and politicized attacks on their artwork seemed to echo US laws and social policies that actively neglected and even punished people dying from the disease. But the similarity between these two artists breaks down when we look at their aesthetic practices. While Mapplethorpe's work is about the virtuosic performance of austerity, classicism, and perfection, Wojnarowicz's art regurgitated the world, mixing up its laws, its orders, and its scale. Compared to Mapplethorpe's perversely immaculate renderings of bodies and natural forms, Wojnarowicz's omnivorous eye embodies Catholicism in a different vein.

His vision—or the process through which his technique renders the image—is projective in nature. It aspires to transfigure scale without abstracting individual objects. Put another way, his work is projective because it mixes scales in order to illuminate the transcendental. It forces things into relief without regard for naturalism, throwing one detail into compositional prominence so that the ordinary object achieves the status of idol. Or, as in reliquary, it bestows on a body part not the completeness of human form but the wholeness of the divine. This projective impulse can be found across his work in implosions of disparate proximities within various spaces: pictorial space (among objects sharing the same pictorial plane or collaged into the same composition), in serial space (across set of linked works), and filmic space (among various shots in a montage).

Many of his non-cinematic works operate like projected images or contain a projection structure. Take, for example, the black and white photomontages, “Sex Series (for Marion Scemama)” (1988-89) or the early spray-painted works, like *Peter Hujar Dreaming/ Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian* (1982). Both provide a threshold to a divine other world by adopting the technique of superimposition — which is a kind of projection either enabled by photographic technology or adopted from the generic conventions of religious painting. We might also think here of the crash site paintings from 1986 or the four elements series of paintings from 1987, whose pictographic disorganization of space and time suggests the divided attentions of complex multi-paneled altarpieces found in 15<sup>th</sup>- and 16<sup>th</sup>-century European churches or of Hieronymus Bosch paintings. Wojnarowicz's pictorial frame voraciously accommodates the microscopic and intergalactic, incorporating them into the planes of perception ordinarily available to unassisted human vision. A cosmological and even biblical outlook appears to motivate this aesthetic.<sup>8</sup>

While scale-shifting operations are not always religious, they are inflected here by the sacred procedures of Catholic worship that revere both the small and the gigantic: the miniature devotional object can be as overwhelming to the worshipper as the voluminous ceilings of a gothic cathedral. These scale-shifting operations should be understood alongside Wojnarowicz's related pursuits: iconophilia (the aforementioned hoarding of icons, relics, talismans) and obsessive iconographia (the impulse to render things into magical beings). As if in intense prayer with a devotional object, *A Fire in My Belly* pursues the potencies of each image to the fullest extent, investing almost too much symbolic weight in what is seen. Watching this film, we often feel the image overdrawing on the profilmic event's semantic worth. It is almost as if this fervent visuality aims for overdetermination or at the very least for an overripened symbolism. Hence, we should understand *A Fire in My Belly* as

a work also characterized by a larger sense of the “Catholic” that connotes more than a simple co-opting of particular religious emblems and specific likenesses.

Like Catholicism’s own early history of appropriating existing pagan deities, this film sacralizes everyday objects. It summons a vital animism and polytheism that Jean Epstein associated with the purest drive of the cinematic: *photogénie*.<sup>9</sup> The film’s iconophilia could also be seen to invest in the affective architecture of reliquary more generally. The film recognizes semiosis, or the process of arbitrarily linking meanings to symbols, as a form of magic. Thus the film also aims at transmutation. These qualities of transfiguration, resacralization, and transmutation seem to encourage rather than discourage the proliferation of versions and re-edits as well as the circulation of competing versions online and in different platforms. In fact, if we were to insist on a definitive version of the film, we would close down its “Catholic” interest in the semantic operations of metamorphosis. In general terms, transmutation describes the movement of energies from things to ideas to spirit. As a process, transmutation combines elements of transference (redirection and substitution), projection (a dramatic racking of scale), transformation (alchemic shapeshifting), and transferral (the movement from one venue to another). Historically, “Catholic” belief networks were sustained by how successfully the religion borrowed from the holidays, icons, and rituals of incongruent belief systems. As such “Catholicism” influences the aesthetic impulses of even those who do not follow the Church or even hope to abide by its laws.

As the film’s roving eye hunts for the most powerful objects, it evokes another definition of “catholic”: the lower-case version of the word that describes a person or approach that is formidably open, far-reaching, comprehensive, and radically inclusive. In this sense, we could say that Wojnarowicz sees the world through catholic eyes, to use the figurative and non-religious sense of the word. Here again the contrast to Mapplethorpe is useful. Whereas Mapplethorpe’s work is defined by its meticulous minimalism, its intimacies, its privacies, and its exquisite sense of balance, Wojnarowicz’s work refuses to abide by consistent rules of pictographic scale, thematic economy, and compositional harmony. His works are untidy and often self-proclaimed products of scavenging. They accost us like mixed metaphors, invoking a powerful realm of catachresis in which objects from conflicting realms of existence and different scales of amplitude collide. This mixed-up mise-en-scène reflects an upended world in which the quotidian and the cosmological implode and become indistinguishable. Thus Wojnarowicz’s photographic collages *Weight of the Earth I and II* (1988-89) appear to draw on the same improbably diverse vernacular of images as *A Fire in My Belly*.

Wojnarowicz never achieved virtuosity in a single medium. He worked across various media: film and video, installation, painting, printmaking, photography, memoir, poetry. Even within a single Wojnarowicz painting we find a striking amalgam of materials and visual languages: collage, superimposition, printed text. Various traditions of artmaking collide, with elements drawn from graphic art and signage mingling with stills from porn films. Types of drawing associated with textbook illustration and comic books overlap with high art abstraction. Many artists from this postmodernist moment draw from a similar range of genres, but Wojnarowicz’s work is uniquely inclusive. It never allows one mode to overshadow another; it never installs one kind of representation as authoritative. Formal languages often compete with each other before our eyes, never admitting any pre-given semantic hierarchy. Sometimes his work seems overreaching, as if it were trying to capture something beyond its representational capacities. In fact, his paintings have appeared to many to be the work of an untrained artist. But it might be more accurate to say they display a refusal to be tutored; this irreverence brings his work to the threshold of inconsistency. (Dan Cameron’s essay “Passion in the Wilderness” betrays some anxiety about this issue and

suggests that his later paintings redeem the primitive quality of his earlier technique. Lucy Lippard's important early essay on Wojnarowicz articulates this more sympathetically saying: "his paintings lack the preciousness."<sup>10</sup>) His works are polymorphously perverse; technical promiscuity and pictorial instability are his *métier*.

It is also the case that this artist's materials never seem to transcend this material world. His impasto never hides its status as paint, his drawings never seem more than inscriptions. Like other New York artists in the 1980s, such as Jean-Michel Basquiat and Keith Haring, Wojnarowicz was immersed in urban traditions of graffiti. He foraged the urban environment not just for materials and styles but for spaces to adorn, using the walls of the city's abandoned buildings as his canvas. Appropriating the genres of illustration and comic books, he took the latter more seriously than either Warhol or Lichtenstein. His works are frequently collages, but even more often they are a collage of various modes of depiction, various techniques of rendering, not unlike the muralist traditions. And while Wojnarowicz's cosmology appears at times to emulate that of Diego Rivera, his mode of rendering sometimes appears more like a WPA muralist in over his head, out of his technical range. This straining is not without its visual pleasures. So this catholic approach to rendering (an unwillingness to recognize the specific skills demanded of different media) also returns us to the question of scale. Wojnarowicz's pictures refuse to cue depth coherently, giving up on the project of a unitary scale. This perspectival wrongness brings us back to the pre-Renaissance Christian paintings whose figures often look denuded of depth to our modern eyes and whose landscapes seem like flattened stages, venues awaiting devotional investment.

## II. The Denatured Image

Conventional histories of 1980s art see the decade marked by a return to figuration and representational painting. In Wojnarowicz's case, it is a disastrous world that seems to compel his own pictorialism. His work displays a compulsion to illustrate the flora and fauna of a world in crisis. It seeks a means to depict a world just before or just after complete ecological apocalypse. His aesthetic, even before his HIV diagnosis, constituted what could be called a queer ecology: a dystopic environmentalism that refuses to revel in the progressive powers of human biological regeneration.

Wojnarowicz's work refused to move beyond the messiness of the world, perpetually hovering on the threshold where the political and the primal overlapped. The place where corporate waste becomes toxic is the place where modernity and nature meet up in his works. What is so interesting, and—as André Bazin might say—so "Franciscan," about this work is that its transcendence comes from the grimmest artifacts of the everyday: the material of forgotten lives, fallow spaces, rotting detritus, neglected objects. As with the muralist traditions best represented by Diego Rivera's *Detroit Industry* murals (1932-1933), nature is as much a scene of destruction and contamination as it is fertile and fecund. In some of the best descriptions of Wojnarowicz's paintings, art historian Mysoon Rizk argues that the turmoil of modernity's detritus carries a generative force in the artist's cosmology. She characterizes the totemic relic in *Late Afternoon* as "deriving sustenance from this postapocalyptic wasteland's persistent ability to recharge itself."<sup>11</sup> Waste is a productive figure in these horrific landscapes.

If there is the suggestion of a new kind of fertility in Wojnarowicz's landscape of roaches, blowjobs, broken clocks, suicidal buffalos, and dirt, then it is a queer fecundity, again, an over-ripened quality that may actually offer the earth a greater utility than the relentless and narcissistic practices of normative heterosexual reproduction. For example, queer fecundity bubbles up from a morass of

homosex, gay eroticism, diseased canals, and toxic landscape in the painting *Why the Church Can't/Won't Be Separated from the State* (1991). It shimmers like a night sky in the polluted seas, sperm, dead fetuses, car crashes, desperate animals, and Naval butt-fucking in the painting *Water* (1987) and blows a similar torrent of associations into *Wind (for Peter Hujar)* (1987). In these works, in other paintings such as the somewhat more serene *Fuck You Faggot Fucker* (1984), and in the photographs from “Sex Series (for Marion Scemama)” (1988-89), we are reminded why perversity interested writers like Sade and Genet, or what was so productive about apprehending the pervert for Bataille and Freud. Perversion enabled these writers to see sexuality as more than simply the means for continuing to populate the earth with humans. Non-reproductive sex might be productive after all. But of what, one can never be sure. Perversion marks the threshold to a world not simply skewed by different proclivities, but one instead accountable to different productivities, different efficiencies, different fertilities. Perverted desire as a practice suggests the existence of systems of value and need that do not mesh with the way our world is currently organized.

Rizk argues that the figure of the extinct animal who so often appears in his paintings “resonates with Wojnarowicz’s experience of ‘being queer in America.’”<sup>12</sup> I would push this queering of nature further, especially since his mid-1980s paintings asked to be taken more as landscapes than as anthropomorphic allegories. In fact, they seem to evoke the traditions of American landscape painting, where the representation of the land is used as a means of articulating an entire ecology. Such paintings stage a human encounter in nature not only to delimit/expand human intervention into nature but also to describe the parameters of humanity’s collective will regarding the value of individual life and the question of who gets included in community. In other words, landscapes describe how we “treat” or “render” nature as a means of revising the category of the human and delimiting the shape that living can take.

Are Wojnarowicz’s worlds, then, truly dystopic? His queer ecology certainly privileges waste, deterioration, infection, and decay over progressive evolution and heterosexual reproduction. But does this mean that regeneration, production, and reproduction are all treated with a cynical postmodernist edge? Or is this instead an attempt to rethink the very categories of regeneration, production, and reproduction?

### III. The Graven image

For centuries Christians have been divided over the question of whether to represent Christ visually. Protestants historically defined themselves in opposition to the Catholic Church, in part because of its use of images of Christ in worship. Most Protestant sects saw the use of Christ’s image as a form of idolatry (the worship of idols or material effigies, icons, images) and a betrayal of one of the Ten Commandments: “thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.” Hence the Protestant’s cross contains no image of the body of Christ, while the Catholic’s crucifix carries a detailed and realist image of Christ wounded and suffering for our sins. I mention this complicated history here to point out how each side of this schism represents an opposing understanding of how to represent Christ in general and his suffering in particular.<sup>13</sup>

*A Fire in My Belly* poses the question of how to show physical suffering by restaging this debate over the graven image. Its corporeality—the fleshiness of its images—provokes the average iconophobe: the person who remains deeply suspicious of the visual and sees anyone who uses images of any kind as necessarily a propagandist, charlatan, or heretic. For these iconophobes, all truth resides in the word. *A Fire in My Belly* speaks to us boldly through images and uses spoken words only as a backdrop—if at all. The film never allows its viewer the safe remove of the clinical or academic gaze.

It dares us not to react to the bodies depicted. “Try not responding to this,” it taunts us over and over again. From the specific context of late 1980s homophobic culture, the film’s goading seems less a confrontation with the logic of right-wing politicians, however, and more a test to the limits of the well-meaning tolerant liberal humanist. This short film tries to make impossible the easy postures of sympathy so often granted the film spectator. It calls an apparently liberal culture’s bluff on the politics of tolerance, pity, and compassion. The film seems to confirm Pasolini’s claim that “tolerance is a more refined form of condemnation.”<sup>14</sup>

Again we are reminded here that devotional practices of Christianity distinguish themselves by how they invest in martyrdom and represent it. Catholicism’s devotional particularity emerges in part from its foregrounding of the suffering body, its investment in corporeal display to underwrite the transcendence of mortal flesh. It is in this context, that we should consider how *A Fire in My Belly* collects images of public displays of pain and suffering: scenarios of pity, sympathy, and charity. The film initiates a structure of charitable gazes and sympathetic responses that it eventually disallows by forcing us to confront the unstable analogies of real violence to fake fighting; preplanned cultural spectacles of risk (such as bullfighting) to accidental death; or of hemorrhaging puppets to actual bleeding. Must the sufferer always play the victim in order to attract our attention, our charitable concern? Doesn’t making a public spectacle of one’s suffering curtail one’s political agency? Following a rhythmic montage of blood splashes, self-mutilation, Mexican idols, and the shuffling of butchered cow carcasses, the film’s assault on charity’s gaze culminates in a bleeding eyeball that turns into a similarly injured globe.

The word “graven” is useful for understanding Wojnarowicz’s work not only because it references Christianity’s split over how to represent suffering, which is a question central to this film, but also because like the word “graphic,” “graven” names an image that is both inscribed and overtly, often excessively visual. Wojnarowicz never hides the inscription or registration process from which the image arises. We might think of Wojnarowicz’s artistic practice as a kind of writing in images, and that characterization applies as much to his use of text in his painting as it does to the photographic registration of light in his photographs and films. A complex set of gears reminds us of Dziga Vertov’s famous kino-eye, and of the camera’s improvement of human perception to create a truly modern gaze. Wojnarowicz’s roving camera captures startling physicalities, bodies in motion and/or vulnerable to injury. His gaze ends up dwelling in almost mystic contemplation of the visual surpluses of the body that exceed its association with personhood. When we look back at this film, we find that cinema for Wojnarowicz is a means of generating graven images. The most documentary or photographic footage becomes symbolic almost immediately. Not unlike Pasolini’s aspirations for cinematic representation, Wojnarowicz’s camera works to sanctify the raw footage of reality.

#### **IV. The Desecrating image**

*A Fire in My Belly* is also obsessed with things torn apart. Photographic image generation would seem to be a process of desecration capable of sacralizing that which the world has abjected. The film’s imager implicates photographic depiction as a process that rips things from the world only to foreground how cumbersome any attempt at reintegration would be. The photographic process echoes the world’s fall from a prelapsarian wholeness into a divided materiality, but then inverts this trajectory. The film’s images of sewing things together and conjoining bodies create radical forms of discontinuity and disruption rather than reunion. These operations of assembly and suture are represented as processes of conscription, binding, and violence. In many of his paintings, drawings,

and photographs, the ground of the image itself becomes a site of a violation. At times figure tears away from ground. In other images ground appears to leak into figure.

Those most offended by *A Fire in My Belly* tend to focus on one particular image as the primary locus of desecration: the images of ants crossing a crucifix. This was the moment the Catholic League deemed an instance of “hate speech” and invoked as the crux of the exhibition’s smearing of Catholic belief. The organization’s early press release condemning the Smithsonian describe the ants in a way that implies they have a ravenous and predatory hungry for Christ’s body that not unlike queer desire: a video “...shows large ants eating away at Jesus on a crucifix. The exhibit is replete with homoerotic images.”<sup>15</sup> Another influential attack on the show was titled with a similar paratactic amalgamation that recalls the film’s structure of meaning: “Smithsonian Christmas-Season Exhibit Features Ant-Covered Jesus, Naked Brothers Kissing, Genitalia, and Ellen DeGeneres Grabbing Her Breasts.”<sup>16</sup> Rewatching this film in the context of these hostile descriptions, I started wondering: If the ants are a dangerous force of queerness unleashing itself on the world and threatening to soil the world, does the Catholic League regard the ants as agents of contagious homosexuality? Then a silly question started nagging me: can ants be gay? There are tentative answers in some of Wojnarowicz’s other work. The activities of these insects across the photographs called “Ant Series” (1989) seem fairly queer, especially those ants pairing up on top of what looks like vintage porn images of a naked man’s torso in *Untitled [Desire]* and clinging to the muscular body of toy soldier in *Untitled [Control]*. Are these ants also agents of queer desire? Do they simply map the transits of queer desire? Or do they traverse these photographic bodies to consume the homoerotic as they would sugary icing at a picnic?

What makes the ants in *A Fire in My Belly* so offensive to its critics is more likely the fact that they desubliminate the mystical body of transubstantiation into base matter. The film’s camera magnifies the plastic crucifix to reveal its very material density, including its plastic seams, and it highlights the artificiality of this representation. Christ is deprived of his realism. The crucifix lies on the ground. Like anything left in the gravel, an army of uncaring ants tramples across it. Christ’s body is returned to the ordinary of everyday existence. For this reason, the work itself is heresy.

Rather than garden-variety heresy, however, might Wojnarowicz’s ants instead be performing Surrealist putrefaction? For the Surrealists, putrefaction was a decadent force churning within bourgeois life. It invited a kind of purposeful desecration, an act to provoke disgust and necessary to release the unconscious of a repressed world.<sup>17</sup> Dalí and Buñuel in fact famously unleash ants in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). As in *A Fire in My Belly*, the ants perform a desecrating activity in their wanderings across bodies. Ants represent the un-monumental forces of everyday life that so easily infect middle-class complacency if given the chance. Such infestations do not merely interrupt and irritate the comforts of middle-class living.<sup>18</sup> As in David Lynch’s film *Blue Velvet* (1986) from the same period, swarming insects debunk the magic of glossy surfaces and picket fences and expose the frailty of human existence and the violence required to maintain the status quo. With this context in mind, I agree to some degree with the League’s designation of the ants as a deteriorating and consumptive force: they are a kind of desecration. But, of course, another understanding of the film’s metaphor would suggest that if Christ stands in for an ordinary person with HIV/AIDS, then the ants represent the forces of a hideously neglectful and inhumane world that too easily tramples its most vulnerable occupants or that sits by as a disease is allow to ravage innocent bodies.

The desecrating image is like the mixed metaphor: an unlikely combination of two incongruent signs. It violates sanctioned and sanctified ways of making meaning. In *A Fire in My Belly* editing provides further desecrating opportunities. Like most films, it makes its points not through the content of a single image but in the juxtaposition of shots; it utilizes editing paratactically, as a process to form analogies, to force comparisons, and, as I have suggested, not only to make metaphors but also to mix them. In fact the film issues its most heretical accusations through editing. For example, it draws an analogy between our looking at sub-proletariat forms of living—circus performers, panhandlers, and disabled people, many of whom seem to hail from the global south—and our looking at people living with HIV/AIDS in the US in the 1980s. While this analogy is rife with difficulties, we should take a moment to understand these juxtapositions. I would argue that they offer the film a means of questioning the fundamental humanism of our vision. Wojnarowicz was vocal in his disgust for the category of victim, and it is therefore unsurprising that his film's editing attempts to interrupt our conventional way of seeing the imperiled or endangered body. The film's central analogy attempts to undo our own inner perceptual processes that make manifest victimization. Victims are not made by disease or injury; victims are constructed by particular perceptual structures, by disingenuous modes of sympathy. In this way, *A Fire in My Belly* can be seen as a refusal to make available a comfortable space for tolerant liberal looking. With this unsettling of the liberal humanist optic, palatable versions of gayness are annihilated, along with the pitiful and powerless sufferer.

So far my descriptions respond to the recent edit of the film that appeared in the NPG. This edit is relatively concise. Its semantic networks are sewn tightly, as if it is anticipating an anxious hermeneutics. It wants the viewer to see the work as a symbolic self-portrait of a person living with HIV/AIDS. (Even the Catholic League's initial condemnation of the work appreciates this fact: "At least Wojnarowicz bared his soul.") An earlier edit of the film from 1986/7 and labeled by Wojnarowicz "Film In Progress" is longer than the more recent edit. At just over 13 minutes, this cut is more impressionist and perhaps less systematic in its structure. Even within this looser narration of ideas, I would argue that the film launches an assault on the political presumptions implicit in the liberal humanist gestures of pity, charity, and tolerance. While the visual vocabulary of this piece is recognizably Wojnarowicz's and includes much of the same footage excerpted in the shorter version, this thirteen minute cut lacks his most infamous images. Neither the ant-invaded crucifix nor the mouth-sewing sequences appear here. Yet even without these images, the film makes fierce jabs at America's political status quo. A liberal complacency conspires with the more overtly inhuman responses to human suffering by conservative political forces in the US. Like the other versions of the film, this cut's critique works through an intensification of vision—a hyperbolization of seeing—that eventually implodes. To understand the film's intervention (and further clarify the interventions of this film's other manifestations), I want to outline briefly how critique emerges from the images and their editing.

This 1986-7 version of *A Fire in My Belly* starts out like a structuralist film (e.g., *Zorns Lemma*, Hollis Frampton [1970]) or semiotic slide show, flashing lotteria/chapula cards with their emblematic illustrations. Early on a shot of a fake eyeball spinning on a string declares with parodic didacticism: this film will change what you think about vision. Quickly, these bright and bold iconic images give way to shaky black and white shots of dilapidated urban landscapes. These mobile cityscapes are longer takes, clearly shot from a bus or car, but they feel more frenetic and harried. The world rushes by our view as if to suggest the point of view of greedy tourists, hasty anthropologists, or hell-bent terrorists rushing through a city at a pace suspiciously faster than that of the city's occupants. We are passing the world by with little care for detail. We don't stop even for a car

accident. Also, appearing in these early moments of the film are close-ups of tabloid newspaper images that depict violent crimes, splashed on the print page in all their gory details and accompanied by salacious headlines.

The film then begins weaving in another type of shot: images with slightly more stable framings, documenting the occurrences on the street. Each of these follows specific pedestrians, vendors, or performers, often from a distanced, high-angle perspective. The camera zooms in on one person or pans attentively to follow another. Shot with a telephoto lens, these perspectives slow our relationship to the observed, but the film maintains a removed, voyeuristic perspective for us as viewers, as if we are looking down from a hotel room, one story up from the street. With both the mobile shots of the city and the more static voyeuristic observations of street scenes, the film asks the viewer to recognize documentary conventions, but it also prompts that viewer to see realist modes of depiction as only one mode among many. These shots are not granted evidential status over other images; they too are units of figuration, parts of a larger metaphor.

From the theater of the street, the film then shifts to a sequence of shots documenting various aspects of professional wrestling culture, then to a similar sequence showing us the world of cock fights, and finally to televised footage of a traditional matador's fight with a bull in a crowded stadium. The film gradually begins inter-cutting these forms of staged violence and combining them with shots that function as metaphorical reframings: a close-up of ants fighting in gravel mixes with the cock fight footage; strobed images of what look like pre-Columbian stone sculptures of faces interrupt shots of wrestlers donning masks with similar features; a brightly colored illustration of a gruesome pre-Columbian medical operation (or is ritualistic torture?) interrupts the end of the bull fight.

This structure of contrasting shots not only allows the film to build a series of political analogies, it also cues the viewer to experience the unexpected political allegiances of various modes of looking. Throughout this version of the film, the cutaways to still images from Mexican iconography or staged studio shots (the eyeball, the masks, and a vulnerable marionette) interrogate the intertwining of entertaining spectacle with the affective structures of pity, tolerance, and charity. For example, in one studio shot, a hand from above our viewpoint drops coins down on the camera. This shot is stagey, like some generic reenactment of a handout thrown to a street beggar. Here a generous act turns sinister, especially when shot from this perspective. The falling coins carry a menacing effect: we can't stop them tumbling down on us. This image provokes questions about the subjective relations imposed by acts of charity: Who does charity really benefit? To whom does the charity donation belong? In its first iteration, this shot is followed by a reverse shot of an open bandaged hand, the coins violently cascading down upon it. Later when this shot/reverse sequence is repeated, a new shot is inserted between the two familiar shots described above. This new shot shows a young boy walking in the street and performing a trick of eating fire. Edited into the shot/reverse shot of the cascading handout, this image allows the film to complicate further the question of charity with the ethics of looking: Should we refuse to participate in the consumption of children's performances that put the children who perform them at risk? Or are we obliged to document these acts and show off these children's vulnerability to a world of concerned spectators? Does charitable giving help people in need or provide a safety valve for richer people's anxieties about privilege? Do these public displays of giving operate in concert with volunteerism to occlude the shortcomings of state expenditure? Is charity simply a ritual that is as brutal as other spectacles of risk? These are the questions uncomfortably generated by these images and their combination.

The last third of the film follows a similar pattern where longer documentary sequences such as those following the clumsy routines of slapstick and risk supplied by a traveling circus troupe intermingle with densely iconographic montages of lotteria/chapula cards, lizards lounging in nature, empty frames of solid primary colors, strobed images of water streaming onto a hand, and the map of Mexico burning. Through this already-familiar structure of streaming visual rhymes and analogies, the film continues to investigate the politics of looking. The film does not build tension in a typical fashion. Rather, it ruminates and obsesses on these formal relations, formal relations that then gain political connection for us through their repetition. In the process, the film forces on the viewer the recognition that politics resides not only in the content of visual culture but in its optical regimes. The metaphoric structure of the editing is anything but nuanced (it feels pedantic at moments). Yet the film's stubbornness is remarkable for how it refuses to release us from the constraints of the bourgeois gaze, leaving us to hover in those spaces that most palpably make us feel the violence of our own complacency. We feel the discomfort of having the conditioning of vision made so plain, so visible. And in places, the film lapses into instrumentalizing spectacle in a way that threatens to undermine its own critique of vision. Nevertheless, by juxtaposing scenarios of regulated looking (mass spectacle) with a looser narration of looks, Wojnarowicz demonstrates that in even the most quotidian forms of looking, our gaze is guided by ideology's delineation of the world; the eye can never reclaim a pre-aculturated seeing even when on vacation.

## **V. The Democratic Image**

In an interview now easily accessible on Youtube, Wojnarowicz describes how the labeling of an artist's expression as political and hence unfundable is a way of excluding certain citizens from the national public sphere.<sup>19</sup> "If my writing is political," he states, "then why isn't my dying of AIDS political?" For him, "information and representation is what is most frightening to" the prevailing powers. He goes on to argue that the right wing's goal to silence and make invisible certain Americans has violent consequences. He uses the example of how one US senator's campaign for "decency" demanded that a government report on education remove any data on the violence experienced by queer teens in school and any suggestion that such abuse contributes to rising suicide rates among LGBT youth. By excising these brutalities from the public record, the US congress redoubled the original violence done: no policy of protection could be enacted, victimizers were left unpunished, and the lives of gay youth were rendered erasable.

If the making insignificant of queer lives can be (in)directly sanctioned by government policy, then the question of who is included in the public space of the nation must be put under pressure. Should not a true democracy work to prevent the exclusion of identities inconvenient for its culture's reigning policies? Is not democracy exactly that mode of political organization in which minority voices are not merely tolerated, but are encouraged to contribute to the shape and content of public space? Although the authors of the US Constitution excluded many Americans from the category of full citizen, the structure of legislative governance that the Constitution proclaims is importantly democratic for how it addresses minorities with disproportionately limited access to determining public space. And although it has not always lived up to this ideal, the design of American governance and liberty allows for the protection of those less hegemonic forms of expression and being. The structures of American constitutional democracy are republican in nature, based upon electoral and representative government and not mere majority rule. Could they then be particularly well-attuned to represent populations are in a perpetual minority (queers)?

Since Wojnarowicz's death, we have seen the rise and extension of a violent populism in which queers have suffered from the rising tide of referenda. (The repeal of municipal and state LGBT

anti-discrimination laws has been the exemplar of this trend over the last 35 years. Many believe that Republican strategists have employed such measures as a tool for getting disproportionate numbers of socially-conservative voters to polls for major national elections. Examples of these ballot measures include Proposition 8 in California [2008] and Michigan Proposal 04-2 [2004]). Many of these ballot measures pose themselves as more “direct” means of polling. In doing so, these practices work to revise how political change happens in America. Instrumentally, they exert tremendous pressure on the structures for changing laws, at times even bypassing the will of legislative or other elected bodies. They also shift how we imagine the work of representative politics, condensing the people into an easily measurable unitary national will rather than a legislative body defined by a plurality of voices and for whom debate is the only proper working mode. These populist referenda suggest the rise of an *American Idol* version of governance, a pseudo-direct democracy that assaults the liberty protected in the US Constitution’s structural sensitivities to minority rights and representation. As a curator of the Smithsonian’s “Hide/Seek” exhibition, Jonathan D. Katz, declared in his pointed response to the NPG’s decision to remove *A Fire in My Belly*: “When will it be time for the decent majority of Americans [to] stand against a far-Right fringe that sees censorship as a replacement for dialog and debate?”<sup>20</sup> Wojnarowicz’s work articulates the costs of leaving behind truly democratic forms of liberty. In the same interview mentioned above, Wojnarowicz describes how the appropriation of the public sphere by radically conservative politicians and fundamentalists not only further marginalizes disadvantaged groups of Americans from cultural expression, it also endangers their lives. The refashioning definition of public culture will have a painful consequences, he warns us, as many Americans will end up dying “slow and vicious and unnecessary deaths because fags and dykes and junkies are expendable in this country.”

In late 2010, Representative Eric Cantor of Virginia (Republican) called for the removal of *A Fire in My Belly* from the NPG by invoking decency: “taxpayers have a right to expect that the museum will uphold common standards of decency.”<sup>21</sup> Anachronistically, we might hear Wojnarowicz’s interview as a response to Cantor. When Wojnarowicz said “we are being silenced” under the auspices of propriety and decency, he meant that the radical right refuses PWAs and homo-kids not only a possibility of verbal expression, but also political representation, and basic civil protections. Cantor proposes to deny queers any claim to express their presence in public culture. In other words, we might amend our understanding of Act-Up’s famous slogan “silence equals death” to also mean “silence equals social death.”

*A Fire in My Belly* redresses an oppressive optic that derailed American democracy in the 1980s. The film relishes in making bodies both excessively public and political. In doing so, it asks: How can we talk of decency in a democracy that forces people dying painfully to parade their pain in order to illicit sympathy and receive care? What was—what is—decent about that?

### **Coda: The Wrong Image**

Before an artwork can be censored it must be made wrong—narrated as wronging someone or something. The Catholic League recast *A Fire in My Belly* as not just an inaccurate representation but as a wrong-doing, a hate crime. To get it removed from museum walls, the League characterized the film as more than just incorrect in its depictions of Christianity or humanity. The film was made into something deeply wrong, an agent of injury. In other words, to banish the film, its wrongness had to be produced as a malignancy, as a wrongfulness requiring immediate excision. This process blames the work, declaring it so guilty that censorship is only appropriate response.

An effect of this process is to cast aspersions on the artwork's ability to represent adequately, truthfully, fairly. Hence censorship (and its preemptive process of "wronging") has contained within its procedures a very undemocratic compulsion: the sequestering of certain minority forms of expression as untruths and the segregation of certain mode of living as deviance. As the Oxford English Dictionary tells us, part of what it means to be wrong is being "illegal, not legitimate, unlawful, lacking right."

The censorship of Wojnarowicz is fascinating to consider precisely because he always deemed his work "wrong" beforehand. Or we might say, he made his works wrong ahead of time. By this I do not mean that he wished to be excluded from the public sphere or to have his work removed from public view. Instead, I mean that his work anticipates and responds to a world that will call for that work's censure. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that Wojnarowicz's *métier* finds its spiritual and technical motivation in welcoming "wrongness." *A Fire in My Belly* is the perfect example. The film appears to know that it is wrong: wrong for poaching cultural traditions, for invoking the Biblical alongside the homosexual, for instrumentalizing animal violence, for eroticizing the sacred, for desecrating the body, for employing stereotypes, for shooting puppets, etc.

There is also a certain "wrongness" that circulates in and around Wojnarowicz's technique and that fits another OED definition for wrong as "crooked or bent in form," "misshapen," and "marked by deviation." All wrong are his work's feral polysemy, its irreverent worship of catholic icons, and its stubborn lack of technical virtuosity mixed with its audacious visuality. Always flirting with poor production values, his artworks remain unwilling to perform what is required to avoid delegitimization.

His writings use the word "wrong" to describe what it means to live in the 1980s with HIV/AIDS. This condition of "feeling wrong" reflects more than the bodily symptoms of a disease.<sup>22</sup> It is an emotional state in which one's physical weariness is indistinguishable from the psychological exhaustion of confronting death at an early age, living in a homophobic society, and experiencing an unrelenting political anger. Counter-intuitively, Wojnarowicz drew clarity from this nexus of feeling. To think these conditions separately or to designate one cause as originator over the others would introduce a false segregation, a marginalization that Wojnarowicz opposed. Any impulse to reconcile one condition to the others (e.g., "That's the illness talking") would constitute a reactionary maneuver to reclaim a world that queers and PWAs had not yet relinquished. Any attempt to hierarchize causes would diffuse the systematic violence being done to queer people.

We can see Wojnarowicz refusing the reactionary forms of segregation across his work, irreverently interpenetrating realities, unearthing odd allegiances, forcing together disparate generic tropes, and making distinct affective registers to clash. These juxtapositions make provocative political commentary—for instance by linking HIV/AIDS and capitalism's disrespect for the environment. More importantly, the wrongness of these collisions provides a training ground for Wojnarowicz's viewers, makes them more ready to return to the world and question the separations and the unities it attempts to impose on its inhabitants. Why must this physical condition of HIV/AIDS be untangled from social politics? Why should a sense of cultural apocalypse not reflect a failing healthcare system? In his later works Wojnarowicz refused to relinquish the productive political and artistic potentials of this difficult emotional state rather than trying to explain it away as merely a side-effect of a compromised immune system. According to conventional wisdom, there's something wrong about an angry sick person and there's something wrong dying enraged, but for Wojnarowicz a politically charged wallowing was a means of resisting the role of victim to the end.

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## Notes

This essay originated in a lecture at the Albertine Monroe-Brown Gallery at the Gwen Frostic School of Art Western Michigan University, where *Fire in My Belly* was exhibited in the Spring of 2011. My great appreciation goes to Patricia Villalobos Echeverría and Donald Desmett for inviting me there, as well as to WMU's keen audience, whose questions helped to shape the revised version.

<sup>1</sup> Certainly, the more serious art history texts and criticism in art magazines cannot be always faulted here, but in the wider debates, the radical right provides the dominant understanding of how a viewer encounters and interacts with the work. And while many a debated work provokes the viewer, it might also engage the viewer in a conversation that we lose in the detractors' accounts.

<sup>2</sup> "Smithsonian Hosts Anti-Christian Exhibit," Catholic League News Release, November 30, 2012, <http://www.catholicleague.org/smithsonian-hosts-anti-christian-exhibit-2/> (accessed December 2011). It is crucial to keep in mind that the organization lacks any formal affiliation with the Vatican and does not represent the official position of the Church. From the political pulpit John Boehmer spoke out against the work's presence in the show. He would soon go on to be House Speaker. Representative Eric Cantor vocally condemned the exhibition of the work during the buildup to the *Christmas season*, saying that the work was timed to insult Christians and ruin the holiday.

<sup>3</sup> See Leon Hilton "X-Ray of Civilization": David Wojnarowicz and the Politics of Representation" on *Bully Bloggers*. <http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/12/13/%E2%80%99Cx-ray-of-civilization%E2%80%99D-david-wojnarowicz-and-the-politics-of-representation/> (accessed December 2011).

<sup>4</sup> In collaboration with the Fales Library and Special Collections at New York University, P.P.O.W., the gallery that represents Wojnarowicz's estate, has made various versions of the film available on the video-sharing website *vimeo*, including the 8-minute edit made specifically for the National Portrait Gallery exhibition by Bart Everly and the show's curator, Jonathan D. Katz (<http://vimeo.com/17692112>), as well as a 13-minute version subtitled "a Work in Progress" and a 7-minute "excerpt" found in Wojnarowicz's collection after his death (<http://vimeo.com/1765020>). *Semiotext(e)* circulated another video version of the film that uses music from "Plague Mass" by Diamanda Galas as its sound track. The journal first put the video on YouTube, which the website removed for *Semiotext(e)*, then reposted it on Facebook in November 2010, where it remains as of the writing of this essay: <http://www.facebook.com/video/video.php?v=10150127107352738>. For more information on the various versions, see Fales archivist Brent Phillips's blog post at [http://blogs.nyu.edu/library/sp.collections/2010/12/david\\_wojnarowicz\\_a\\_fire\\_in\\_m.html](http://blogs.nyu.edu/library/sp.collections/2010/12/david_wojnarowicz_a_fire_in_m.html) and the *Los Angeles Times* "Culture Monster" post "Getting the facts straight about Wojnarowicz's 'A Fire in My Belly'" at <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2011/02/wojnarowicz-a-fire-in-my-belly-gets-a-closer-look.html>.

<sup>5</sup> "Religion: The Miracle," *Time*, Monday, Feb. 19, 1951. Bosley Crowther, "The Strange Case of 'The Miracle,'" *Atlantic Monthly* 187 (April 1951).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>7</sup> *Joseph Burstyn, Inc. v. Wilson*, 343 U.S. 495 (1952).

<sup>8</sup> As early as the 1981-2 spray-painted mural *Science Lesson* and the sculptures of bodies wrapped with maps from around 1984, these mixtures of scale also reverberate with geopolitical significance. The miniature upstages the monumental, here, and the global ends up bracketed by the bodily. National borders are intriguingly reworked as corporeal interiors. Wojnarowicz's images use maps as icons of the deformation and implosion of scales and proportion. These maps don't function as maps ordinarily do, guiding us to the boundaries of the world, orienting us to limits and parameters. Wojnarowicz's maps often form the skin of figures. They conform to the pre-given shapes of bodies and objects. They get distorted as they are fleshed out by bodies. These maps are in this sense anti-cartographic, never containing but rather always undoing boundaries. This metaphoric use of maps suggests that political communities do more to undo the subject of modern life than they do to ground that subject. This figuration is not simply a movement from personal to political. It is an implosion of the geological, economic, biological, and political.

<sup>9</sup> Jean Epstein, 'On Certain Characteristics of *Photogénie*' in Richard Abel (ed) *French Film Theory and Criticism 1907-1939* (Princeton University Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz*: 1-43; Lucy Lippard "Out of the Safety Zone." *Art in America* (December 1990). <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/out-of-the-safety-zone/>

<sup>11</sup> Mysoon Rizk "Reinventing the Pre-invented World" in *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz* 57

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 49

<sup>13</sup> The Catholic Church defends its visual practices by pointing out that the veneration of icons has been part of Christian practice since its earliest days. Religious historians suggest that Catholic ceremonies incorporated pre-Judeo-Christian religions and their worship of idols or fetishes carved in wood or stone. For a broader discussion of iconophobia and Christianity, see Martin Jay *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-century French Thought*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) particularly 38-50.

<sup>14</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Gennariello," in *Lutheran Letters*, trans. Stuart Hood (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1983) 22.

<sup>15</sup> "Smithsonian Hosts Anti-Christian Exhibit."

<sup>16</sup> CNSNEWS.com, Penny Starr, November, 29, 2010,

<http://cnsnews.com/news/article/smithsonian-christmas-season-exhibit-features-ant-covered-jesus-naked-brothers-kissing> accessed December 2011.

<sup>17</sup> In "The Golden Age," Henry Miller writes that Buñuel "worships...decay and putrefaction." *The Cosmological Eye* (Norfolk, Conn: New directions, 1939): 55. For more on putrefaction in Surrealism see Robin Adèle Greeley, *Surrealism and the Spanish Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) 73-75.

<sup>18</sup> Not everyone appreciated the ants in exactly these terms. As Dudley Andrew reports: "One critic sees the thrusting hand as phallus, its palm as vagina, and the ants as evidence of putrefaction festering in the very womb of creation. Another critic finds this a blasphemy of Christ's stigmata. Raised in a country where body parts of saints are revered as powerful relics, Buñuel and Dalí sought out images of sacred suffering..." Andrew, "L'âge d'or and the Eroticism of the Spirit," *Masterpieces of Modernist Cinema*, ed. Ted Perry (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 127. For more on Wojnarowicz's relationship to surrealism see Lippard.

<sup>19</sup> YouTube video "David Wojnarowicz discusses arts funding,"

[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfmkja\\_HGU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfmkja_HGU)

<sup>20</sup> Statement from Jonathan D. Katz, <http://gayhighwaymen.wordpress.com/2010/12/03/curator-jonathan-d-katz-statement-on-smithsonian-npg-censorship-of-hideseek-exhibit/> accessed December 2012.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted in R. Cort Kirkwood, “Anti-Christian Film To Open at Brooklyn Museum,” *The New American*, November 14, 2011, <http://www.thenewamerican.com/culture/faith-and-morals/9765-anti-christian-film-to-open-at-brooklyn-museum> accessed December 2011.

<sup>22</sup> See for example *In the Shadow of the American Dream: The Diaries of David Wojnarowicz*, Eds. Amy Scholder (New York: Grove Press, 2000): 248; *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1991): 239.