

Filthy Dreams

For Minorities Who Don't Even Fit Into Our Own Minorities

ART

'I Am Consumed in the Weight of You': "Self-Portrait in 23 Rounds: A Chapter in David Wojnarowicz's Life (1989-1991)" at London's Live Art Development Agency

Posted on December 18, 2019 by TESS CHARNLEY

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(<https://filthydreams.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/last-night-2-e1576683744453.jpg>)

Marion Scemama and David Wojnarowicz, *Last Night I Took A Man* (still), 1989

To mark this year's World AIDS Day, London's Live Art Development Agency (LADA)

(<https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/>) hosted the first UK screening of Marion Scemama's 2018 film essay *Self-Portrait in 23 Rounds: A Chapter in David Wojnarowicz's Life (1989-1991)*

(<https://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/events/world-aids-day-screening-david-wojnarowicz/>), co-directed with François Pain. Having spent the past two years immersing myself in Wojnarowicz's life and work (<https://www.cityandguildsartschool.ac.uk/when-i-put-my-hands-on-your-body-an-intimate-encounter-with-david-wojnarowiczs-archive-by-tess-charnley/>), I was hungry for what new information I could learn about the man I'll never meet, but think of so often. The impetus for the work was four hours of interview footage, conducted by Sylvère Lotringer in Wojnarowicz's Lower East Side apartment, during the two years following his HIV diagnosis. This is interspersed with archival footage, from both Wojnarowicz's archive held at NYU's Fales Library & Special Collections (<http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/fales/woj/>) and Scemama's own archive.

The film is separated into sections, almost thematic in their division. We see the filming of *When I Put My Hands On Your Body*; the eroticism of Wojnarowicz (<https://filthydreams.org/tag/david-wojnarowicz/>) undoing the belt of the film's subject with his mouth, tracing his tongue on waiting skin, is undercut by Scemama's direction—their pausing, the simultaneously awkward and charged

nature of this encounter. We see Wojnarowicz reading from his essay *Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-inch-Tall Politician*, palpable with rage in his descriptions of the “killing machine” that was Reagan’s America during the AIDS crisis. We see Wojnarowicz interacting with animals—his pet scorpion in particular. He is gentle, softened by the weight of the responsibility for another creature, the feeling of a life in his hands.

(<https://filthydreams.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/when-i-put-my-hands-on-your-body-e1576683875741.jpg>)

Marion Scemama and David Wojnarowicz, *When I Put My Hands on Your Body* (still), 1989

Smoking compulsively, he sits and talks, at times standing to lean against a surface or look for something in his chaotic home. The camera cuts occasionally to Lotringer, but mostly we just see Wojnarowicz, the awkward grace in the way he moves his body, the movement of his eyes with his ideas. There is a certain *mythology* (<https://filthydreams.org/2018/09/10/institutionalization-keeps-me-awake-at-night-david-wojnarowicz-the-whitney-and-the-violence-of-the-canon/>) around him. Either an activist, an outsider, a poster boy for the AIDS crisis, spitting rage and sexuality; abject almost, he is rarely seen just as human. I have been guilty of this myself. I fell into Wojnarowicz’s work in the way that I have fallen into the arms of men—unfettered and compulsive. I didn’t think of him as a person who ate, who slept, who needed laughter and respite.

Scemama’s film humanises him, particularly in the archival additions. We see him as an activist, but we also see his playful side. The section “Family Album” shows Wojnarowicz leafing through a book of wild cats with a domestic cat on his lap, pointing to different images of leopards or tigers as though showing a child their family photo album: “There’s your mommy... Oh look, there’s your uncle, drunk again.” We see that he could be silly; he liked a joke. His persona goes beyond fucking or death, and certainly beyond AIDS. It would be wrong to flatten him in such a way.

(<https://filthydreams.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/david-wojnarowicz-2-e1576683899636.jpg>)

David Wojnarowicz in his kitchen, New York City, 1984. Photo by Marion Scemama

Wojnarowicz, approaching the end of his life yet uncertain of its timeline, shows us that death is not opaque. Sex and death can co-exist; humour and death can co-exist. As Wojnarowicz states, “We need to be surrounded by sexy images. It’s not all death. It’s sexy.” He wanted to capture in his art an expression of what he named as the “indescribable” and “untouchable” place of orgasm—that releasing of a person, the “little death” coming. They are not so dissimilar in their speaking of human experience. When I think of death, I think of it as a hollowness, a gutting and emptying. Life is the intangible spark that makes a body more than a cold vehicle. And you watch it leave in stages, with multiple interventions at times but always retreating, slippery and ungraspable. And then, when someone is finally gone and their body has been burnt or buried, you are left only with things. Things that you so associate with that person, but are unanimated without them—their materiality lifeless, but cruelly outliving any flesh or bone. Wojnarowicz described the sight of his close friend Peter Hujar’s (<https://filthydreams.org/2018/02/18/into-the-black-peter-hujars-the-speed-of-life/>) glasses after he died as the saddest thing he’d seen in his life. I remember having the same experience with the death of my mother; the half-drunk glass of water by her bed, her glasses placed beside it, more painful than anything that had led to that room’s emptiness.

(<https://filthydreams.files.wordpress.com/2019/12/desert-journal-e1576683962342.jpeg>).

Desert Journal, 1991. Text by David Wojnarowicz, composition and photo by Marion Scemama.

In Scemama's film, we see death as something that doesn't need to be repressed or battled against or even accepted, but just as an inevitable. The result of a neglectful government in the case of many of the AIDS crisis deaths, certainly, but something that will come for us all regardless of whether we live our lives with humour or rage, whether we have a lot of sex or we have hardly any. And Wojnarowicz interviewed acts as the baseline for these multiple, at times conflicting, facets of a personality presented through these archives. Scemama brings us back to David in his kitchen, again and again, not an activist or a PWA or even an artist, but just as her friend with things to say and a limited time to say them.

Tags: [David Wojnarowicz](#), [Fales Library & Special Collections](#), [François Pain](#), [HIV/AIDS](#), [Live Art Development Agency](#), [Marion Scemama](#), [Self-Portrait in 23 Rounds: A Chapter in David Wojnarowicz's Life \(1989-1991\)](#), [Sylvère Lotringer](#), [When I Put My Hands On Your Body](#), [World AIDS Day](#). Bookmark the [permalink](#).

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