DAVID WOJNAROWICZ
ARTHUR RIMBAUD IN NEW YORK

Arthur Rimbaud in New York is one of David Wojnarowicz's foundational works — one of his fully photographic series — produced between 1978 and 1979, at the dawn of a career marked by urgency, marginality, and a furious desire to live. These prints come from the collection of Jean-Pierre Delage; they are the very photographs Wojnarowicz had hoped to exhibit in Paris in 1980. As attested by the hundreds of letters, postcards, handwritten or typed, addressed to his lover at the time (Delage), he was actively seeking a Parisian gallery to present Rimbaud. That ambition is finally realized today. The series stages a simple cardboard mask held by an elastic band: the face of Rimbaud, the adolescent poet, immortalized by Étienne Carjat. This face becomes a specter. Though universally recognized, it now haunts the streets, wastelands, graffitied subways, and empty beaches of New York. It is Wojnarowicz's friends and lovers — among them Jean-Pierre Delage — who wear the mask. A Rimbaldian topography of New York begins to take shape: Coney Island, Times Square, The Piers, a hamburger and fries as a last meal. Perhaps Wojnarowicz prostituted himself there. Perhaps the child of Charleville, in another life, would have shot up in an abandoned factory.

To exhibit these photographs today is not merely a visual exercise or poetic tribute: it is a political and intimate gesture. A way of bringing back the flavor of lovers into one's bedroom, like gathering fever into a sheet. An attempt to speak erasure, to represent invisibility. A masked body to better reveal those made illegible by society. In one photo, an anonymous naked man appears, his erect sex stretched like a captain's sword.

Wojnarowicz and Delage met in the Louvre's parking lot, where the pyramid now stands. In a letter dated January 9, 1981, sent from a frozen New York, Wojnarowicz writes to Jean-Pierre: he speaks of love, exhaustion, music, and his meeting with Peter Hujar — the photographer-mentor with whom he shared the burden of a comfortless art. He wonders: will he ever sell his work in a gallery? Or will he stay at the RTR Club? He ends the letter with a drawing of a rainbow dog, and these luminous words in the night: "I kiss you now."
On a flyer from Club 57 — a landmark of the East Village underground — Wojnarowicz announces a "ppœtry perfffformance" with Bob Holman and Ira Brukner. At the bottom: DANCING. In the image, one of his companions wears the Rimbaud mask. His body is pulled taut by diagonal ropes, trapped in a ruined urban scene. This is no portrait. It's a contemporary crucifixion. A state of tension. The wall, saturated with scratches, becomes a surface of suffering: the city itself, a martyred body.

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This New York, Wojnarowicz captured it still intact: raw, dirty, radiant — before gentrification. The Lower East Side was then a territory of experimental collectives, clandestine love affairs, bodies for sale, live poetry. But soon, AIDS would ravage this world. Wojnarowicz died at 37.
He shared with Rimbaud a shattered youth, a hatred of institutions, a taste for wandering. Both are great damnés, petty criminals, beings "out of order" in the eyes of their time. When Rimbaud proclaimed himself a pagan and anti-Catholic in *A Season in Hell* (1873), Wojnarowicz railed against the Christian, neoconservative America that rejected its sick. Both sang of a scorched adolescence, of life too fiercely desired. "*To be born into the world is to know hell*," wrote Rimbaud — a line that could have been his. "*I dried myself in the air of crime*." Wojnarowicz did too.
Where Rimbaud abandoned poetry for the arms trade in Abyssinia, Wojnarowicz persisted. He kept writing, painting, photographing — to the point of exhaustion. He did not believe in "extinguished light" or "misguided motion." He preferred to believe that at dawn, we would enter splendid cities. Wojnarowicz explored every medium: painting, photography, performance, writing. But for him, art was never purely aesthetic. It was a weapon, a scream, a tool of resistance. He presented himself not as an artist in the classical sense, but as a consumed, traversed, damned figure.
In *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, the poet becomes a medium of disappearance. Rimbaud walks through the crowd, but no one sees him. He wanders alone in Coney Island. He collapses on a bed, hand on his sex. Every image repeats the same intuition: the erasure of the person.

At the time, Wojnarowicz was not yet sick. The world had not yet collapsed. That's what makes these images so trembling, so precise: no pathos, no virtuosity. Just tension. A pre-catastrophic light. He captured a world on the brink of disappearance — of hustlers, of galleryless dreamers, of artists with no heirs, of lovers who died too young. A world of ruined carnivals, deserted fast food joints, empty lots, gutted factories. A world crossed by the fervor of raiders — fugitive bodies.
Rimbaud, said Nietzsche, was the poet of joyful ecstasies.
Wojnarowicz too believed in an impure joy, a joy born of shame, sex, night, silence, and rage. Neither claimed a pure art. Their work was made with crime. With what the era rejected.

And in some measure, if we need them,
they did not need us.

Pierre-Alexandre Mateos, Paris, Mai 2025