
DAVID WOJNAROWICZ / MARION SCEMAMA

I WAKE UP EVERY MORNING IN THIS KILLING MACHINE CALLED AMERICA

My first camera was a stolen camera. I was living on the streets of new york city and a street buddy and I were staying at some guy's house for a while. This guy was a forty-eight-year-old acid head who'd been doing the drug for five years on a daily basis. He lived on a stipend from his rich dad.

He was part hippie, and he let us stay with him and didn't ask for rent. One day his dad cut off his stipend and he went into withdrawal from all the acid he'd been consuming. My buddy and I carried him to a hospital and while he was recuperating, we decided to clean his house for him. His house was a horrifying mess: ceiling to floor piles of brown newspapers and sacks of garbage and what appeared to be useless pieces of cardboard. We threw out anything that appeared to be without value or sentiment. When the guy came home from hospital he went into a fit screaming that we had robbed him. He called the police and asked them to come and arrest us for theft. We had to run out the door before the cops got there. My buddy stole the guy's small thirty-five millimeter camera because he figured if the guy was going to call us thieves, we might as well steal something. My buddy gave the camera to me and for months afterward I'd steal rolls of films from drugstores and take photographs of the gang of ex-can transverities we hung around with on West Street. I never had any money so I couldn't get the photographs developed. I'd put all the rolls of film in whatever bus station locker we left our meager belongings in and the first that we forgot to put in the daily-required quarter, all our belongings were confiscated and taken to a lost and found in the outer reaches of brooklyn.

I try to think of what it meant to be engaged in the act of picture-taking. I thought at the time that it would be making pictures of the world I lived in. One that was never seen on the television sets behind the window of electronic shops or in the pages of newspapers floating around the 5:00 A.M. streets. Or it was possibly an act of validation of our lives, something of value being implied in the preservation of our bodies.

After getting off the streets at age eighteen, I began taking pictures with the same camera and for the first time I was able to see what the camera saw when I pointed it at something and snapped the shutter. I began to learn something about representation and what that meant to me. I learned something about defining ones impulses and desires and ideas about the world. If you look at newspapers you rarely see a representation of anything you believe to be the world you inhabit. This is called information control. This is distortion by unseen hands belonging to faceless people. As a person who owns a camera, I am in direct competition with the owners of television stations and newspapers; though my gestures of communication have less of a reverberation than a newspaper photograph has because of the amount of copies the newspaper owner can circulate among the populations coast to coast. The only difference between a newspaper owner and myself is that I believe I represent a different intention in what I point my camera toward. I have a desire to open up certain boundaries and release information that unties the psychic ropes that bind the ONE-TRIBE NATION. I can speak with photographs about many different things that the newspaper owner is afraid to address because of agenda or political pressure, or because of the power of advertisers dollars. I can make photographs dealing with my sexuality and I do because I know my sexuality is purposefully made invisible by the owners of various media.

Are photographs just tiny windows looking onto the world, frozen moments of it that lie flat and quiet without sound or smell or movement? Susan Whatsername said something about photographs being like small deaths which is maybe true. Maybe not. Maybe such a statement reflects that person's fear of being photographed. Certain people in certain places for ages have felt that a photograph steals a part of your soul, so when someone aimed a camera at them they were likely to throw a spear or cut the photographers throat or shoot them, or slug the photographer on the chin and demand a fifteen percent cut of the royalties. To me, photographs are like words and I generally will place many photographs together or print them one inside the other in order to construct a free-floating sentence that speaks about the world I witness. History is made and preserved by and for particular classes of people. A camera in some hands can preserve an alternate history.

DAVID WOJNAROWICZ, extract from *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, 1991

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Born in New Jersey in 1954, political artist, painter, writer, performer, photographer, David Wojnarowicz, who died of AIDS in 1992 in New York, was one of the leading figures of the New York Downtown artistic scene of the 80s.

By confronting death and the AIDS crisis to the tough political context afflicting the most vulnerable people and all those left behind by the American dream, he quickly emerged as one of the main protest and radical artists in the Reagan-Bush years.

Marion Scemama is a French photographer and filmmaker based in Paris. In 1983, she met David Wojnarowicz in New York where she lived for five years. From this encounter was born a special friendship, that will last for nine years, marked by a mutual support and numerous collaborations (photos, texts and videos). In 1991, one year before David Wojnarowicz's death, they undertake together a journey into the American South-West, which will become his last trip.

The exhibition at New Galerie presents an important ensemble of vintage prints by David Wojnarowicz from Marion Scemama's collection. The photographs were printed by David Wojnarowicz in 1988-89 at Peter Hujar's studio in New York. The show will also present photographs by Marion Scemama and videos made in collaboration. This body of work creates a remarkable look into David Wojnarowicz' inner life and artistic process.

Self-Portrait in 23 Rounds, A Chapter in David Wojnarowicz's Life (1989-1991), a film essay by Marion Scemama, co-directed by François Pain, will be screened at FIAC, auditorium du Petit Palais on October 20 at 4:30pm. Filmed in his loft, David Wojnarowicz speaks about confronting his own death, AIDS, desire, sexuality, his work, the use of rage in his commitment, and the numerous contradictions he was going through at this time of his life.

The main thread is a 4 hour interview conducted by Sylvere Lotringer, founder of Semiotext(e), in May 1989, with unseen images from the director's personal archives as well as David Wojnarowicz's.

The movie has been selected at the *Berlinale 2019* and nominated for the Best documentary essay.