A Fire in My Belly: The Viral Legacy of a Controversial Film

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by

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Introduction

Almost 25 years after its creation, *A Fire in My Belly* (*A Work in Progress)* was removed from the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. due to the Catholic League accusing it of being a form of hate speech. David Wojnarowicz created the film almost 40 years prior, far removed from our current day politics. Why, then, did *A Fire in My Belly* antagonize certain conservative groups? It can be argued that the message and themes behind *A Fire in My Belly* are still prevalent today. Filmed during the height of the AIDS epidemic and the conservative Reagan administration, Wojnarowicz created this film to share his truth and to challenge the stigmatization of the gay community and other marginalized groups. Thus, the film is a representation of Wojnarowicz's rage toward the institutions that have resulted in the disparity of many. Paying attention to the visual and technical aspects of the film and the sociocultural context of the time will provide insight into the certain choices Wojnarowicz made in the creation of *A Fire in My Belly.* Divided into two separate films, *A Fire in My Belly* explores themes of religious hypocrisy, colonial exploitation, social inequality, and violence. These themes are expressed through violent and gory imagery, the use of collage-like editing, and zoomed-in camera angles. Furthermore, analyzing Wojnarowicz's film through the lens of formalism and social art history will help answer the question, how is a nearly 40-year-old film still controversial to this day?

Looking at the formal qualities, such as the visual aspects and the filming and editing techniques, provides a window into Wojnarowicz's thought process. Moreover, looking at the medium of analog film itself is also important in analyzing *A Fire in My Belly* through a formalist lens. It is often noted by scholars, biographers, and researchers well versed in his art that Wojnarowicz's weakest medium was film. As an artist who worked in all kinds of media,

Wojnarowicz chose film for *A Fire in My Belly* when he could have easily chosen a multimedia collage, as these were the bulk of his oeuvre and consistently stronger in their cohesion to tell a story**.** Why, then, did he choose analog film? Perhaps it was because it was the only medium that could fully encapsulate the themes explored in the film. It may possibly be because he wanted to experiment with a medium he was less familiar with, or maybe Wojnarowicz chose film for its reproducible capabilities. Whatever the case may be, choosing film as *A Fire in My Belly's* medium allowed Wojnarowicz to create future projects by reusing the footage from the film.

Moreover, the time in which Wojnarowicz created *A Fire in My Belly* provided different means to produce works of art. Artists could utilize film as a medium, which made it all the more convenient to reproduce their work and provide multiple copies. Creating a film allowed him to develop other projects, incorporating the footage from the film into his later works. The themes that he grappled with in *A Fire in My Belly* were translated over into the works seen later in his oeuvre. It was during this time that Wojnarowicz was diagnosed with HIV, which eventually progressed into AIDS. Thus, his artwork became more heavily tied to AIDS activism and his identity as an HIV+ gay man. Creating *A Fire in My Belly* in the format of a film, then, provided Wojnarowicz the ability to further develop and strengthen the themes found in the film in consideration of the unfolding circumstances surrounding him.

Furthermore, social art history is another methodology that will also aid in answering the main question, why is *A Fire in My Belly* still relevant today? Wojnarowicz's upbringing was turbulent and unstable, as his father was abusive, and his mother was neglectful of her children.[1]

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[1] Wojnarowicz's childhood would be one of the defining periods of life, shaping him to become the artist that we know of today. Much of Wojnarowicz's childhood is filled with holes, as both him and his siblings blocked out the dark parts of their adolescence. Wojnarowicz came from a broken home; his father was abusive, and his mother neglected to care for her children. In 1956, his mother Dolores filed for divorce, which was granted the following year; however, in November 1958, Wojnarowicz's father Ed

His childhood shaped him into the man and artist that he became. Living on the streets of New York City as a teenager also influenced his worldview. Wojnarowicz was exposed to drugs, alcohol, and sex at a young age, which in turn affected the perspective of his surroundings. This is clearly seen throughout his various artworks, in which violence and rage are a universal theme in his art. Furthermore, the context in which Wojnarowicz was living in as an adult was a time of great change, both politically and technologically. With the rise of conservative politics in the United States and the fast-growing technology of the time, the AIDS epidemic was a crisis feared by the general public, yet its discourse was permeated throughout media channels and popular culture. Therefore, it was hard for people to distinguish the real truth of the virus from the stigmatization and stereotypes ingrained in American popular culture. Working with the technology of the time, such as analog film, allowed activists to record the effects of the epidemic on the marginalized groups most affected and to spread awareness of the severity of the virus that was either ignored or twisted to antagonize the virus's victims. Although *A Fire in My Belly* never explicitly addresses the AIDS epidemic, its legacy is heavily tied to AIDS activism. Furthermore, the role in which analog film played in its creation has allowed the work to be

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kidnapped him and his siblings after picking them up from their boarding home and brought them to Michigan, his home state. Living with his father left Wojnarowicz with an unstable home life and years of neglect and abuse. He and his siblings eventually went to live with their mother after five years of being separated.

Moreover, it was during this time, living with his mother in a one-bedroom apartment in New York City, that Wojnarowicz experienced his first sexual encounters. Wojnarowicz was barely into his teenage years when he had sexual relations with a 26-year-old man, the son of one of his mother's friends. The idea that he shared an intimate and emotional moment with someone of the same-sex terrified Wojnarowicz, and he soon questioned his sexuality. Being raised Catholic and growing up in a culture that saw homosexuality as a sin left Wojnarowicz with a lot of shame in his actions, and it would take some time for him to accept this part of himself. As his childhood shows, Wojnarowicz grew up in a tumultuous family. He fell victim to psychological, physical, and sexual abuse at a young age, and he never truly had a parental figure in his life. *A Fire in My Belly (A Film in Progress)* served as an outlet for Wojnarowicz's rage and anger toward the neglect and violence he experienced as a child and young adult. (Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz,* New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 7-38.

adapted to current technologies, allowing it to live on in various spaces across the internet, thereby digitally immortalizing Wojnarowicz's provocative film.

Chapter One: Visual Analysis of *A Fire in My Belly (Work in Progress)*

In late October of 1986, David Wojnarowicz and his colleague Tommy Turner traveled to Mexico, bringing a Super 8mm camera to record footage that eventually would be edited into *A Fire in My Belly (A Work in Progress).* Much of the scenes that Wojnarowicz recorded during this time was footage of street life in Mexico City, Mexican wrestling, and an infamous scene of fire ants crawling over the crucifix. These recordings, along with footage shot in New York City and San Juan, are shown in two different versions of *A Fire in My Belly.*[2] There exists a thirteen-minute and a seven-minute version, each having slight variations from the other. However, they both display images of violence, rage, and power as a way to express Wojnarowicz's commentary on certain social issues.

It is important to pay attention to both the visual and technical components that form the basis of *A Fire in My Belly* in order to understand how they relate to the message of the film. A common motif seen throughout *A Fire in My Belly* is the image of violence, whether that be through bodily mutilation or physical violence toward another. One of the more well-known shots depicting bodily mutilation is that of Wojnarowicz's friend, Tom Rauffenbart, sewing his mouth shut in the seven-minute version (fig. 1). A spotlight illuminates his face, while the camera is zoomed in so that only his mouth is shown. Red thread is used to stitch his mouth closed, which further emphasizes the "blood," actually red food coloring, that drips from his mouth. The idea that the human body is mutilated in such a way elicits a repulsed reaction from

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[2] "A Fire In My Belly (Film In Progress) and A Fire In My Belly (Excerpt)," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed on January 30, 2024. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/855888.

the viewer. They cringe and flinch, looking away at such a grotesque image. Wojnarowicz incorporates a close-up shot, however, making the viewer unable to look away and forces them to watch the scene unfold. This image is representative of those who are forcibly silenced and marginalized. The physical action of sewing the mouth shut comments on the forced silence of those who are constantly trying to raise their voices to speak out against the injustices they face.

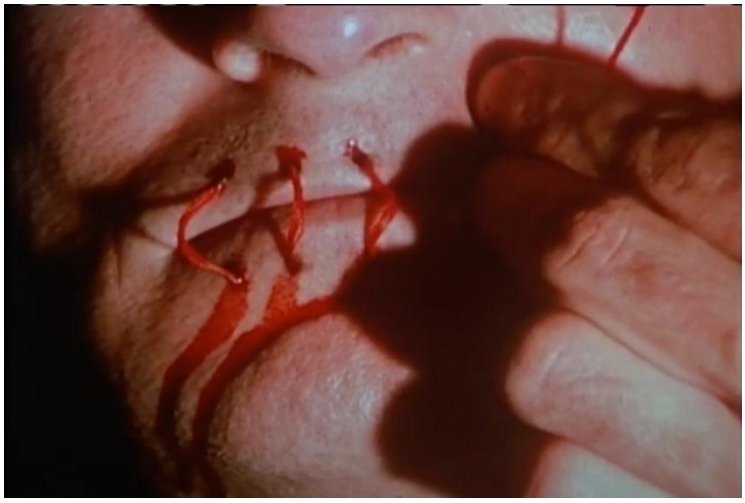

Figure 1: David Wojnarowicz, a mouth being sewn shut from *A Fire in My Belly (A Work in Progress),* 1987. Super 8mm film. 7-minute version, time stamp: 1 minute and 20 seconds.

Where both versions of *A Fire in My Belly* depict images of violence, the seven-minute version contains several scenes with Christian iconography, which ultimately addresses the film's theme of religious hypocrisy. The image that sparked controversy over *A Fire in My Belly* nearly 25 years after its creation is the crucified Christ. For Christians, the image of Christ on the cross symbolizes his sacrifice for humanity in order to save them from sin. At about 3 minutes and 51 seconds into the 7-minute version, an image of a bloody Jesus Christ on the cross appears (fig. 2). Christ is shown bleeding from wearing the crown of thorns, from his chest, and from his hands. This image is further enhanced by fire ants crawling over the crucifix. As he was raised

Catholic, Wojnarowicz was familiar with the symbolism behind the crucifix. However, his struggle with Catholicism and with institutionalized religion is what he attempts to highlight with the ants crawling over Christ. The ants represent Jesus assuming the suffering of those who have been marginalized and disregarded by society, specifically by the Catholic Church and its followers. The ants are, "humanity rushing along heedless of what lies under its tiny feet, indifferent to the structures that surround it."[3] The ants are representative of humans – they just accept what is placed in front of them as true, as factual. Humanity, therefore, does not question or is seemingly unbothered by the institutions that govern them.

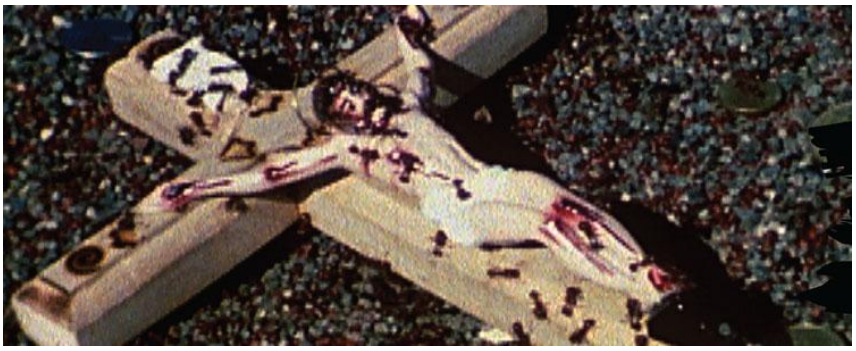

Figure 2: David Wojnarowicz, fire ants crawling over a bloodied crucifix from *A Fire in My Belly (A Work in Progress),* 1987. Super 8mm film. 7-minute version, time stamp: 3 minutes and 51 seconds.

Throughout the duration of *A Fire in My Belly,* Wojnarowicz incorporates zoom-in camera shots when recording scenes outside the studio. The zoom-in angle indicates that he was recording these scenes from a distance. This is seen in the footage of the wrestlers (fig. 3). The viewer can tell that Wojnarowicz is seated amongst the crowd watching the violent performance happen, yet he zooms in on the fighting to make it seem like he is right there in the heart of it.

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[3] Cynthia Carr, *Fire in the Belly: The Life and Times of David Wojnarowicz,* New York: Bloomsbury, 2012, 1-2.

The act of zooming in and out, of pushing and pulling away from the scene at hand, creates the sense that Wojnarowicz is not truly a part of what he is witnessing. He is present, that is obvious, but he is only an observer, not an active participant in the fray. Wojnarowicz commented on his filming style, saying, "'I pushed the voyeurism to the limit, always shooting through a zoom lens whenever possible, from car or bus windows; points of elevation, third story windows, shop balconies, cliffs, etc.'"[4] Labeling himself as a voyeur asserts the idea that Wojnarowicz should not be watching, much less recording, these violent scenes in *A Fire in My Belly.* Wojnarowicz asserts himself as an unwanted spectator witnessing the violent cacophony around him. By recording the violence, he forces the viewer to watch the violence unfold with him.

Figure 3: David Wojnarowicz, Mexican wrestlers amidst a fight. From *A Fire in My Belly (A Work in Progress),* 1987. Super 8mm film. 13-minute version, time stamp: 2 minutes and 37 seconds.

Moreover, the voyeurism that is attached to the filming style is seen in the first several minutes of the thirteen-minute version. Wojnarowicz zooms in from different angles: either from

[4] Carr, Bloomsbury, 342.

above or from the side. He captures close-up scenes of Mexican wrestlers, cockfights, and even newspapers. In a specific scene around the 4-minute mark, Wojnarowicz zooms in and out of what appears to be a man tying a metal spur onto a rooster's leg, which is used to inflict more damage to the its opponent in a cockfight. He focuses on the hands of the man, carefully holding the bird's leg so as to not hurt it (fig. 4). This misleading tender scene, however, is later juxtaposed with scenes of violence where Wojnarowicz captures close-up shots of the cockfight, Mexican wrestlers, and bull fights. These scenes, seen throughout the thirteen-minute version, all demonstrate a voluntary and performative aspect of violence. The wrestlers put on a show of rehearsed fighting for the audience, while the cockfights are a show for people to bet money on the winner. Even the short snippets of the bull fight allude to the fact that the bull is provoked into an angered stated in order to give a suspenseful show for its audience. By using zoomed-in shots, the viewer can never fully look away from the violence that is happening in the film. They, too, turn into a spectator who watches the scenes unfold into violence meant for the crowd's entertainment.

Figure 4: David Wojnarowicz, still of a man tying a metal spur onto a rooster's leg in San Juan, Puerto Rico. From *A Fire in My Belly (A Work in Progress),* 1987. Super 8mm film. 13-minute version, time stamp: 3 minutes and 57 seconds.

Along with the visual components of *A Fire in My Belly,* the post-production process is equally important in understanding Wojnarowicz's use of college-like editing. Much of the scenes in the film are spliced and put together abruptly. The splicing of the film adds to its central theme of violence. That is, there is a violence into cutting an analog film. Unlike digital film, editing *A Fire in My Belly* required Wojnarowicz to physically cut into the negatives in order to achieve the collage-like composition. Therefore, along with the visual violence, there is a technical violence in the creation of *A Fire in My Belly.* The idea of damage and of gore is repeated throughout the film. The viewer is given no time to digest the scenes in the film. A quote from Wojnarowicz explains why he chose to edit the films this way. He states, "What I explored in the film is the workings within surface images; so I split open continuous images and placed studio shots or other related images within the splice – the film uses spliced-in-images almost as subliminal messages, but each image is used at least long enough to register on the brain; sometimes longer."[5] Therefore, Wojnarowicz edited shots in a way so that they are layered upon each other, quickly switching between scenes that overwhelm the viewer.

Chapter Two: The Role of Analog Film in Wojnarowicz's Oeuvre

Many biographers, art historians, and experts on Wojnarowicz's art view film as his weakest medium. Why, then, did Wojnarowicz decide to create *A Fire in My Belly* in the format of a film? Maybe it was because it was the only medium that could fully encapsulate the themes explored in the film. Maybe it was because he wanted to experiment with a medium he was less familiar with, or perhaps Wojnarowicz chose film for its reproducible capabilities. The time in which Wojnarowicz created *A Fire in My Belly* provided different means to produce works of art.

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[5] Carr, 358.

Artists could utilize film as a medium, which made it all the more convenient to reproduce their work and provide multiple copies. As an AIDS activist who used art as a platform to raise awareness and to prevent the further stigmatization of HIV/AIDS, Wojnarowicz may have used film for *A Fire in My Belly* because of its easily reproducible qualities. Because of its reproducibility, film is able to spread information much faster than other media. It can be copied and distributed fairly quickly, as well as be showed in multiple places at the same time. Unlike other media such as painting where only one authentic version exists. Moreover, there is a connection between analog film and the AIDS crisis, both literally and symbolically, which may have influenced Wojnarowicz to use film as the medium for *A Fire in My Belly*.

Organizations such as DIVA TV, or Damned Interfering Video Activist Television, made use of analog film to record the AIDS crisis. They focused on recording women and people of color affected by the epidemic whose stories were overlooked and pushed to the periphery.[6] Activists utilized film as their medium to record and document authentic stories of those affected by the epidemic and to provide a platform for people who were most ignored and overlooked during the crisis. Thus, film quite literally became associated with AIDS activism due to its ability to record events in real time. Additionally, analog film became associated with AIDS symbolically because of its ephemerality. Analog film breaks down and erodes overtime, much like those infected with the virus.[7] As Jih-Fei Cheng writes, "AIDS video artist-activists cared for the bodies and the images of those who were most vulnerable to the crisis not simply to prolong life – they anticipated that these videos and images would return as the afterlives of those who

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[6] Cheng, Jih-Fei. "How to Survive: AIDS and Its Afterlives in Popular Media." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 44, no. 1/2 (2016): 73–92. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44475167.

[7] Cheng, 75.

might come to pass."[8] In a way, analog film became the medium to immortalize those who died from the virus so that they would not be forgotten. Moreover, the act of splicing the negatives of the film reinforces the damage AIDS has on the human body. That is, cutting the physical negatives that make up *A Fire in My Belly* symbolizes the destruction wrecked on a person infected with AIDS. Like AIDS, there is no cure to the damage caused to the physical roll of film. Thus, Wojnarowicz may have chosen analog film because of the symbolism associated with AIDS. Although it remains to be seen whether Wojnarowicz deliberately chose film for its reproducible qualities, for his own experimentation with the medium, or for its connection to AIDS activism, *A Fire in My Belly* paved the way for Wojnarowicz to further expand ideas through other forms of media.

Moreover, the choice of film for *A Fire in My Belly* led Wojnarowicz to develop other projects, such as his *Ant Series.* The series includes six black-and-white photographs that have plastic ants crawling on the surface of them. The six photographs depict different subjects, such as "an effigy of Christ on the cross, a nude male body seen from the shoulders to the knees, a gun (fig. 5), coins and part of a clock face, a model soldier, and part of a sign with fragments of its text visible."[9] Each photograph refers to a different theme, which simultaneously functions as the photographs' titles. These themes include violence, spirituality, and control, which are also central concepts of *A Fire in My Belly*. Wojnarowicz referred to these images as the 'Mexican photographs' – a reference to his time spent in Mexico in the late 1980s – suggesting that he may

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[8] Cheng, 75.

[9] "Untitled (Spirituality)," Tate Modern, last modified November 2015, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wojnarowicz-untitled-violence-p79853.

have shot these photos while there.[10] In fact, the photograph of Christ on the cross (fig. 6) parallels the same image seen in *A Fire in My Belly,* further demonstrating Wojnarowicz's capability of reusing images and footage in various artworks. Wojnarowicz had much to say in *A Fire in My Belly,* as seen through the amalgamation of footage in the two versions that exist. Therefore, he may have chosen film as its medium because of the infinite number of possibilities that it gave him in comparison with stagnant two-dimensional art, allowing him to further expand on similar themes in other projects.

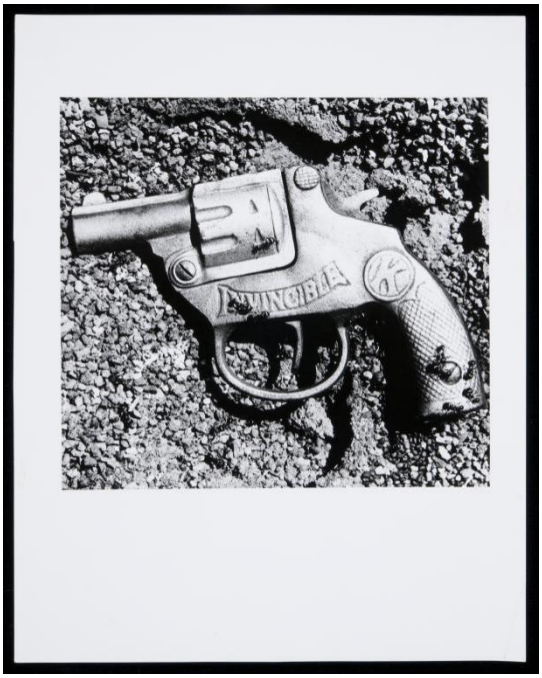

Figure 5: David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Violence)* from the *Ant Series,* 1988. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 200 x 250 mm. Tate Modern.

[10] Tate Modern, https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/wojnarowicz-untitled-violence-p79853.

Figure 6: David Wojnarowicz, *Untitled (Spirituality)* from the *Ant Series,* 1988. Photograph, gelatin silver print on paper, 200 x 250 mm. Tate Modern.

When looking at his oeuvre, Wojnarowicz's works all share similar collage-like characteristics. He attempts to peel back the layers of a work, demonstrating the complexity of the subject matter.[11] In a way, his use of collage and layers force the viewer to dissect the work of art at hand and to derive its meaning from the multiple images comprising the composition. Additionally, "Collage made it possible for him to suggest a multiplicity of other voices, faces, stories, and conditions in combination with the singularity of his own."[12] Collage allowed Wojnarowicz to compact a variety of themes and unheard voices, including his own, into a single work of art. This is seen in *A Fire in My Belly* through the way Wojnarowicz edits the film.

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[11] Carr, 358.

[12] Mysoon Rizk, "Reinventing the Pre-Invented World," in *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz,* Ed. Amy Schloder (New York City: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 45-67.

Instead of flowing from one scene into the next, he splices them so that scenes are split between each other, bombarding the viewer with an over-stimulation of a variety of images. Furthermore, his use of collage is seen in his two-dimensional stagnant art, such as in the *Four Elements* series.

The *Four Elements* series consists of four mixed media artworks, with each one representing one of the four natural elements: earth, fire, air, and water. Each work combines seemingly unrelated images from a variety of media to form a single piece, as seen in *Earth* (fig. 7). Furthermore, the *Four Elements* was constructed around the same time as *A Fire in My Belly,* (the late 1980s) in which Wojnarowicz's work began to heavily focus on the crises surrounding his environment. It was during this time that his close friend Peter Hujar passed away from AIDS related causes, and Wojnarowicz and his partner were diagnosed with HIV.[13] The close effects that the AIDS epidemic had on Wojnarowicz and his friends in turn affected his artwork in his later career. As Dan Cameron writes in "Passion in the Wilderness," "It seems self-evident that the remarkable surge of creativity in his work in this period emanated from the growing realization that he was running out of time."[14] Wojnarowicz was racing against the clock, an internal countdown in his body that would inevitably lead to his death. The deaths of his close friends and colleagues made Wojnarowicz rethink his relationship with spirituality and mortality. Therefore, his artworks shifted away from "the familiar images and sensations from childhood" and instead focused "on the very real crises facing him and his generation."[15] Through the use of collage, the *Four Elements* demonstrates Wojnarowicz's new worldview. *Earth* is a prime example. The work is divided into four quadrants, each containing an image relating to the element. A locomotive, a bulldozer surrounding by what appears to be coal, ants, a mask buried

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[13] Dan Cameron, "Passion in the Wilderness," in *Fever: The Art of David Wojnarowicz,* ed. Amy Schloder (New York City: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999),1-43.

[14] Cameron, 22.

[15] Cameron, 22.

underneath dirt, are all separated by a border. These images symbolize humanity's relationship with the earth, "an unyielding force against which man is constantly pitting himself."[16] Therefore, it represents humanity's perseverance to exist in an environment that appears to be unchanging. There is a sense of organization in *Earth* through its four quadrants, yet Wojnarowicz piles images on top of each other, which gives the work a layering feel to it. Therefore, the viewer is tasked to dissect these images to reveal the meaning behind the artwork.

Figure 7: David Wojnarowicz, *Earth,* from the *Four Elements,* 1987. Acrylic collage on Masonite, 72 x 96 inches.

Unlike the *Four Elements* series, Wojnarowicz felt that *A Fire in My Belly* was unfinished, which is the reason why he titled it "a work in progress."[17] As Cynthia Carr writes in

[16] Cameron, 22.
[17] Carr, 358.

her biography, "He was trying to pack the universe into it."[18] Therefore, *A Fire in My Belly* was an ambitious project that Wojnarowicz undertook, as he attempted to fit multiple themes and stories into one project. The use of collage assuaged any difficulties in presenting the themes by enabling him to edit and cut pieces of the film in the post-production process. Wojnarowicz, however, still deemed *A Fire in My Belly* an unfinished work, prompting him to never show it during his lifetime, but what the film demonstrates is Wojnarowicz's ability and desire to squeeze various themes into one artwork. Collage, therefore, gave him the potential to transform multiple stories – those of Mexican street life, Wojnarowicz's personal relationship with Christianity, and violence permeated throughout society -- into a single, cohesive story.

Chapter Three: The AIDS Epidemic and AIDS Activism

A Fire in My Belly was created during the height of the AIDS crisis and the conservative Reagan administration. The first cases of AIDS, short for acquired immune deficiency syndrome, appeared in the early 1980s. Initially HIV, or human immunodeficiency virus, infected homosexual men, resulting in there being little attention toward it due to homophobia ingrained in the general public and the rise of conservative ideologies in US politics.[19] There was little information and little funding into developing a potential cure for HIV/AIDS in the early stages of the epidemic, partly due to the silence on the matter from the Reagan administration, as well as societal stigmatization of homosexuality. Thus, many people, regardless of sexual orientation, fell victim to the virus. Organizations such as the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, or ACT UP,

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[18] Carr, 359.

[19] T.V. Reed, "Acting Up Against AIDS: The (Very) Graphic Arts in a Moment of Crisis," in *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Present* (University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 198-199. https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvb1hrcf.10.

were founded to combat the silence on the AIDS crisis by raising awareness through means of rallying and protesting.[20] The 1980s was a decade of great change – politically, culturally, economically, and technologically. Thus, the members of ACT UP had to transform the way of protesting to keep up with the changing climate.

One way in which ACT UP was successful in gaining the public's attention was through its members. As T.V. Reed writes, "ACT UP's membership included visual artists, advertising copywriters, and media professionals."[21] Being an openly gay artist in the 1980s, and later getting diagnosed with HIV, Wojnarowicz became an AIDS activist, participating in ACT UP rallies and protests. Visual artists like Wojnarowicz utilized art as a medium to express their concerns of the lack of attention on the virus. In turn, visual art augmented their voices to make the public aware of the ever-increasing threat that AIDS had on not just homosexual men, but the general public overall. It was not just homosexual men susceptible to the virus but also intravenous drug users and people who received blood transfusions. Most importantly, the use of art to discuss the AIDS epidemic resulted in the empowerment of those diagnosed with the virus. As Richard Goldstein writes in "The Implicated and the Immune," Art about AIDS "seeks to empower… both personally and collectively, through images that can serve as the basis for political action."[22] A sense of community and empowerment is seen through the creation of art shows, such as the

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[20] Reed, 197.

[21] Reed, 201.

[22] Richard Goldstein, "The Implicated and the Immune: Cultural Responses to AIDS," *The Milbank Quarterly* 68, (1990): 308. https://doi.org/10.2307/3350055.

Artists Space show "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing" that was on display from November 1989 to January 1990, which focused on the AIDS epidemic and featured Wojnarowicz.[23]

Wojnarowicz's participation in the Artists Space exhibition "Witnesses" demonstrated the polemic increase in his artwork during the late 1980s. His works became increasingly more political after he discovered that his close friend and mentor Peter Hujar was diagnosed with HIV.[24] *A Fire in My Belly* was filmed at the same time when Hujar's HIV+ diagnosis progressed into AIDS. Wojnarowicz is unapologetic in the way he constructs *A Fire in My Belly.* It is a cathartic, rage-filled film that expresses his resentment toward those who are responsible for the death of his dear friend Hujar and eventually his own. As Margaret Morrison writes, "Wojnarowicz does not explicitly voice his rage against the cruel indifference and lack of action among governmental agencies empowered with money and resources that they could have been using to save the lives of thousands of gay men and some women. Instead, he voices the effects of the inaction on himself, including his frustration, anger, depression, and exhaustion."[25] This is seen in *A Fire in My Belly* through the action of sewing the mouth shut and in the symbolism behind the ants crawling on the crucifix. That is, he does not explicitly address his frustration and anger toward the institutions responsible for those suffering under their power. Instead, he uses provocative symbols to represent his anger.

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[23] "Witnesses: Against Our Vanishing," Artists Space, accessed March 24, 2024. https://artistsspace.org/exhibitions/witnesses-against-our-vanishing-3.

[24] Candance L. Morrison, "Censorship for None: An Analysis for American Culture Progression from the Culture Wars to the Censorship of 'Hide/Seek: Differences and Desire in American Portraiture," Order No. 1561615, State University of New York at Buffalo, (2014): 29, https://go.openathens.net/redirector/bc.edu?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/censorship-none-analysis-american-cultural/docview/1562521670/se-2.

[25] Margaret Morrison, "'Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid': The 'Dignity of Queer Shame,' *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 48, no. 1 (2015): 28, https://www.jstor.org/stable/44030732.

Wojnarowicz's transparency of both his sexuality and HIV+ diagnosis was seen in his later artwork. As Morrison writes, "After he 'came out to himself,' he seems rarely to have hidden his queerness in his work."[26] This is clearly seen in the "Witnesses" exhibition catalogue in which Wojnarowicz wrote a piece called "Postcards from America: X-Rays from Hell." His essay touches upon his mortality and his grappling with an HIV+ diagnosis, a death sentence in his eyes. Most importantly is Wojnarowicz's commentary on the blatant homophobia and hatred that is ingrained in the American society. Where *A Fire in My Belly* never explicitly expresses disdain over the poor handling of the AIDS epidemic, Wojnarowicz does not sugar-coat his rage or attempt to represent it through symbolic images in "Post-Cards From America." Instead, he blatantly calls out religious and political leaders, criticizing their leadership for letting many people die from AIDS related causes, which could have been avoided if action was taken earlier. He writes in "Post Cards from America, "My rage is really about the fact when I was told that I'd contracted this virus it didn't take me long to realize that I'd contracted a diseased society as well."[27] Through his contraction of HIV and the inevitable development into AIDS, Wojnarowicz also contracted a target on his back. The fear over AIDS perpetuated throughout the majority of the public resulted in the stigmatization and ostracization of an already outcast community of people. For some of the majority, the infection of AIDS in primarily gay communities further justified their belief that homosexuality was inherently unnatural and perverted.

Furthermore, Wojnarowicz documents a conversation he had with a man in his apartment complex after the man found out he was diagnosed with AIDS. In "Post-Cards From America"

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[26] Morrison, 28.

[27] David Wojnarowicz, "Post Cards From America: X-Rays From Hell," *Witness Against Our Vanishing,* Artists Space, 1989, exhibition catalog. https://texts.artistsspace.org/ljdsawyb.

he writes, "he believed that although the government probably introduced the virus into the homosexual community, that homosexuals were dying en masse as a reaction to centuries of society's hatred and repression of homosexuality."[28] From this man's perspective, those who were homosexual and who had contracted the virus were the result of internalizing the hatred society has had toward homosexuality. For Wojnarowicz, the belief that this disease was a form of "protest against society's hatred" toward homosexual people, completely dismissed the deaths of people who contracted HIV through intravenous drug use and blood transfusions.[29] The existing hatred toward the gay community in American society, coupled with the fact that HIV infected primarily gay men, justified people's homophobia and resulted in radical or religious reasoning to validate the deaths of homosexual men. These beliefs were spread through media like television and even platforms such as stand-up comedy, which were permeated throughout society.

Where the fine arts provided an outlet for activists and artists to highlight the victims of the AIDS crisis and to destigmatize the stereotypes of the virus perpetuated by the general public, popular culture served as the medium for the majority to augment their fear over the virus. This is seen in stand-up comedy during the 1980s at the height of the epidemic. Comedians incorporated the AIDS epidemic, and consequently gay men, into the list of their jokes and jabs. Though coming from a "comedic" lens, and therefore making light of a dire situation, the jokes stocked in comedians' arsenals further perpetuated harmful stereotypes of gay men and misconceptions of HIV/AIDS itself. An example of ridiculing gay men while also spreading misinformation about AIDS is a joke made by famous comedian Eddie Murphy. Goldstein writes,

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[28] Wojnarowicz, "Post-Cards From America."

[29] Wojnarowicz, "Post-Cards From America."

"In one routine, Murphy refuses to date women who kiss their gay male friends, lest that contact give him AIDS."[30] The jab implies a swooping generalization that the majority, if not all, of gay men contracted AIDS, and that HIV is transmitted through saliva not unprotected, penetrative sex. What these jokes represent, moreover, is the idea of popular culture being used to cater to the underlying fears the masses had over AIDS.

The AIDS epidemic emerged in the United States during a series of mass changes. The country was shifting politically – transitioning from the liberal, civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s to a more conservative decade of the 1980s. Not only was there a political shift, but a moral shift as well. There was a transition from the sexual revolution of the 1970s to a moral panic over sex and sexuality in the 1980s. The AIDS epidemic caused a further panic when it emerged in gay communities who were already historically viewed as promiscuous and immoral. However, it was not just the social context of the time that shaped the perception of HIV/AIDS, but it was also the virus's long latency period that caused a lasting anxiety among those outside of the groups most at risked. Those who experimented with sex and drugs during the sexual revolution of the 1970s feared they too would contract HIV since the virus can remain latent in a person's body for nearly a decade without causing any symptoms.[31] This anxiety of contracting HIV was heightened even further due to the stigmatization associated with the virus. Further coupled with new technology of the time, the AIDS epidemic was cast into the forefront of the general public's mind – spreading like wildfire throughout media platforms. As Goldstein writes, "Popular culture gave voice to the fear and rage of the majority, while the arts helped dispel

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[30] Goldstein, 303.

[31] Goldstein, 316.

stigma by deconstructing it."[32] Therefore, the AIDS crisis serves as a battlefield for the activists and their opponents, with each side utilizing a platform to raise their voices. With various platforms used to discuss the AIDS epidemic – either to destigmatize the virus or to express people's fears and anxieties – American society could not escape the battlefield. Like the virus infecting the human body, the discourse over AIDS permeated throughout the general public.

Chapter Four: Virality and the Legacy of *A Fire in My Belly*

Even though *A Fire in My Belly* did not explicitly comment on the AIDS epidemic, it has become associated with AIDS activism in the arts through Wojnarowicz's outspoken advocacy of AIDS awareness. Furthermore, the AIDS epidemic was a defiant moment in the 1980s and early 1990s. It shaped the future of art activism and protest in the United States due to the new media technologies of the time. The 21st century seems to have moved on from the grip that AIDS had on the general public nearly 40 years ago. Living in a post AIDS-epidemic society, the fear the virus instilled in American society is no longer as prevalent. However, HIV/AIDS has not fully disappeared. HIV still infects people today, but thanks to antiretroviral therapy, it can be treated without it progressing into AIDS and controlled by preventing the infection to spread to others. Thus, less attention to HIV/AIDS in our current time has shaped AIDS activism in the arts. As Marika Cifor writes in her essay, "Going Viral: Mobilizing AIDS Archives in Digital Cultures," "After the development of more effective antiretroviral drugs in our endemic time, the little attention AIDS receives is only retrospective despite its ongoing devastation of marginalized communities."[33] HIV/AIDS becomes seen as an infection of the past, a virus

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[32] Goldstein, 316.

[33] Marika Cifor, "Going Viral: Mobilizing AIDS Archives in Digital Cultures," *Viral Cultures: Activist Archiving in the Age of AIDS,* University of Minnesota Press, (2022): 195, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.cdbmfhq5f.8.

fossilized in archived footage from the 1980s. Despite all this, AIDS activism still persists today – its legacy changed with the ever-evolving technology of the current time as a way to keep the activism alive. This is seen with contemporary artists incorporating found footage of past AIDS activism in their works, as seen with *A Fire in My Belly*.

It can be argued that *A Fire in My Belly* was a precursor to the role digital media has played in promoting AIDS activism on online platforms. Where Wojnarowicz used the state-of-the-art technology of the 1980s, art activists of the 21st century utilize our current day, digital technology to promote AIDS awareness. These days, part of our culture is shaped by our interactions on the internet and social media, such as reading about recent fashion trends and even learning about current events. Therefore, for artists to take advantage of these platforms is to influence a person's media consumption while simultaneously adding to the ever-changing, online cultural discourses. Current artists not only make use of digital media, but they also incorporate archival records and footage in their works. Thus, they maintain a conversation of the past through their borrowing of images from the artists that came before them.

Moreover, AIDS activists insert their own spin on past discourse and awareness by making it more inclusive to the communities that were ignored during the epidemic of the 1980s. As stated by Cifor, "They contend with the AIDS past to reimagine AIDS narratives in ways that engender more vibrant, livable presents and futures for queer, trans, and BIPOC subjects."[34] Activist-artist Jess Mac demonstrates an adoption of archived records through their rendition of the infamous image of Wojnarowicz's mouth stitched shut and transforms it into a GIF, a moving image easily accessible via social media.[35] Though at first glance Mac's GIF may appear to not address the intersectional component of HIV/AIDS -- that queer and trans people of color

[34] Cifor, 196.

[35] Cifor, 201.

are the most at risk groups of contracting HIV. Mac uses an image of Wojnarowicz, a white, cisgender, gay man, which reiterates the idea that AIDS is a disease of the past. However, they transform a photograph, a medium that is considered a fine art, into a GIF that is of commercial use and available to use at the tap of a button. Therefore, Mac opposes the past white, homosexual male narrative associated with the AIDS epidemic by using a photograph of Wojnarowicz, adapting it to the current discourse over AIDS and transforming it into a digital medium associated with contemporary culture.[36]

Although Wojnarowicz was not working with the digital technology seen today, *A Fire in My Belly* is a precursor to digital art that is able to be reproduced on a different scale than non-digital art. They have the ability to be reproduced in viral numbers, with unlimited copies spread throughout the internet. Furthermore, older works such as *A Fire in My Belly* demonstrate the significance of the speed at which messages can spread through digital means. Like their modern-day counterparts, "AIDS records appear frequently on social media, especially on image-driven platforms like Tumblr and Instagram. They are posted and shared… in ways that shape and are shaped by platforms' sociotechnical affordances as well as social, political, and cultural values."[37] Although *A Fire in My Belly* is analog film, current technologies have been able to digitalize it, allowing it to exist as multiple copies and in multiple online platforms. Thus, it is easily accessible to the general public, giving it the potential to be shared countless times and providing an almost eternal, digital legacy for the film.

With *A Fire in My Belly's* reproducible qualities, the film has lived on since its creation in 1987. Modern-day technology has somewhat immortalized it in the sense that multiple

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[36] Cifor, 205.

[37] Cifor, 194.

versions of it exist across online platforms. Its legacy is seen even in current times, when in 2010, a four-minute excerpt of the film was displayed at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington D.C. in the "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture" exhibition. The exhibition explored themes surrounding "the fluidity of sexuality and gender" and "how major themes of modern art – especially abstraction – were influenced by social marginalization."[38] Furthermore, it focused on the changing attitudes toward sex and desire, specifically through the lens of art.[39] The excerpt that was included in the "Hide/Seek" exhibition was taken from Rosa von Praunheim's 1990 AIDS documentary *Silence = Death.* Wojnarowicz gave von Praunheim permission to use the seven-minute version of *A Fire in My Belly* for the documentary, which he edited to a four-minute excerpt that included the imagery of the ants crawling on the crucifix.

Unlike the original versions of *A Fire in My Belly,* the excerpt shown at the "Hide/Seek" exhibit included audio of Wojnarowicz speaking at an ACT UP rally, thus explicitly linking the video to AIDS activism.[40] Von Praunheim's 1990 version also included audio; however, this excerpt incorporated artist Diamanda Galas's song "This is the Law of the Plague.[41] The first month of the exhibition received positive reviews; however, on November 29, 2010, a month after its opening, the "Hide/Seek" exhibition became a target for religious and conservative groups. Groups such as the Catholic League demanded the excerpt of the film to be removed from the exhibit. In their defense for its removal, they "complained that an 11-second scene

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[38] "Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture," National Portrait Gallery, October 30, 2010 – February 13, 2011. https://npg.si.edu/exhibition/hideseek-difference-and-desire-american-portraiture.

[39] National Portrait Gallery.

[40] Candice L. Morrison, 29.

[41] "A Fire In My Belly (Film In Progress) and A Fire In My Belly (Excerpt)," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accessed on January 30, 2024. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/855888.

depicting ants crawling on a crucifix amounted to anti-Christian hate speech."[42] Due to the large public outcry from both the Catholic League and conservative representatives, the National Portrait Gallery was forced to remove the four-minute excerpt from the exhibition. Many people saw the removal of *A Fire in My Belly* as a form of censorship and spoke out against this. Even though it was permanently removed from the National Portrait Gallery's "Hide/Seek" exhibition, the meaning behind the action proves that *A Fire in My Belly,* 25years after its creation, remained a controversial work of art.

Conclusion

David Wojnarowicz never saw *A Fire in My Belly* displayed in the National Portrait Gallery. He died eighteen years prior on July 22nd, 1992 from AIDS related causes – two months shy of his 38th birthday. He continued to create art up until his death, using it as a medium to voice his truth over the things that mattered to him. It can be argued that *A Fire in My Belly* is the culmination of Wojnarowicz's rage and frustration that he experienced throughout his life. Experiencing a childhood of neglect and abuse, living on the streets of New York City, and witnessing close friends die from a disease that had no cure led Wojnarowicz to develop a lot of pent-up anger to express in his film. Wojnarowicz never showed *A Fire in My Belly* while he was alive, partly because he deemed it unfinished. However, due to current technologies, the digitalization of *A Fire in My Belly* has been made it possible to be shared across social media platforms online, resulting in easy access to the film and maintaining a legacy long after its creation.

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[42] The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Wojnarowicz's use of analog film allowed him to experiment with the medium, and therefore, the film itself. Using zoom-in shots of scenes from Mexican and Puerto Rican street life, as well as shots from his studio in New York, Wojnarowicz compiled multiple stories into a single piece of art. Though he deemed the film unfinished, the amalgamation of footage he recorded and included in *A Fire in My Belly* attempted to tell a story of perpetual violence, the silence of minority groups, and his personal relationship with religion and spirituality. Furthermore, his use of collage-like editing demonstrates Wojnarowicz's interest in compacting multiple stories into one, a translation from his stagnant, two-dimensional work. Though experts and biographers on Wojnarowicz view film as his weakest medium, his experimentation with it allowed him to flesh out future projects.

Moreover, these future projects became ingrained in his activism with AIDS activist groups such as ACT UP in which Wojnarowicz became a staunch advocate and voice for the victims of HIV/AIDS. It is interesting to note that *A Fire in My Belly* never explicitly comments on the AIDS epidemic, yet it is this film that has been used countless times over to spread awareness on the disease. Due to his use of analog film, modern day technology has transformed *A Fire in My Belly* digitally, allowing it to survive on digital channels long after the physical negatives of the film deteriorate. Its digital status allows it to be shared and viewed numerous amounts of time, reinforcing the idea that the film can go viral at any moment with a click of a button. Even though Wojnarowicz never showed *A Fire in My Belly* during his lifetime, the film remains to be a provocative, controversial, and relevant piece of art in today's time, influencing and shaping the way American society and culture views both activism and censorship in the arts.

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