

David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame Works: 1979-1989

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Above: **Junk Diptych**, 1982, spray paint on masonite, 48" x 96"

Front cover photo by David Wojnarowicz, 1989

Frontispiece photo by Madoka, 1984

Title page: **Science Lesson** (detail), 1981-82, spray paint and stencil on room mural, 96" x 164"

Page 128: **Burning Child**, 1985, mixed media on doll. Collection of Robert Mnuchin, New York.

Photo in woods: David Wojnarowicz

Back cover: costume from performance **ITSOFOMO**, 1989. Photo: Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

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Science Totem, 1983, acrylic on wood sculpture, 71" x 9" x 4½"

THE COMPRESSION OF TIME: AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID WOJNAROWICZ

Barry Blinderman

BB: Every artist gets satisfaction from pulling that long rope inside their brain out into the real world so that it can affect other people. In your story "Living Close to the Knives" you say, "Every painting or photograph or film I make I make with the sense that it may be the last thing I do...I cut straight to the heart of the senses and map it out as clearly as tools and growth will allow..." To listen to you talk is to hear someone who is speaking very lucidly, someone who is figuring out where he stands.

DW: One of the things I realized after getting diagnosed, is that my whole life I've felt like I was looking into society from a outer edge, because I embodied so many things that were supposedly reprehensible—being homosexual or having been a prostitute when I was a kid, or having a lack of education. All my life I looked at the world with a longing to be accepted, but at the same time because of what my early childhood was and because of how I view the world, the only way I could be accepted would be to deny all those things. At the moment of diagnosis I fully gave up that desire to fit in, and started realizing that those places where I didn't fit and the ways I was diverse were the most interesting parts of myself. I could use that diversity as a tool to gain a sense of who I was. It wasn't the part that "fit" that gave me an indication of what I was; it was where I didn't fit that caused the pressure in



Cowhead painted on wall of abandoned pier, 1982–83, photograph by Peter Hujar. Left: Pteradactyl painting, photographer unknown.

me to make things or to try to communicate across the gulf of distance I felt from society.

I still have elements of wanting to be accepted or loved or touched; everybody carries that unless you somehow alienate that need. But dealing with my mortality and watching Peter Hujar and Keith Davis die in front of my eyes threw into question all my notions of what mortality was. Being with Peter at the moment of his death completely broke apart any foundations of spirituality I'd come up with in my life, and

I realized that any sense of spirituality I had was based on odd cannibalizations of different cultures—things from the Aztecs, Egyptians or Eastern thought, things from myths or they could be just things I made up in my own head as a kid.

In getting diagnosed I have tried as hard as I can to completely reject the notions that I carried in my life about spirituality or mortality, because I realized those notions were only designed to comfort one in the face of those events. If I'm heading towards a rendezvous with death, then I want to experience it in as real a state as it can get. I don't want to bring all this baggage of reincarnation or any of this other shit; I want to look it square in the eye. I've always had a tendency to confront the things I'm scared of, or at least try to confront them—in the process of my work or in my daily

life or whatever, and sometimes I'm successful and sometimes I'm not. I seem to reject other people's gestures to make me feel comfortable with death. In a way, I'm withdrawing from everything around me because I think that's the only way to go through a process like death. When people die of lingering illnesses, if they have time to reflect, they withdraw from everything around them. One thing I noticed about Peter as he came closer and closer to death is that he grew more and more detached, he drew away from the issues that occupy all of us, he detached from friends, he detached from the issues of his work and everything else. I think I'm doing that earlier than I need to; it's as if I want to define something for myself that means something to me, but it doesn't have to mean anything to anyone else.

BB: This seems to be a paradox; it's at this very time that you have the most to communicate to people.

DW: But still, I'm trying to continue that communication.

BB: Now really is the time to connect, because you have thought through some things that a lot of others will have to face. When I read "Living Close to the Knives," I couldn't just think about mortality in the same way anymore. I don't know exactly how it changed me, but that essay definitely made an impact. So although maybe you're detaching, it seems that those who will come into your company are going to get a lot of the benefit from the kinds of things that you have been thinking. People in an advanced state of consciousness would be thinking about these issues even when they were healthy and when they had no fear of death whatsoever; a person shouldn't be thinking about it only when they've been diagnosed as having an illness that might lead to their demise.

DW: That's it, you hit it right on the head. What the world looked like to me in the event of Peter's death and then after my own diagnosis—my sense of the world shifted. There are the things which happen internally and the things that happen externally. I realized after Peter got diagnosed that I projected this entire structure of what that diagnosis must mean to him. It was a totally invented thing that I projected onto him. When it happened to me, I sat in my apartment minutes after getting diagnosed, I'd come home—I'm looking out of the window and what's happened? What's changed? Absolutely nothing's changed; the world is still going on, the junkies are standing on the corner, there's a prostitute getting into the car, the vans from different

companies are going through the streets, there are people in their automobiles, the clouds are moving by. That's what is amazing about suddenly developing a heightened sense of mortality—really, nothing changes; I have the same appetite I've always had, I have the same needs I've always had.

What I would love to dispel, if I could just wave my hand, is the whole mystique behind something like a diagnosis or a heightened sense of mortality, that suddenly that person is facing this enormous thing; it's simple, what they're facing is very simple. In the first few minutes after my diagnosis I would have loved for half the landscape to crumble in sympathy, but it didn't. Suddenly I didn't have the luxury of time. I don't know, but it made the world look a little more marvelous than it ever did before; it was like I found myself at a tremendous distance looking at the world that I live in.

BB: Why do you think people who look at death a lot are accused of being morose?

DW: I think people are only preoccupied by things if they're denied information—it's the same thing with issues of sexuality. Things tend to gain power by their denial; if my sexuality is denied, no wonder for a period of time I explored promiscuity; if I'm going to be invisible in the reflection of society then I'll seek my visibility. So when I concentrate on issues of sexuality in my work, a lot of people say that's better left to the bedroom. I say bullshit, because I'm completely surrounded by one form of sexuality; it's represented in every ad—whether it's cigarettes or beer or whatever, there's always one prescribed sexuality that makes me feel invisible. So of course, if my work is going to reflect my life, then I'm going to put sexuality into my work.

BB: Have you ever watched one of these television dramas on AIDS? Do you think they whitewash them?

DW: Most of them are broken down into the "innocent victim" category. . . .

BB: There's a girl who got a transfusion. . . .

DW: Yes, the transfusion case. It's rarely someone who got diked in the behind. I can accept some of these gestures on t.v.—not the "innocent victim" bullshit—but in viewing some shows as just the *starting* point of education for otherwise ignorant audiences. But there should be people who *do* carry the clubs and *do* hit people over the head and *do* confront people with

the *entire* range of reality, because confrontation shakes things up, and people who are exposed to confrontation have no choice. They can try to bury it and block it out, but really they can't succeed. An image or gesture, no matter whether the person who sees it likes it or not, tends to sit with the person and then the next time they see something palatable that touches on the same subject, such as a T.V. program, they can ease their way into it; it gives them permission to look at the forbidden thing.

So those programs serve a purpose, but it makes me impatient because the issues of sexuality, race, gender etc., just seem totally absurd when death is dragged from abstraction, and suddenly mortality looms with a stronger sense. That's why I feel that this culture should deal with mortality in a real way from Day One. As a kid, I remember bringing it up and asking questions about it, and being told, "Oh, you're being maudlin" or "Oh, you're being depressing."

I remember when I was in second grade, learning for the first time that everybody dies—it was a blockbuster. I can't remember who told me, but I was so shocked, I remember running down the block and to every kid that I saw I said, "We all die, one day we're all going to be dead!" And I remember parents running out into the front yard because their kid burst into tears and it was like, "Get the hell out of here!" I was seen as a very sick kid for having told other kids what I'd just learned. Growing up in a violent family, with my father having a penchant for guns, killing, and violent abuse, I think I always had a strong sense of mortality.

BB: When you were a kid, your life was actually threatened by your father?

DW: Constantly, and I didn't know enough to realize it then; it was only in hindsight that I realize how close he came to killing us. But I think I went through my whole life being sensitive to the presence of death; I would spend a lot of time in rough neighborhoods; I was a kid being a prostitute; I almost got killed two or three times—just barely escaped it. So I could never bury the idea of mortality, it was always there, and I think for people to get a sense of mortality is something akin to examining the structure of society. That seems to be the most frightening thing people can do—examine the structure of society. I think to deal with mortality on an honest level would shake the foundations of society, because I don't think people would spend their entire lives making hamburgers or mopping floors or printing money



I was about 10 years old this guy took me to a hotel on 34 St and 8th Avenue and sat in a chair with out his pants and asked me to blow him. he promised he wouldn't come in my mouth. I started sucking him and his face got red and he came in my mouth. I remember the wind in the curtains over the bed. I remember I wanted to kick his ass too.

Memory Drawing, circa 1981



I saw this in a park on 2nd avenue
one night. I wish my eyes were movie
cameras so I could record scenes like
this in movement.

Memory Drawing, circa 1981

for the Pentagon or whatever. If we looked at mortality honestly, it would reduce all our human actions in this society to a total joke. We're born into a pre-invented existence, we either adapt to it or we end up dead or barely surviving, because none of us really had any hand in the shaping of this existence.

BB: You often use the term 'pre-invented man,' by which you mean we're born into a formula. If you're born a boy, you're expected to do certain things; if you're born a boy in a rich family you're expected to do other things; if you're born a boy in a poor family you're expected to do other things. It seems the media offers you endless choices, but really it's all one choice, you're just filling in the blanks in a fake multiple-choice test whose multiple choices have been dictated by an outside force. Somebody has to make hamburgers or somebody has to raise sheep or whatever. . .

DW: I don't think that there's anything wrong with making hamburgers—unless you're a vegetarian. It's not so much that any of those jobs are de-meaning in themselves, but each job is a particle in the structure of this society. That's what supports this society and keeps it moving in the general direction that it is; all media does is offer variations on a theme. In being born into a pre-invented existence, we're born into a structure that starts with traffic lights and goes up to governmental decrees in Congress. This is what your existence has to fit within. Maybe a couple of centuries ago you could have had a choice—you could have gone off and been a hermit, or you could have found a spot of land and grown your own food and led what kind of existence that made most sense to you, but now you can't because the landscape is all bought up. I remember travelling out West and being a hundred miles between cities and stopping in the middle of nowhere—a totally blank landscape—and pulling off to the side of the road. I wanted to walk out across the plain because it was so much space, the sense of sky was deafening, and I got out of the car and there was this little fucking fence completely surrounding this piece of land in the middle of nowhere and by law I can not step over that fence. That's what I mean by the pre-invented existence. By virtue of having being born a couple of centuries late, suddenly I can't walk on this land.

BB: And now they're trying to put a fence around your consciousness. They're trying to take David Wojnarowicz and put a lead fence around your

brain saying "Do not enter. Dangerous substances in there." When you started gaining notice in the early to mid eighties, which I doubt you were ever expecting—it started with graphics for posters and things like that and pretty soon you found yourself doing collages and paintings and pretty soon you got a whole lot of media coverage in the New York Times and many magazines. When you got this audience in the art world, how did that visibility affect you, both good and bad?

DW: The biggest shock was that it opened up the structure of the art world to me. The moment I got validated by a well-known critic, suddenly the pounding on the door was deafening. I remember being extremely angry because I had some pure and naive notion of what making art was; I wanted to support myself with making art because it always made sense of living for me. I had three shows—nobody would touch the work with a stick and suddenly some critic came along and validated the work and hoards of people were coming left and right to buy things. That kind of acceptance is a double-edged sword. For the first time in my life I had more money than I could ever think of, which brought with it a load of difficulties. Whatever kind of tensions you carry—whatever kind of displacement one feels in their life—when suddenly the one thing that keeps you semi-conscious, such as having to work day in and day out, to suddenly have that taken care of and have nothing but time on your hands because financially you're suddenly free—you can do whatever you want. At that moment all the tensions rise to the top. Everything that you've managed to suppress by keeping yourself exhausted just trying to pay the rent, or getting food on the table—all those tensions surface, and that was very difficult for me.

Basically the art world was giving me a message that bucked against years and years of other messages from the family structure, from school, from society: that as a homosexual person, I should be invisible, that it would be better if I just disappeared, that I was unwanted. Suddenly there are people throwing money at me for something about myself that they're attracted to; something they want to buy or whatever. I think I mostly felt anger to realize that people don't think for themselves—it takes validation from a critic for them to come running with the checkbook and say "here's your ticket to time, to access to materials, to travel, or anything else" and it was very frustrating in that moment. Of course I loved being supported—it was a total

relief. Because when that happened I was literally broke, I was really very close to not being able to eat at all. I had no money at all and suddenly I had six thousand dollars in one day.

But after the initial wave of acceptance, culminating in the Whitney Biennial, came the tail end of the cycle when suddenly, for a period of time, nobody was interested in what I was doing. That was also educational. I had to decide what I most cared about in my life, what was most important to me. To me it was making things, and although I'll make work that operates as communication for others to see, I also make it for myself. So if I make a sexual image and put it on a wall, in a way, it's fighting against my need for anonymity—which I treasure to a certain extent. At the same time I'll make that image in order to put it on a wall so that I'm not alone.

That brings up another issue about contradictions. As far as politics go, I hate the idea of being politically correct. I think it's inhuman. We all carry contradictions, and by negating our contradictions we live lies. I don't really like to be part of political groups because it's exchanging one power structure for another, and I no more want to live under that system than I would a communist system. I don't think anybody outside of myself could create a design for a society that I would like to live in. Only I could create a design for myself. I think an ideal society would provide everyone with the use of methods of transmitting information.

BB: Kind of an extension of Warhol's idea that everybody can be famous for 15 minutes.

DW: But most of these issues aren't really about fame; they're about being given a voice to participate in a society. If for one week a year, all the forms of media were turned over to people to be able to express their ideas 24 hours a day, I think it would be great; but that tool would be too threatening to the structure at large.

The media is just another system of control; they give you comfort or they give you fear on the nightly news. They never really give you information unless it's "hot," unless it has a flame—images of outrage or violence or whatever. They'll rarely ever present real information except for some commodified sound bite that they'll repeat endlessly, which never really enlarges your understanding of anything, it just sort of drills in the information they want to give you. You have to realize who benefits from news stations—it's

the owners, the stations themselves. Look at all the advertising—millions of dollars of advertising they accept in between the pieces of news. What's that all about? Obviously somebody benefits financially, and that's going to determine the kind of information you get, because they're not going to alienate sponsors.

BB: Speaking of alienation, the first thing that got you a lot of widespread attention was the Pier show, which was way out on the westside, along the Hudson—a pretty seedy neighborhood.

DW: Yeah, it was the industrial shipping line.

BB: It was kind of a subterranean experience, like a cave where you and some others were making these pretty primal gestures.

DW: I was playing with that, organizing people to come in there and make gestures on the walls or an installation or whatever; it was the idea of treating abandoned structures as caves. And at the same time I had a history in those warehouses for years. There were some extraordinary warehouses where a lot of sexual activity occurred, where a lot of homosexual men would roam the hundreds of rooms of these abandoned shipping structures and engage in open sex and whatever. For years I would document that stuff in writing; I documented not just sexuality, but the slow disintegration of these architectural structures in times of storm, in winter, in spring, during rain; I'd write these long pieces about the sound quality, the visions of people that appear out of darkness and disappear into darkness; it was completely hallucinatory and very much like film, like a Burroughsian type of film.

I also used to spend time in abandoned warehouses along the river further downtown that were completely empty except for maybe in an open warehouse area the size of a football field; I'd see a dog in the distance; it would just disappear into a room and I'd never be able to find it. Or I'd sit on the back balcony of one of these warehouses and just watch the river for part of the day. What I loved about them was that they were about as far away from civilization as I could walk, and I really loved that sense of detachment. It was like sitting with the entire city at your back and looking across the river. I've always loved the qualities of light in late afternoon skies—around dusk, which is one of my favorite periods of the day. I always use those times to project and dream, and I could sit there and watch those qualities of light, and the entire skyline of New Jersey, and all the factories,

and everything on the river there. When they became silhouetted at a certain point of the day it could look like India, or what I would imagine India would look like; I could dream myself—project myself—all around the world in my imagination by looking at those qualities of light, and by looking at those structures. Those qualities of light, of sound, of pieces of tin rattling in the breeze way off in some other part of the building, and just these rhythms of the elements and the earth itself were really extraordinary.

I could genuinely get lost; I'd stayed up at night in some of those places. They were a little unsettling sometimes because you could hear certain noises that could sound very threatening coming closer and closer and nothing would appear and you'd wonder “what the hell . . . ?”—whether you're hallucinating or whether there's something present. Sometimes you would feel the presence of another human in the dark and nobody would reveal themselves.

Part of it was having come off the street in my late teens; I spent years and years going back to the street in my free time and I would hang around with the people that inhabited those areas—hookers, runaway kids and others. Even after I came off the streets, for a long time the streets were still the only place that I felt comfortable; those people were like a tribe I had left.

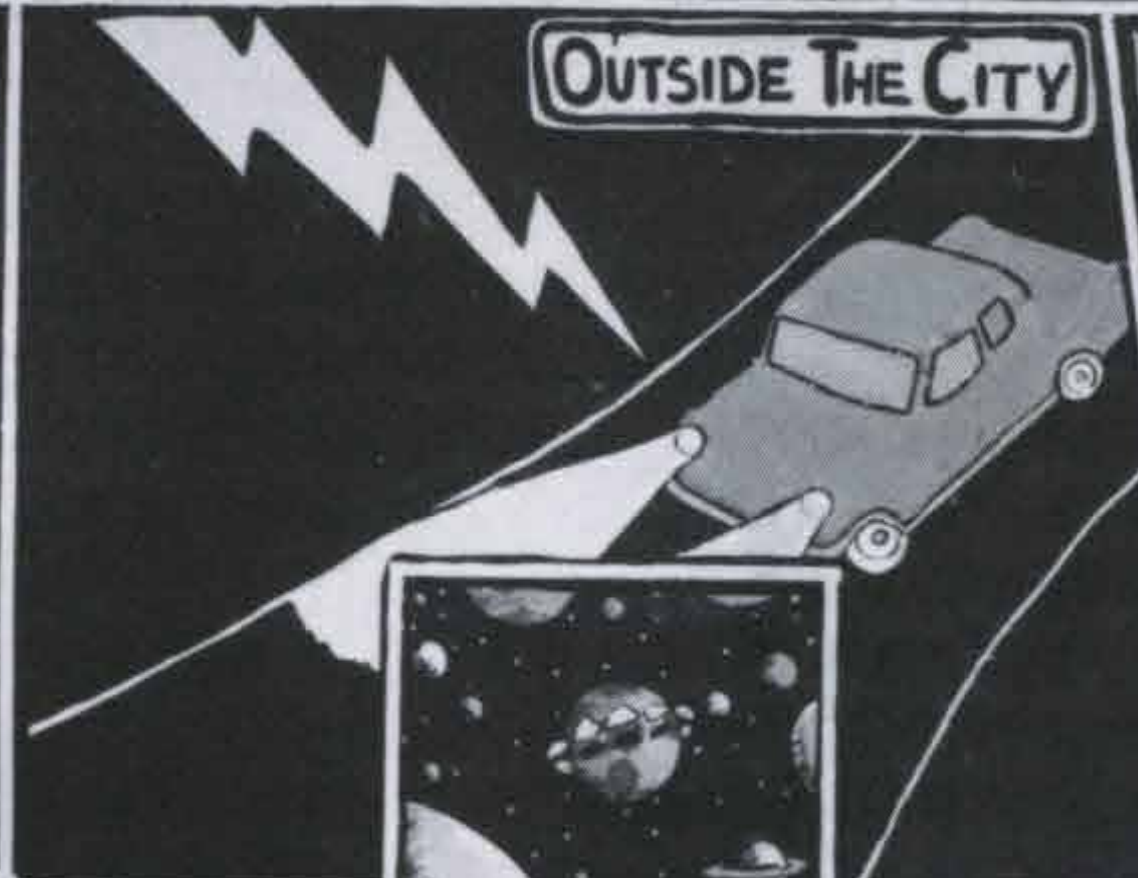
BB: You all had a common understanding of a certain quality of existence.

DW: It was a very enhanced level of existence because all your senses were highly tuned or otherwise you wouldn't survive, I mean you had to be able to see with eyes in the back of your head. So what happened was, I eventually stopped hanging out on the streets and started going out to the warehouses, which were good for solitude and being able to hear myself think.

BB: So it would be like a person of an earlier time going to some meadow and contemplating the Hudson River; you were in some warehouse.

DW: Like an industrial meadow. There's also something really compelling about sitting in one of those warehouses that's in the throes of mortality—those things are rusting to pieces, and if they don't take care of them, the architecture disintegrates within a couple of years. I remember I would buy grass seed and walk around inside the warehouse, down near Canal Street and throw this grass seed all over. All the disintegrated plaster

LATER ON...



OUTSIDE THE CITY



THAT OUGHT TO
HOLD IT TOGETHER
TIL I HAVE TIME
TO SEE A
DOCTOR...



BUT... WHAT
DOES THIS GOTTA
DO WIT DA PRICE
O' MILK + EGGS?

EVERDAY MY MIND
GROWS KEENER... MY
GOOD ARM STRONGER
... MY SILLY
GOVERNMENT MOPE
FUTILE...

that had fallen out of the ceiling and all the airborne particles of earth and stuff would actually let this grass grow in the confines of the building, so it would be like an actual meadow inside several rooms that were just so beautiful. I got the idea for that because one day I saw mushrooms growing in some of the rooms and I thought, well if mushrooms grow, then maybe grass seed will, too. Those are some of the gestures that I loved the most and got the least attention because they were the most anonymous— you couldn't sign a blade of grass that says Wojnarowicz.

BB: Recently, you've been using your own camera and training it on things you set up yourself, as opposed to using strictly pre-printed images, which seems to have announced a certain shift in your work.

DW: The tail end of the time I lived on the streets, when I was 15, 16, 17, I had a street buddy who had stolen a camera and given it to me and I would steal rolls of film from drug stores. I would take pictures of all these characters in the street—people that I interacted with, drag queens who hung out and hustled on the Hudson. I would take pictures of everything, it was like I was documenting all this stuff.

BB: Hundreds of pictures?

DW: Yeah, hundreds, but the weird thing was, I had this whole thing about bus station lockers where I would leave my belongings. Whatever belongings I'd accumulated up to a certain point, I would leave them in bus station lockers, but I'd forget to go and put a quarter in every day, so within 24 hours they would take the stuff out of the locker and hold it at a lost and found somewhere in the city. I never knew where this place was and so I lost all this stuff—I never got a chance to develop any of that film.

When I got off the streets, I still had the camera, so I shot some rolls and for the first time in my life I developed the pictures. This was when I was about seventeen or eighteen. For years ever since then, I've always taken pictures—wherever I go, I usually bring a camera. I would take rolls and rolls of film—mostly black and white—and get them developed as contact sheets. I had never had access to a darkroom, but after Peter's death, living in his place I had access to his darkroom—that was the first time I was able to go back over years and years of negatives.

BB: Did you learn how to use the darkroom from him?

DW: He pointed to some of the possibilities in photography, in printing;

he was a master printer. It was interesting because I developed an eye for printing and the possibilities in the print more than my physical experience in printing would let me catch up to. That creates a lot of tension in the photograph itself; it's such an abstract thing what makes a good print, what doesn't make a good print; there are so many millions of variations. I just try to follow intuitively what properties of the print attract me—the luminous edges, or whatever. I've always treated the camera as a journalistic device but at the same time, for years and years I've taken pictures of things because they were psychologically loaded—whether it's a clock, or a hand with some tadpoles in it—no matter what it was it was always extremely loaded. In the course of looking at all those negatives, I realized that the photographs were like words in a sentence and that what I try to do is to construct paragraphs out of the multiple images.

BB: What about the set-up? I'm particularly interested in the surrogate buffalo—whatever those were made out of, they looked like they were actually falling off a cliff, and the first time you look at it, you don't even challenge the impossibility of it, you think, "Oh yeah right, David was just standing there photographing these buffalo..." and then you realize you can't find three buffalo falling off a cliff—you can't even find a buffalo, period.

DW: That's true. After a while when people would ask about the image I would just automatically say "Yeah, I was there..." and then if they'd say "Well, how did it happen?" I'd say I had some firecrackers with me I set them off behind the herd, rushed to cliffside, and documented it. Actually, the buffalo thing is a small part of a large diorama in the Natural History Museum in Washington, and I was shocked when I turned the corner and came face to face with this diorama. It had a lot of connections to things I had learned when I was a child, because I grew up in mostly rural towns in Jersey that were just being developed for suburban tract housing.

I felt very alien in those communities because the communities were alien in themselves. Most people wouldn't go beyond the edge of their lawn and had no interest in interacting, so the only place I found any clear sense of freedom was in the woods, where I went to spend time, day in, day out. Any chance I had, I spent a lot of time around animals—I've always had a trust for the animal world that I never developed for the human world. So ever since I left New Jersey and came to New York, I always carried my



childhood with me as some sort of comfort because I knew that there was another possibility other than city life—there was something outside of this structure. You live inside Manhattan and you forget that you haven't seen a tree in months.

BB: There is a lot of animal imagery in your work—you probably have made very few paintings that don't have animal life forms in them, whether it's ants, or the buffalo going over the cliffs, or reptiles. In particular, frogs, snakes seem to fascinate you. It occurred to me about the time I saw *Invasion of the Alien Minds* that your work seemed very Kafkaesque. You would have figures that were half-monster, half another being. There were a lot of images that looked like giant insects, giant cockroaches and snake forms. The work that immediately preceded it and followed it seemed to have a lot of these combined beasts which you could read all kinds of implications into. What were some of the things that were going on at that time?

DW: First, I was thinking of human society's rejection of nature. That came from thinking about the word "nature," which we immediately distanced ourselves from the moment we invented the word for it, even though we're part of it. It completely surrounds us, we ingest it in order to survive, we breathe because of it. Most artists that I was aware of who would make images with any emotional content would use an image of a human as a source for that emotion. If they were going to convey anger, they would use a human figure; if they were going to convey tension they would use the human figure, and so on. What I was trying to do early on was take that power away from people and give it back to "nature" by using animals as metaphors.

In *Invasion of the Alien Minds*, I was trying to deal with my feelings about these two governments at war each other. Basically, I couldn't give a shit about either government; I really don't want to live under either system. I had the centipedes with hammer and sickle stenciled on their sides and these little human heads looking pretty ugly and leaping across landscapes into explosive annihilation. Then the Americans were these giant revolting heads with target eyes, clock eyes—things about mortality. In their foreheads were images of nuclear systems, which came from when I found a handbook in some little shop in Argentina that told you how to build a nuclear system. This is the kind of thing that the Rosenbergs were fried for a mere

forty years ago, and now I can pick up a manual in some foreign country that tells me how to build a nuclear reactor.

Beyond that, I'm really interested in breaking down the distance between humans and nature. I look in the animal world and find the counterparts to the technological/human world. I painted a monkey collecting coins in a bowl for some street vendor or street musician. You can look at this monkey sitting with its bowl of coins and think it's an unbelievably pathetic image—that the nature of this animal is reduced to collecting coins. But we won't look at ourselves collecting coins and think that that's a sad image, that somehow it's an unnatural activity. Animals allow us to view certain things that we wouldn't allow ourselves to see in regard to human activity.

In the painting *Earth*, I wanted to picture two things that move and physically push the earth, so I used a tractor and an ant. They do the same thing; I walk down the city street and there are tractors excavating the sidewalk in order to build something to contain life and if you look at ants they're doing exactly the same thing. In the Mexican photographs with the coins and the clock and the gun and the Christ figure and all that, I used the ants as a metaphor for society because the social structure of the ant world is parallel to ours. They have queens, they create wars, they keep pets, they keep slaves; there's this whole social structure that isn't that far different from our own. Also, in these photographs the ants are fire ants—very venomous—they can inflict damage or even kill other animals if they give them enough bites. So I just took simple symbols, things that preoccupy us: money, time, religion, violence. There's an image of the ant crawling on an eye. It was actually a little plaque from a Botanica in Miami that has a glass eyeball in the middle of it that you're supposed to hang on your wall to ward off evil.

I love mythology, whether it's personal mythology or it's something from a lost civilization. Those are the things that have comforted me in my life. Ever since I was a kid, anything we had no control over—natural events like tornados or floods—signalled other possibilities. That the world wasn't just the family structure or the governmental structure—that there were things in the world that could possibly change the face of what we've come to know and accept as given. These little myths and pieces of information signalled other possibilities.

BB: The mythological aspect of cartoons is becoming more and more evident to me now that I have a son who wants to watch cartoons all the time. A child probably grows up thinking that animals are the most important part of the world because everything they see and read is about animals. Animals are used as symbols for everything, whether it's Big Bird or Mighty Mouse; a kid's world is overrun with animals.

DW: Yeah, America's nearly spiritually dead, but at least we still deal with a few mythic images—especially in the form of animals. We give animals stature in our cartoons or in our toys; we deal with evil and good as mythic images in children's toys. Children, luckily, get to deal with all that stuff, but unfortunately at some point they're supposed to give that up. Any form of real spirituality is denied after a certain age. I see things like monster movies as really being mythic devices for explaining anxieties about what existence is, and the same thing goes for children's cartoons. Watching some of those cartoons with Gabriel, I was amazed at how sophisticated they were. Forget time, distance, reality, surreality—it was like a total soup of everything and it was wonderful because there's no formal code imposed on the world that he's watching. It's totally open to interpretation, it's totally open to possibility, it's totally absurd, and it's wonderful because of that. Popular culture still carries the most spiritual reverberation. It's no accident that people started using it in their art.

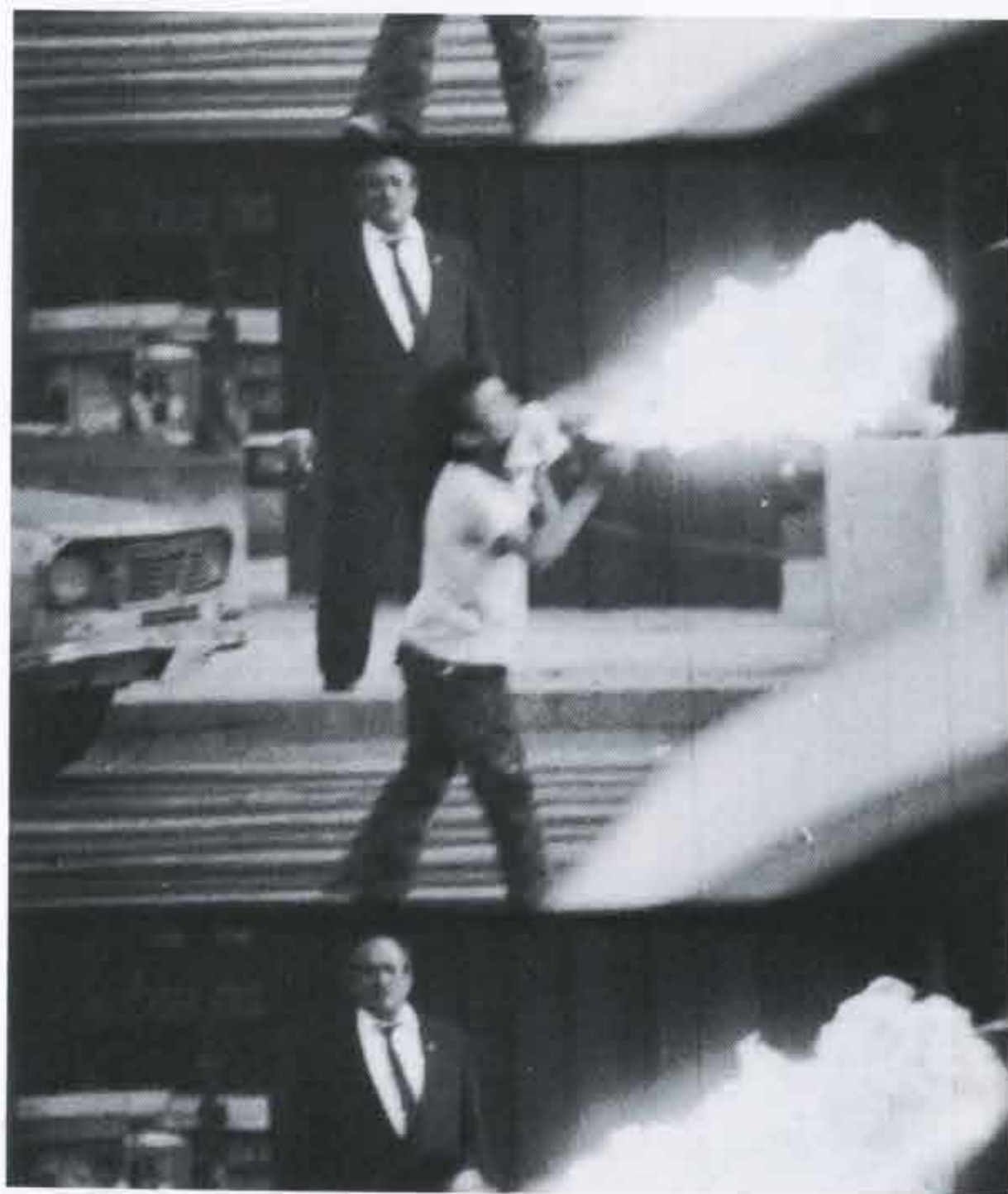
BB: Speaking of mind and myth, it seemed like your use of symbols intensified after you went to Mexico.

DW: Once I went south of the border I discovered there's a vacuum in America and Europe. South of the border that vacuum disappears—maybe it's spirituality, maybe a sense of connection people have to the ground they walk on. I remember travelling to the jungle up in the north of Argentina with Louis Frangella, and even in the small towns in Mexico, there's a connection that people have—and I don't think I'm just projecting this as a white American tourist—it's something that you can feel emotionally. Even in relative levels of poverty—not extreme poverty, but just subsistence living—there's a joy with which people live. It doesn't discount the pain that they go through, or discount the mortality rate or discount the difficulty that they have in staying alive but there's joy in the event of living that I really feel lacking in America. Also, the cycles of life and death are incredibly evident



Untitled, 1982, spray paint on garbage can lid, 18" diam. Below:
David at pier cartoonizing windows, 1983, photo by Dirk Rowntree





Monkey man in Mexico Circus and 12 year old fire breather,
super-8 film stills

south of the border. Going to the Yucatan you can imagine what the States might have been like in the last century or the teens or twenties; there's a sense of simplicity in living and it hasn't gotten quite so cluttered as the American landscape. When I was in the Yucatan, I would get up at dawn and borrow a car and go off down the backroads into these villages; it was one of the happiest times I've had travelling; everything was unfolding, revealing itself as it was waking up in these small tiny villages, way, way in the backroads. It was such a beautiful period of time; two weeks of just driving down the road and look over there: There are ten enormous buzzards taking apart a dead dog and then across the road there's some little naked kid crawling around behind a fence in what looks like some sort of African compound, thatched-roofed huts on stilts, going further down and some Indian cow tied by its neck to a post, sleeping, and me not knowing if it was alive or dead. I just saw the thing lying out near the road and got out to take a picture and suddenly it wakes up and starts making all these honking noises and people come out of their houses to see what's going on.

The landscape changed so suddenly from moment to moment. Where one part of the village looked like an African village, another section would be showing a totally different cultural response to architecture. It was really exciting to experience that. And all of it was very rudimentary – that's what attracts me, whether it's in architecture, lifestyle, or whatever. It's looking at foundations for things that seem a century ahead somewhere up north, in America.

BB: How did you come up with the idea for circular insets in the *Sex Series*?

DW: I was on the outskirts of Mexico City standing on a cliff above one of the most horrifying slums I've ever seen; if you see the extent that people can be pushed to by government, as in the poverty of Mexico City, you realize how far New York City or any other American city will be pushed in terms of what people will accept and allow in terms of homelessness or lack of access to jobs, etc. – so I was standing there on this cliff and looking down into the slums through the zoom-lens of a super-8 camera and I was looking right into the face of this one-legged man standing in a yard of a shack made of pieces of discarded lumber and cardboard and doors and flattened tin cans, and his baby was rocking back and forth on a rocking horse that had no head and I felt very strange; one, being right in this man's

face without him knowing I was even there, and two, watching him with an instrument that would have bought his family dinner for a year in terms of cost. This incident made me think of the act of surveillance; or the searching for evidence whether through the circular portal of a telescope as in looking into outer space, or the circular portal of a microscope as in examining matter for evidence of disease or foreign life.

In the early eighties I made large images with square insets of information put into the larger fields of information, as in the painting entitled: *Junk Diptych*. When I began working in the darkroom on the *Sex Series* I recalled the moment in Mexico City and it translated those previous squares into circular disks. Using suppressed images of sexuality in circular insets recalled images that we can only witness by embodying those activities of surveillance as through binoculars or telescopes. The insets had to do with suppressed information or self-conscious witnessing of information or activity.

BB: Some people see things analytically; other people have a synthetic ability by which they are uniquely suited to putting things together. It seems that every art form you work with has to do with this putting together of elements, for example, beginning with paper money or using maps, and then building images up....

DW: I'll use pre-printed material in order to illustrate something of the structure behind those pre-printed materials. These are things that we just blindly accept. Take the map—the concept of the map is contingent on people accepting that this what landmasses look like from some point in outer space. Most people will never have that experience of being in outer space yet they accept as a given that this is what the world looks like, they don't stop to think that the borders are really psychic things rather than actual physical things. The North American continent is really just one big piece of land, but suddenly there's this arbitrary place where Mexicans have to stop, but on the other hand, Americans can just saunter over.

You can think of the map as a metaphor for government—that this is what the world looks like, this who you are, this is your job, this is how things have to run, etc. People take it as a given, and not always of their own accord, only because they're too exhausted from working meaningless jobs or they're too afraid. You question structures and you're suddenly in a

minority and there's nothing as frightening as finding yourself a minority in a hostile environment.

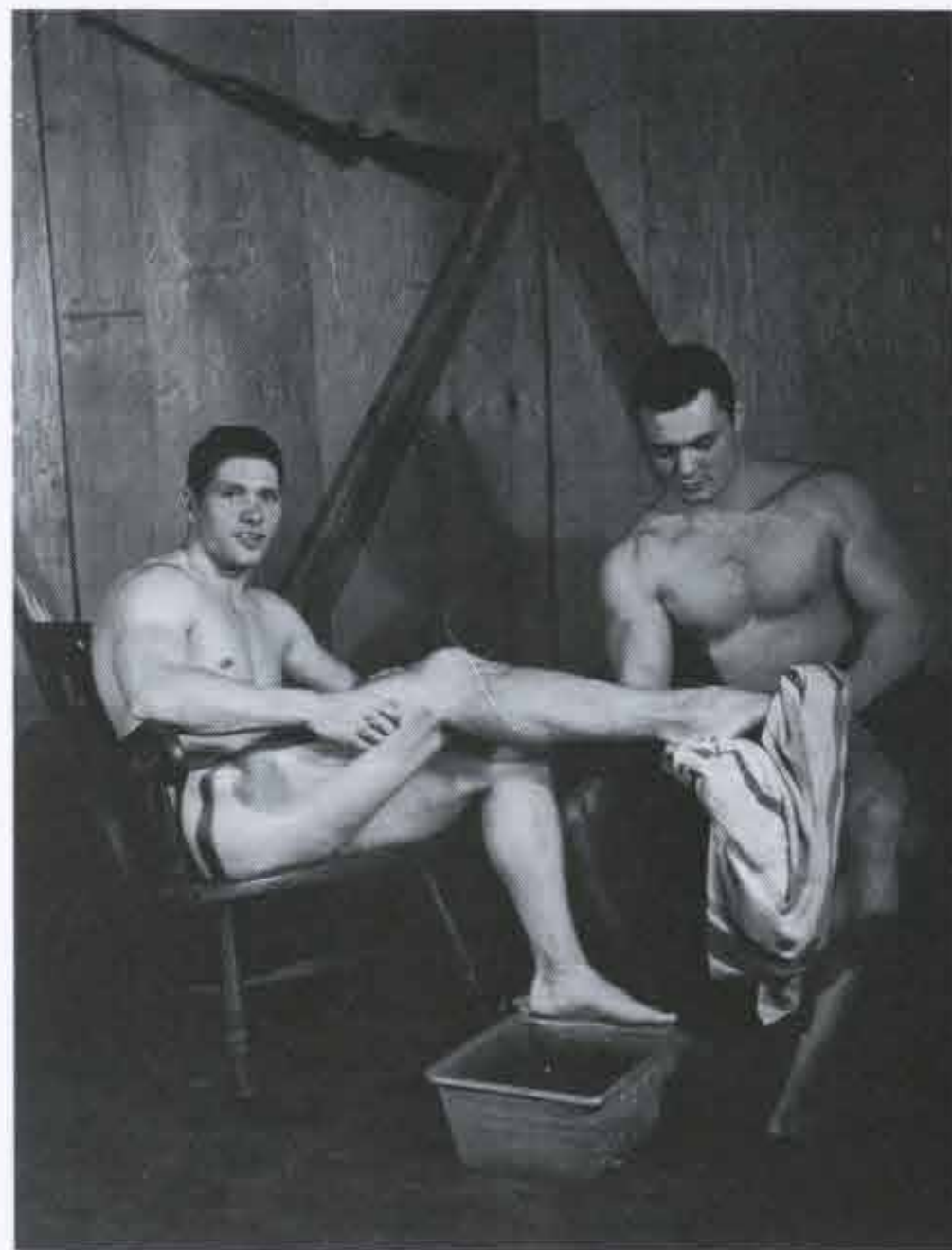
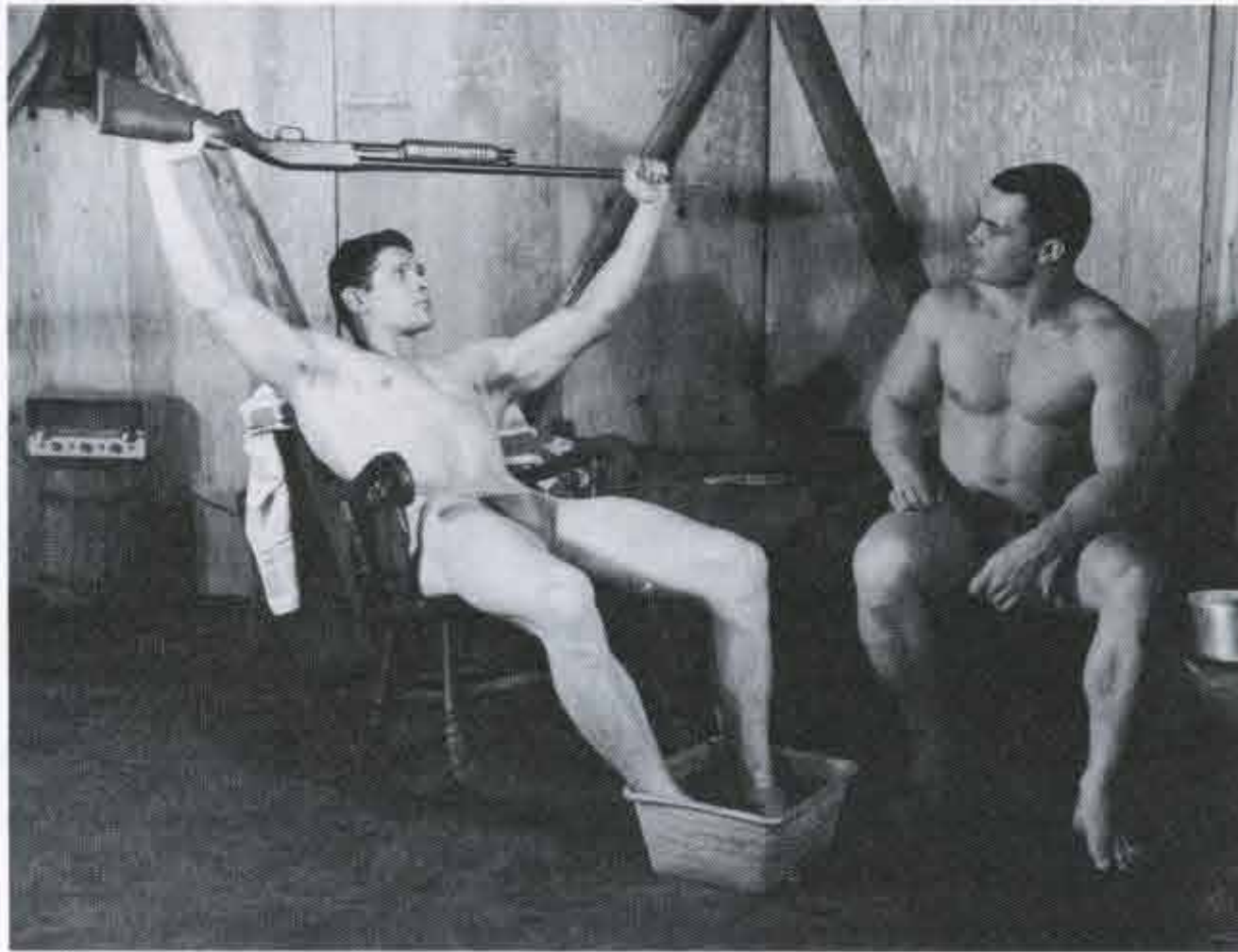
So I use a map as a metaphor. By ripping the map into pieces I've suddenly erased all these borders and I've completely joined opposing governments. It's a metaphor for a sense of groundlessness and anarchy: No more governments no more borders. The most physically anarchic state would be literally upside down. I remember as a kid lying on the bed and keeping my head over the side of the bed and imagining what it would be like if the world were upside down....

BB: What about the pre-printed food posters?

DW: They're symbols of consumption. I would think, okay, what are images that we consume on a daily basis or that other people consume on a daily basis—people who live in places where there are wars or where's there's murder on the streets by government forces, and I try to figure out a way of using that surface in a subversive way to look at the structure behind it. What supports the society in which this food poster exists? What are the mechanics of that society? This leads to the collage element of the work; it's my experience—I have thousands of these little films or slide transparencies inside my brain; one thing is superimposed on top of another, there's a green of a traffic light against a blue of a sky, there's a building—so now you have a building underneath a blue sky underneath a traffic light and then something might run across the road so you have that underneath the image of the building underneath the image of the blue sky underneath the image of the traffic light. My brain retains some of these things and lets others go. There's a constant associative quality to everything that can spark a memory from a year ago or something that I witnessed ten years ago.

BB: So there is a groundlessness—a compression of one thing into another.

DW: It's breaking the barriers of time, so that the thing that happened ten years ago is no less real than whatever just set off that particular memory. You look down there and you see a white car moving by, and now it's gone; the fraction of time that the action inhabited is so brief that all we can do is carry the traces of memory of it. That's what life is. Every minute, we pick up the traces of what just happened; perception and thought and memory are continuous, and yet somehow we make these delineations or these borders between what's acceptable and what's not. Time is not something



that's set to a strobic beat. For instance, if you're in a place where violence is occurring—possibly occurring to yourself—time takes on a totally different quality than it would be if you were in an introspective, quiet place. Time expands and contracts constantly, and yet we set it to a meter which is completely unreal.

My paintings are my own written versions of history, which I don't look at as being linear. I don't obey the time elements of history or space and distance or whatever; I fuse them all together. For me, it gives me strength to make things, it gives me strength to offer proof of my existence in this form. I think anybody who is impoverished in any way, either psychically or physically, tends to want to build rather than destroy. Given what my childhood was, given the erratic structure I grew up in, I'll always need to build sense into things. I remember they did a study with these kids in high schools, where they would let students paint whatever they wanted in hallways to decorate the school or to do something with the design of the school, and they found minorities from impoverished communities tended to build something that was very beautiful in color, with a sense of design and so on, that inspired some kind of visual comfort, whereas students from wealthier families tended to wreak havoc and make big anarchic gestures of paint that were actually very unsettling and disturbing to the eye.

B B : Yes, but don't you think that is really an individual thing? There are a lot of people who have the kind of traumatic experiences that you had as a child, who do not end up transcending the violence, but rather propagating it; it's well known that many children who were abused or molested grow up to abuse and molest their own children, or children of substance abusers grow up to abuse drugs or alcohol themselves. I think you're very much an exception to the program dictated by your upbringing.

D W : I think we do repeat things that we learn endlessly. It's true, I had violent episodes throughout my teens where I wouldn't think twice about banging somebody on the head if they gave me the wrong look or something; I responded to the world with the violence I'd learned as a kid, but at the same time I had an outlet, because I had a creative impulse that I enacted on the streets. I'd do drawings with ball point pen on paper and it made me happy to do that—somehow it gave me some comfort. Those violent gestures you describe are really people resisting an imposed reality; they're resisting

it and trying to rearrange it—whether it's through drugs, violent actions, through anarchic action, whatever. They're trying to lift off the weight of the imposed structure that they've inherited.

BB: And maybe superimposing one that's equally horrific—just so they can feel they have a hand in it. I read an article recently that talked about the desire for altered states of consciousness. Of course, the easiest way to get there is through drugs—it's a lot faster than meditation—and this desire is something that's an innate part of human nature. People want to alter their perceptions of reality as strongly as they want to eat food or have sex. It's just an inherent part of our curiosity to want to see things differently; children love nothing more than to be spun around until they're so dizzy that they can't function. Isn't that a form of euphoria?

DW: The pressure of what we experience and what we contain in our minds and in our bodies from our environment is so intense that people do drugs, they fuck, they can do any of these things in order to achieve a weightlessness or something outside of the confines of their skin where all the pressure is. I mean, I felt like I should be 50 feet tall with everything that I contain inside my head; I wrote somewhere that I'm a 37-foot tall person inside this six foot frame. It's this pressure of information, of all this knowledge that I exist inside of a blind society where they try to deny or suppress what I'm experiencing. I think of whirling dervishes—they use that centrifugal motion of spinning and spinning and spinning to get into weightlessness, where weight and the polar gravity no longer exist.

It's the same thing as orgasm; when you hit orgasm nobody can ever explain what that place is because it's a blank spot. I wrote something about it being like a stone skipping across an abandoned lake, hitting these blank spots of consciousness, everything disintegrates, everything's nonexistent for that fraction of a second. It's such a pleasure to be in that state of nothingness that people will do it repeatedly—that's where you get into sexual compulsion. It's like this loss of time and space and identity and everything, but it's so fragmented and short that you keep trying to re-enact it. I remember being shocked as a kid to learn that the earth spins, which is what creates gravity. I was amazed at what gravity feels like and that it takes strength to lift a hand in the air.

Now I think that all these things like drugs and meditation and orgasm are ways of trying to get outside of the physical confines of our body vehicles.

It's really about spirituality; we're trying to find this "presence"—or the location of this presence, and really it's something we contain. But people spend all their lives looking outside for it, filling up reels of movies and billions of books and millions and millions of paintings through all this outward gesture. And it's so rare to go inward, so rare to look inside—that's how out of touch we are.

This interview was excerpted from taped conversations with the artist on several days in October, 1989.



Opposite and above: photos from the archive of Vince Aletti



Still from *Manhattan Love Suicide*, 1985. Photo by filmmaker Richard Kern

BIOGRAPHICAL DATELINE

1954 Born in Redbank, New Jersey to a sailor from Detroit and a very young woman from Australia.

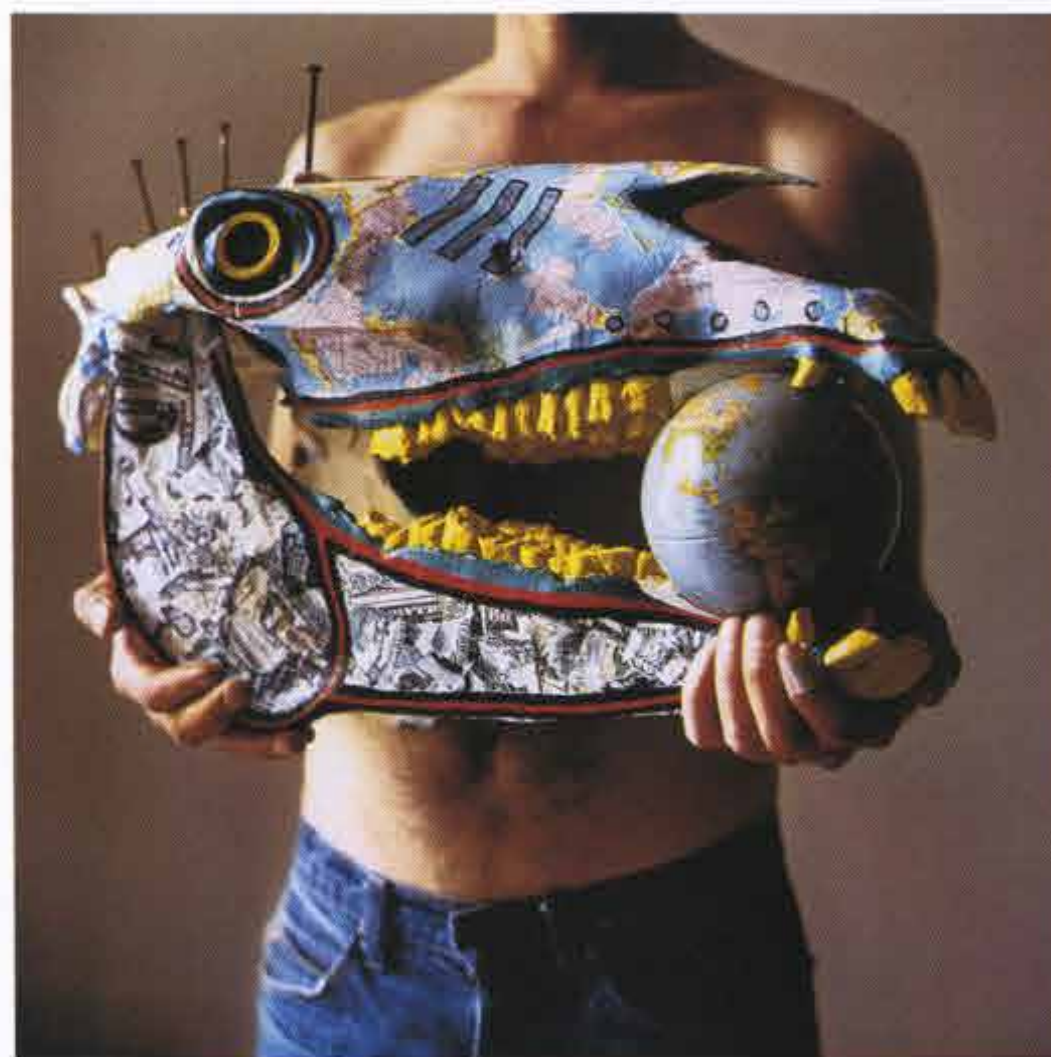
1956 Vague memories of horseshoe crabs on the coastal shores at dawn. Also an infestation of the sands of different colored ladybugs. Mother and father got divorced.

1956-57 Lived with older brother and sister in either an orphanage or boarding home run by a psychotic woman with a nineteen-year-old son who had a pet alligator he fed live worms to in the kitchen sink. Constant beatings and 2:00 am cold showers. Hours on end having to stand in line with other kids at attention while the woman played piano.

1957 My father who had occasional visitation rights kidnapped us and took us to an airport where we flew on our first airplane. Ended up with distant relatives on a chicken farm outside Detroit. First memory there was of a dangerous black, wolf-like dog locked up 24 hours a day in the basement. One day it escaped while we ate lunch and all of us had to sit very, very still until someone with a broomstick chased it away. Uncle may have committed suicide with a shotgun. A woman came to lunch one day who could remove her left pinky. I was impressed.

1958 Lived with a grandmother and aunt and uncle (uncle died mysteriously in a possible car accident). Grandmother would stand in bedroom doorway for hours each morning telling me she saw angels around me. I remember four-foot stacks of comics in the basement. A man around the corner in the suburbs where we lived gave a dead mouse that I found in a trap in his garage to me for a pet. I remember my aunt screaming and putting me in a hot tub for an hour.

1958-59 Dad remarries a young woman from Scotland and moves us back to some small town in New Jersey. I fell in love with a nursery school teacher and would make giant paper sculptures and write her name on them



Untitled (Skull with globe), 1984, photograph for Civilian Warfare ad by Peter Hujar

and drop them in mailboxes. I thought mailboxes knew people by their first name. I remember going down a street four blocks away because a police car speeded by with sirens screaming. When I got there, a man in a white t-shirt had a woman in the front yard of a house with a gun to her head. I remember getting yanked away from the street by a stranger. I have vivid memories of lightning through the glass windows of a darkened room. I stabbed a next-door neighbor with a pencil and the house was vacated in a week.

1960 Moved to another small town. Father was gone three weeks a month sailing to foreign shores. Me and another kid would lie down on the long sloping highway outside our doors to make the enormous trucks that came barreling over the hill hit their brakes. At the last second, we'd jump up and run into the woods. I remember zombie films in the local firehouse every Saturday. The first time I witnessed death was in a pirate movie at the firehouse. I remember feeling dizzy when a pirate plunged his saber through the body of another pirate.

There was a flood once and everyone had to leave school early. I almost got swept away. Some men from a lumber camp rescued me by forming a human chain and gave me hot cocoa in front of a woodstove. I was sorry when my family came to get me. I was told God sees and knows all. When I banged my knee or lost my favorite toy or when it rained on a weekend or when I was punished for something insignificant I would stop and look up and curse every curse I could think of. One day I was asked by someone who I was talking to, I got beat. I never did it again. Found a giant fungus in the woods growing on a tree and took it in my wagon to school and went from class to class showing it; it turned dark brown and shriveled up. Sold frogs and turtles to a kid around the corner who didn't know denominations of bills. For a three dollar frog I'd sometimes get twenty-five or thirty dollars. Got caught. One summer, every day someone killed and slit open all the frogs in the ponds in the nearby woods. An older boy once brought me to the woods and showed me a place where the whole earth was water and turtles all the way to the horizon. This haunted me all my life.

1961 My father forgot us at a shopping center miles from home the day before Christmas. There was a big blizzard and he got drunk. We tried to walk it but were found by a waitress in a diner when we went inside to thaw out the two turtles in a Chinese food take-out box. I had bought them as presents for my brother and sister and the water turned to ice. The state police took us home and dragged my father into the streets in his underwear. I began to burglarize the local high school stealing the late dues coin box from the library. Also science equipment my brother would sell. I broke into a neighbor's house and took the milk money and set it on fire. The neighbors found out and called me a communist. I built log cabins in the woods which were slowly being torn down for new suburban tract houses. Spent all my time in the woods looking at snakes and insects and other animals. Thought of giant birdnests for humans. There was a gang of thugs in the neighborhood that we were

warned to stay away from. The oldest was nineteen. They had bobby-pin guns and switchblade knives. The oldest one found me playing in a half-completed house and took me to the attic where he had me climb a ladder and tie his hands above a beam. Then he told me to take off his pants and take his dick in my hands and pull. I did for a while; he got red in the face. I got bored and grabbed a handful of insulation from a box and wrapped it around his dick and pulled. He screamed and I ran away. My father got a telephone call later and took me to this guy's house and a doctor's black car was in the driveway. After two hours of sitting on the driveway my father took me home and beat me. He pulled out his dick at some point and told me to play with it. I said no and he beat me some more. Was put in catholic school. I remember beatings and having to kneel on bags of marbles. Also films of food people eat in other countries like worms and grasshoppers and ants. Got thrown out of school at the end of the year for not bringing in the mandatory five dollars for the mother superior's birthday. She looked like an orangutang and was red in the face from screaming all day. She told me I was in the devil's wings and would go to hell. There was a farmer in the neighborhood who shot some kid in the face for trespassing. Another boy lost his head in a car accident. I remember riding down on a skateboard and looking at the blood by the crossroads. I took to stealing teachers' purses. I thought babies were shat out.

1962 Another member of the gang took me in the woods and showed me how to put my dick in his mouth. Then he did the same to me. I asked him if we were allowed to do that; he said, yeah. Later I hit him in the nose with a two-by-four and bloodied it. It was unrelated to the scene in the woods but he never came near me again. Started smoking cigarettes while sitting high in the tallest tree at the edge of the forest. The farmer who shot the kid would be on his tractor making the fields look like hypnotist's disks. My father became more brutal. He would shoot guns off in the livingroom missing us and sometimes put the guns to our heads. He killed our

pet rabbit and fed it to us claiming it was "new york steaks" and if he found me with a lame bird or animal he'd take it in the yard and have me watch him shoot it. Once after x-mas he came into my room drunk, and found me working on a paint by numbers image of venice he'd given me. He forgot it was paint by numbers and told me I was a genius and would be famous for my art one day. Another time he was drunk and took the telescope I got for my birthday and pointed it out the window and started hollering about the moon. I looked through and saw that it was focused on the bulb of the streetlamp across the way. I found a colony of ants in a field that had tiny bodies and giant heads. Nearby was another colony with tiny heads and enormous bodies. At the local pond where I'd spend free time tracking turtles and watersnakes, one summer a group of us found frogs with five and six legs. Later they paved over the pond and built a police station on top of it. We tried to run away together and sometimes separately because of the beatings with dog chains and two-by-fours. The town shrink wanted to put my father away but everyone was too scared to sign the papers and thought he'd figure a way to get out and murder us all. A woman next door drank beer all morning, all afternoon and in the hours of dusk she would let out a burp that could be heard across the backyards five houses away.

1963 Kennedy got shot and I remember my dad making us watch the funeral on t.v. all day long. When the casket passed on the screen none of us cried appropriately so he ran around smacking us in the head until we did. He had a collection of World War II books kept under lock and key that I sometimes would wake up early to look at. There was a photo of hundreds of naked soldiers standing with their hands behind their heads in a camp and I always spent hours looking at their bodies. Years later the realization of it being a P.O.W. camp and the sexual curiosity I'd had made me wonder. Had a recurring dream that continues to this day of walking a dirt road and finding a pond and diving in and swimming to the bottom and entering a cave and swim-

ming til I'd run out of air and at the last moment surfacing inside a cave filled with beautiful stalactites and stalagmites that were iridescent. I'd wake up peaceful.

To get to school I'd pass through a forest on a short-cut and gather crab apples and then walk through a cow field. Everyday the cows would surround me and I'd feed them the apples; the cows were taller than me by a foot or so and when the apples were gone they'd get angry and huff and puff at me, then chase me to the barbed wire fence where I'd slide to narrowly escape underneath. I beat up a guy five years older than me on a dare; I thought I was indestructable then. I wrote "novels" in ten-cent notebooks. We found my mother's name listed in a manhattan phone book my father brought home from where he shipped out on the Hudson. She met us secretly one day and took us to new york city for a few hours to the museum of modern art. I wanted to be an artist after that. She called my dad two weeks later and one afternoon when he was drunk he put us on a bus to the port authority of n.y.c. where we met my mother and began living in mid-town next to a Howard Johnsons where later Angela Davis would be caught in a wig and dark sunglasses.

I got asked directions by a smiling man in large lapels after three months in n.y.c. and he asked me to show him where the R.C.A. building was and I showed him and he held my arm and never let go and I thought he would murder me and we went on the tour and saw ourselves on t.v. in the studio section of the tour and then he took me into a deserted bathroom and tried to show me his dick and I asked if we could go on t.v. again and when we left the building by revolving door I stepped back and let him go first and pushed the door hard after him knocking him over and ran the opposite way home where no one wanted to deal with what happened. The next time a man asked me to rub his shoulder outside the amusement center gameroom on broadway and 52nd street and said he'd give me ten dollars if I would, I asked for the ten bucks first and then jumped on my skateboard and took off—my first real lesson in american style economics. Started hustling soon after. Had a dream one

night of being naked in a stream. Then I stood on the banks of the stream and my whole body shook and white fluid came out of my dick and fell into the river. Two days later a man picked me up in central park and asked me to go to his apartment in his car. I told him I wasn't allowed to get in a stranger's car, but I would take the bus while he drove the car. I did and so did he and he took me into his apartment on 98th street and I pulled on his dick like he asked and when he had orgasm it was just like in my dream. He took a polaroid of me sitting naked in a chair. The picture didn't show my face so I let him keep it. When I got home I looked in the mirror to see if what I'd experienced was written all over my face; like somehow my face would change or get older instantly. No one noticed, so I did it again and again and again.

My mother became friends with a mexican woman in the neighborhood and this woman had two adopted sons both of whom were retarded. The 20-year old liked to imitate locomotives at midnight and chickens being strangled. He had the sex drive of a 20-year old and the thought patterns of an eight- or nine-year old. He took me to the roof the first night we hung out together and pulled down my pants and his own as well—I remember in the cool night air getting down on my knees and placing his very warm and hard dick across my face and sniffing it and burying my nose in the hair around his crotch and almost fainting. We fucked on the roof and in the boiler room and in the alleys in the neighborhood in every season and any weather for a few years. I was afraid of being queer and almost murdered him after the first night so that no one would find out. In 1963 your family could put you in an insane asylum for electro-shock treatments, among other things. The day I planned to kill him he put his hands on my body and I forgot all about murder and we fucked. I tried to get information in the local library about what a "fag" was. The limited information I found depressed me. I took to not bathing for months at a time. I was sent to psychiatrists who fell asleep during my sessions with them. I entered a weird depression that lasted until I was 16 or 17.

1964 Was encouraged by my mom to paint and draw and also studied minerals and paleontology. Culture shock in school in Hell's Kitchen. Made cash drawing classmates sexual fantasies for lunch money. My dad returned a few times in a drunken state hiding in the building lobby for our return from school. Narrowly escaped. He stopped coming around. Family went on welfare, endless waits in crowded bureaucratic offices and three-gallon cans of spam and peanut butter. I developed a habit of hanging off the roof ledge by my fingertips, dangling over 8th avenue at night as a test of strength. Endless 42nd st. movies for 69 cents where if you left your popcorn on the seat next to you for too long large rats would climb up for a meal. Balcony seats were the wildest. Met various men this way. Met a kid in summer camp who later became a street buddy and hustling buddy for years. Spent time in the museum of natural history and remember the early winter smell of stuffed elephants in the humid dark halls of African dioramas. Walked over george washington bridge into new jersey to play on the palisades cliffs on weekends.

1965 Family was coming apart at the seams slow but sure. Beginning of recurring dream of being in a highrise hotel with workers on each floor in uniforms directing hotel residents to appropriate elevators. In the dream I walk down a back staircase and between floors find a men's room door and push it open and its dim light and humid with sweat and sex and the room is laid out like the stalls of a barn with urinals and dozens of men all frozen like interrupted sex and I step inside and take a place in one of the stalls and wake up. Caught a fish in central park and put it in the tropical fish tank we had and overnight it ate everything. Planned heists of the Hope Diamond and the Star of India at the museum of natural history. If you brought a rock to be identified the museum would issue a pass to the fifth floor science offices where in the dusty glass-lined hallways one could see the remains of frozen wooley mammoths found in the arctic.

1966 Got skipped a grade in school. Started taking french lessons. Simultaneously began falling apart from strain of

sexuality and the pressures from society. Thought endlessly of suicide. Remember a meeting at the psychiatrist's office where five people in white lab coats with clipboards and pens asked me my dreams. Behind me in the room was an eight-foot-long dark window; it was explained to me that a class of twenty people sat in the darkness to watch me. Sexuality increased. Got picked up by a guy who attempted to murder me in the far-west avenues of times square. Narrowly got away; realized that death or near-death taught me nothing new. Stopped washing altogether except if I found a lake in jersey where I'd swim in all my clothes. Started stealing lizards and snakes from pet shops and building them homes in the corner of the apartment. Stole turtles from Woolworth's and let them go in central park duck pond where they still live. School grades started falling apart.

An old world chameleon I stole climbed into the christmas tree while all the color bulbs were blinking and had a heart attack. When I had money from hustling I'd go to the bus terminal on 41st street and look at the hundreds of names of towns and try to imagine which town had a body of water in it. Then I'd buy a ticket and ride the bus til I saw a lake and ask the driver to get off. Then I'd go swimming.

1967 Witnessed construction workers on fifth avenue beating up scores of hippies who demonstrated against the vietnam war with plastic dolls covered in blood and burned with torches. Started attending demonstrations and became a pretty good rock thrower. Continued intermittent hustling in Times Square. Never thought about the issues of health; never had a check-up until I was twenty years old—a good argument for giving kids safer-sex information rather than church nonsensical position on just-say-no to sexuality. Went with mom and sister to florida with the mexican family—the older boy and I stayed in a dilapidated house on the rural property and fucked the whole vacation away; on a brief visit to the coast my family found out about us having sex. I was in a motel bathroom with a razor pressed against my wrist trying to get the nerve to end it. Went for a mid-

night swim alone and saw a manta ray jump through the air by moonlight. Stabbed my brother in a fight back in n.y.c.—while waiting for the police to arrive at the apartment to take me away I played with my lizards. One of them dropped his tail off in a self-defense move. The tail continues wiggling for a twenty minutes or so to confuse the predator. In the police station a cop asked me what I had in my hand, I replied, a lizard tail. Cops thought I'd gone over the edge. Courts released me to family care. Won art medal at school.

1968-69 Periods of time running away from home. Entered the underground of man/child sexual connections. Lived variously in jersey, long island and n.y.c. Survived only with some of these people's help with food and living quarters. When hustling in times square I'd keep the cheap hotel room after a customer vacated it. Continued in school, grades were miserable. Was accepted in art high school. Began attending Black Panther Party demonstrations; wore a black leather glove on right fist. Running battles with cops and riot squad; became more adept at throwing various objects. Lived in an unrentable trailer behind gas station in brooklyn near the coast. Street buddy set it on fire one morning—barely escaped the flames. Rode dumbwaiters down to apartments in tenement buildings to raid the refrigerators. Kicked pants on beach in summer to rob wallets; stopped when I opened a wallet and found a gold detective badge. Home for various periods; put my fist through a window, lacerating my wrist. More roof-hanging night routines.

Met a married lawyer in times square who took me home to jersey when family was vacationing on coast. Loved him after a time; he helped me regain some sense of self-worth. Was slowly starving at the end of 1969. Hustled in Huberts Wax Museum on 42nd street where you could view twenty portraits of the presidents painted on the heads of pins; these were contained in magnifying boxes. With street buddy dumped an entire shopping bag of Super Balls from ledge of empire state building in an attempt to see if they'd bounce back up twice the height. Experiment failed. Stole an alligator



Thirst, 2 pages from comic book (work in progress); story by David Wojnarowicz, art by James Romberger

from Macy's Department Store and let it go in the duck pond in central park. Sniffed glue for a while and smoked hash and pot with hippies in the park. Got beat up by a crazy cop in a night-time subway; almost hospitalized.

In the art high school I went to, I met one teacher I could respect who ended up on the desk excitedly talking about the purple color in the tree across the street. She was pregnant and had to leave mid-term. Other teachers destroyed my work, which consisted of 3-D city street constructions filled with long hair radicals shooting policemen from windows and rooftops and hurling bombs and molotov cocktails. The cops were farm pigs in n.y.c. uniforms. When the principal made his rounds, the art teachers would dump all my work behind the radiators or toss them in the trash when I wasn't around. National guards shot and killed students at Kent State and Augusta, Georgia. I tried to set the school on fire once in order to shut it down during a vietnam moratorium nationwide on all campuses. The device I made failed to do anything but scorch the walls of a back staircase. This was strong moment for me in terms of activity and what it means to break a law. If you are a member of a minority its a simple thing to be aware that laws are not meant as a reflection of the true society one lives in, but rather as devices to control diversity and silence it. When's the last time you talked to a political representative? I chose to abandon certain violent gestures at that time because of the possible harm to innocent people; but I will never refute the possibility of violent gesture given the environment we live in. Until there is complete and fair representation of all people in this country I believe that what the courts put forth as law has very little to do with what my own determinations are in terms of activity—either mental or physical.

1970 Dropped out of school and lived on the streets full-time. Was almost murdered twice more in ratty hotels and sidestreets of times square. Was drugged once and raped and beat up while unconscious. Jumped from a second story window in an attempt to get away from vice cops raiding an ex-con's apartment where they'd

tailed us. I was naked but no one noticed. Met a heavy duty christian boy scout leader who worked as a banker in mid-town. Went to the scout camp for a week and fucked in the woods and the cabins of the empty camp. Picked up by sailors in times square, some of the sexier moments I remember. Jersey lawyer helped me survive in various ways. Stopped having sex with him, but met him regularly for conversation, warmth and sometimes cash supplements. Shop-lifted regularly in order to get clean clothes; left dirty clothes on department store hangers. Ditched dirty rotten sneakers in frozen produce bins at greenwich village supermarket and put on new ones in side aisles.

Met a con-man in times square who falsified psychiatrists degrees and worked as a counselor at a halfway house for young ex-convicts. Lived with him for two months until he grew tired of all the animals I shoplifted and gave homes to. The breaking point was a twenty-five pound african frog I put under my arm in the coliseum animal show and walked home with. He got me admitted into the halfway house as a potential jail risk. We fucked on the sly. I met another ex-con who worked with me on tape-recording experiments. We'd tape street sounds in cut-up fashion and replay the tapes simultaneously sitting inside a refrigerator box on twelfth avenue. We got tossed out of the halfway house and lived for a year on the streets.

1971 Almost got killed by street buddy several times—ran with a gang of transvestites along the hudson river. We were their “men” and they took care of us for periods of time in welfare hotels and dive apartments on the lower east side. Attempted muggings but always failed miserably. Went on day trips to kennedy airport where we scaled fences to get on take-off jet runways. We'd appear out of shore reeds at the moment of take-off and get knocked on our asses by jet blasts; got beaten up by airport security. Dreamed of home in the country. Got so ragged, blood would pour into my non-filter every drag I took. Became a walking skeleton. Could only sell myself to the vicious creeps in times square; got ripped

off a lot. Went to the salvation army for help, major said, “We don't help people like you.” Regretted all the quarters I dropped in salvation army buckets at xmas as a kid. Returned to halfway house; became a model citizen til I could save enough money from job as custodian to leave town. Tried to ride a bike cross-country; got as far as Ohio. Went north to become a farmer on the land of a vietnam vet.

1972–73 Worked as a farmer on canadian border. Was supposed to share profit from ten-acre vegetable garden. When time to pick crop, the vet tried to run me down in a pick-up truck. Left for n.y.c. Returned to sporadic hustling in times square to supplement income. Got a job as a bookstore clerk in times square (legit bookstore) and fell in love with a woman. Had a relationship for half a year. Stopped when I realized I was truly queer and went freight-hopping across the states by the northern route. Lived in san francisco for a year working as an egg bootlegger. Lived openly as a queer and realized how healthy and calm I felt as a result. Realized that my queerness was a wedge that was slowly separating me from a sick society. Became a writer and took photographs with a camera a street buddy had stolen for me before I got off the streets.

1974 Saw genet's “un chant d'amour” and it confirmed that one could transcend society's hatred of diversity and loathing of homosexuals. Read burroughs and others and realized clearly what american society had been suppressing beneath its skin—realized that had I seen some of these people or their work as a teenager I would have been more easily able to get off the streets without the national guilt on my shoulders. Realized this isn't nor has it ever been government for the people; felt more free with this acknowledgement. Returned to new york in a four-day hitchhiking trip in the early stages of winter. Got a ride on a single engine cherokee airplane flown by a guy heading for reno to pick up gambling winnings. Got picked up outside reno by two teenagers with shotguns in a pick-up truck that turned out to be stolen.

They stopped in dusk mountains and aimed shotguns at me telling me they planned to kill me and/or if stopped at any point by cops would die in a shoot-out rather than surrender on charges of inter-state flight and armed robbery. Stayed with them 34 hours til we got to the outskirts of denver. They committed supermarket robberies on the way, dropped me on a dirt road and turned the truck around, presumably to shoot me and get back on the interstate. I fled into the woods; later hitched a ride with a member of kesey's pranksters and he drove me 1400 miles to st. louis. Slept in a cornfield with him in kansas, I think. Made it home through snowstorms in a stolen car driven by an older woman and her daughter with a brand new baby. Came out to family and friends as a queer. Began writing street monologues; stories of people who lived and worked in the street. Recurring dreams of tornadoes and tidal waves that continue to this day.

1975–78 More hitchhiking trips between two coasts. Brief forays into mexico. More freight-hopping trips. Met a twenty-year-old sword swallower on a freight train. Saw the poverty population that picks fruit in this country. Wrote and drew images as well as continuing to make photographs. I remember this period of american history as a huge national blank spot. Greed in the social arena became more pronounced and unapologetic. Everyone I knew was relieved as the '70s drew to a close. Went to live for the rest of my life in paris and normandy. Lasted a year and had a great relationship with a guy who didn't speak english. Attempted to write biography. Worked on series of drawings that revealed everything people are pressured not to reveal. Shifted my ideas of what making things could be. Started developing ideas of making and preserving an authentic version of history in the form of images/writings/objects that would contest state-supported forms of “history.” Didn't really believe that it would survive time. My father committed suicide.

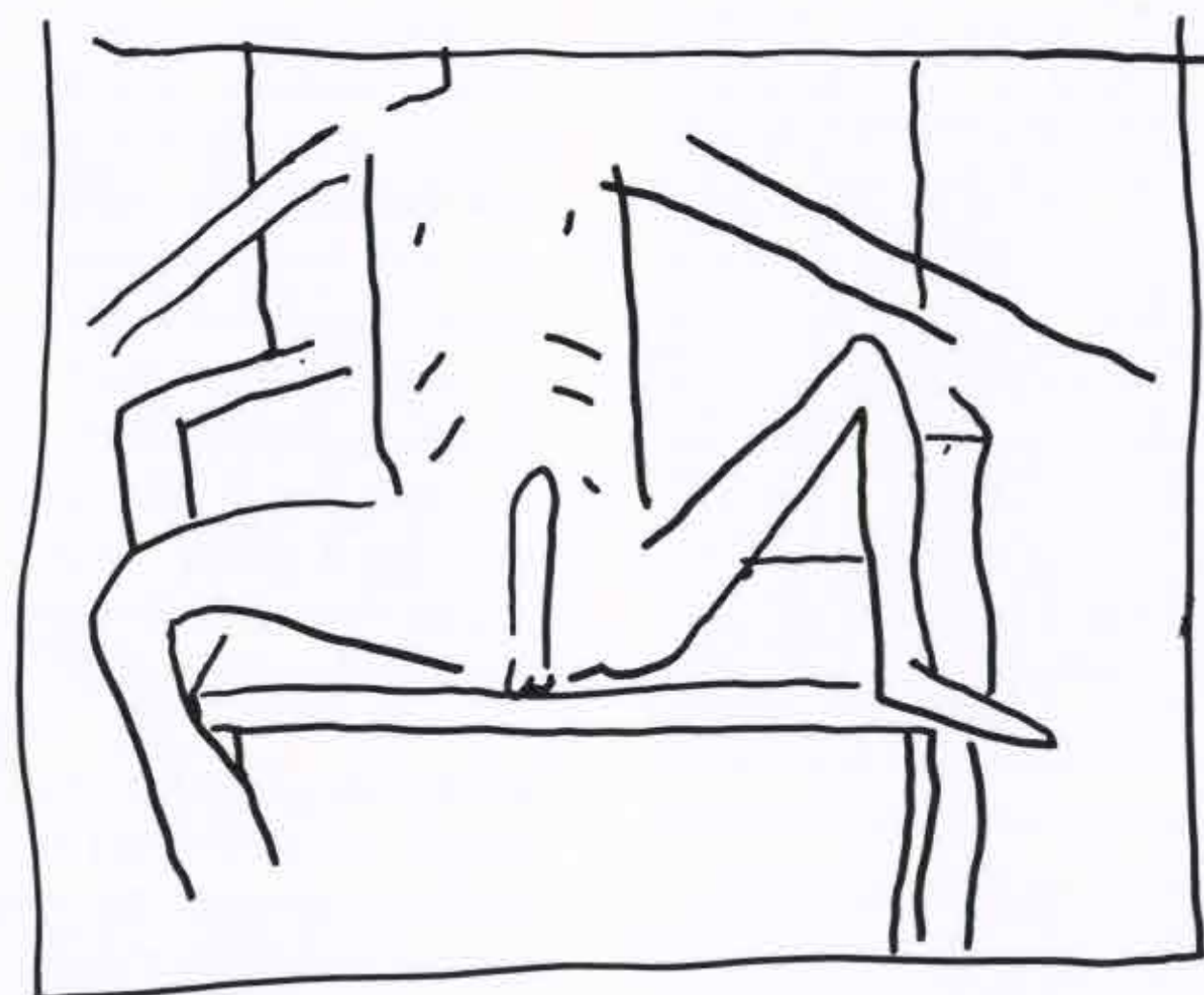
1979 Worked on first super-8 film in the abandoned warehouses and shipping lines of the hudson river. Film

was about HEROIN—made it using friends who were flirting with I.V. drug use in the mistaken hopes that it would get them to reconsider the directions they were moving in. Film unedited. Also began a photographic series entitled: *ARTHUR RIMBAUD IN NEW YORK* playing with ideas of compression of “historical time and activity” and fusing the french poet’s identity with modern new york urban activities mostly illegal in nature. Worked in rock-n-roll clubs like Danceteria. Started doing stencil work in the streets. Played tape recorder and found sound tapes and children’s instruments in a band called 3 TEENS KILL 4—No Motive, taken from a new york post headline. Alternative name which I regret we didn’t use was *SISSIES FROM HELL*. Our hit single was a cover of “Tell Me Something Good” with radio recordings of the attempted Reagan assassination and his media jokes to the press backed with canned t.v. laughter. Put out one album under extreme duress and left the band concentrating on images and writings. Did plan a series of “action installations” with band member Julie Hair—these were illegal actions that were an attempt to shake up the notions of “art” and “culture” that most galleries intentionally ignored. One successful one was stenciling an empty plate, knife and fork on the wall of leo castelli’s staircase and also stenciling a bomber plane and a burning house and recoiling figure and then dumping a couple hundred pounds of bloody cow bones from the 14th street meat packing district into the stairwell. This was accomplished at 1:00 on a busy saturday afternoon. We planned to also set up instantaneous firing squads in macy’s department store and woolworth lunch counters or in busy afternoon streets of n.y.c. and photograph the resulting reactions of having military dictatorships imported to our country as opposed to the usual u.s.a. exporting of such governments and activities. Was talked out of these actions by friends with the idea that we’d probably get shot by the overzealous n.y.c. police department.

1979–1982 Documented in writings the interiors and activities of the sexual underground in the abandoned warehouses along the hudson. Day and night, summer,

winter, spring and fall recorded all the sounds, sights, smells and movements as well as hallucinations inside these warehouses. Also made photographs on occasion of the architectures’ exposure to elements and fires. Witnessed the gradual decline of these places as sexual hunting grounds as poverty spread throughout the country under the Reagan administration. People in the warehouses had their throats cut by thieves, were shot and dumped into the river, etc. City officials as usual were

indifferent to the deaths of minorities, sexual and otherwise. Became more active in exploring art as a record of the times we live in as well as a vehicle of communication between members of certain social structures and minorities; trusting one’s own vision and version of events rather than the government party line as witnessed in the nightly news. Found increasing hope in my “differences” and the gradual simultaneous split from the implemented and enforced and legislated social structure.



when I was 9 or 10 some guy picked me up in central park + took me home. He made a polaroid of me sitting in a chair. It didn't show my face so I let him keep it.

Memory Drawing, 1981, 8" x 10"

David Wojnarowicz has caught the age-old voice of the road, the voice of the traveler, the outcast, the thief, the whore, the same voice that was heard in Villon's Paris, in the Rome of Petronius.

—William S. Burroughs

Wojnarowicz is one of the more brilliant fugitives to land on this cultural island—something of a Renaissance man who can write and paint, make films, photographs and installations without missing a beat.

—Lucy Lippard, *Art in America*

David is not only one of the few artists and writers whose work I can't see and read enough of—he's also, for me, one of the major spokesmen of our society.

—Kathy Acker

My own hope is that by amplifying David's message we will heighten the spirit in all of us and, as a result, broaden our powers of communication.

—Adam Clayton of U2

Through searing images evoked in paintings, photographs, performance and text, David Wojnarowicz exposes the duplicity and soullessness of an illusory "one-tribe nation" promoted by media, government and organized religion. Adamant about counteracting the invisibility he feels as a homosexual in a missionary-position society, Wojnarowicz fights back with intensely colored visions of sexual diversity, surreal tableaux of the military-industrial complex's war against nature, and

