



The visiting artist, in front of *Newspaper as National Voodoo* (1986)

Queer in Normal

David Wojnarowicz Takes His Furious Art to the Heartland

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NORMAL, ILLINOIS

No one knew exactly when the flower box arrived. I'm sitting in the offices of the University Gallery at Illinois State University with David Wojnarowicz and the gallery staff. Last night, the artist gave an angry, exquisite performance at the opening of a 10-year retrospective exhibition of his work; Wojnarowicz redefined "normal" in *Normal* by simply explaining who he is—and throwing in a few facts of life. The 800 witnesses who stuffed themselves into the gallery were mesmerized. The size of the crowd broke records, if not fire regulations.

The next morning, the show of 50 paintings, photographs, and sculptures by a homosexual artist who talks about post-diagnosis art, rather than postmodern art, opens to the public. "When you say you have AIDS most media people think you're nothing but a disease on two legs," Wojnarowicz says to a local reporter, who quotes him.

Will this work play in the heartland of America?

Barry Blinderman, director of the gallery and curator of the exhibition, comes bounding into the office carrying a long brown flower box with a white ribbon tied around it. "It's for David," says Blinderman cheerfully. Wojnarowicz looks at the box and gives it a hex to ward off any evil spirits. Everybody laughs. He picks up the box, but puts it down instantly. "It's too heavy," he says, handing it to me. "This isn't flowers." He may be right. It's too heavy.

"Just read the card," says Blinderman. "Don't be ridiculous."

Wojnarowicz opens the tiny generic envelope. "With Deepest Sympathy" is printed at the top of an unsigned note: *From all of us in Normal who aren't normal. Thank you!* The words confirm his worst suspicions. "I'm definitely not opening this box," says the artist. "Get it out of here."

"New Yorkers are all paranoid," says Blinderman, an ex-New Yorker, as he grabs the box and takes it out into the hallway. "Why should I be the one to lose a hand?" he asks, as he lifts off the top of

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the box and shouts "Flowers!" much to everyone's relief. The mysterious weight is a waterpack. Wojnarowicz is neither amused nor flattered. He leaves the flowers in the box and puts the whole package, including the card, on display in the show. Sympathy notes are inappropriate, unless there's been a death.

It's no secret that David Wojnarowicz is living with the virus. In his performance he makes it painfully clear that people with AIDS are alive and kicking. Kicking the government, the church, and anyone who propagates the lie that gay people are getting what they deserve. Wojnarowicz makes sure the audience understands exactly what he's talking about; PWAs are going to die not because

they put their dicks in the wrong place, but because they're being murdered: "Do you think if there were a disease that struck only politicians and religious leaders that the president would hesitate to shift the entire \$350 billion defense budget towards research and health care?" The audience roars with laughter at the thought.

In a brilliant litany of questions, answers, statistics, and anecdotes, Wojnarowicz makes connections between his own life story, the defense budget, homelessness, AIDS, sex education, gay and lesbian teenage suicide, abortion, and the real killer—silence. Students sitting next to me are nudging each other with wide eyes. They can't believe their ears.

"If I tell you I'm a homosexual and a queer does it make you nervous? Does it prevent you from hearing anything else I say?" screams Wojnarowicz into the mike. He's surrounded by four monitors, each one displaying the same disjunctive montage of images (not quite in sync) that are either violent, soothing, homoerotic, or hilarious. Wojnarowicz likes insects and animals; as he mentions his mother and father, a snake accompanied by a crab walks across the screens. He talks about a disease called "fear of diversity in this country called America," where politicians are trying to exterminate homosexuals like bugs.

Wojnarowicz looks up from his text and asks, "Why can't any woman who wants an abortion get one in this town?" The audience breaks into applause. When he reveals that he grew up "in a tiny

version of hell called the suburbs," in the "universe of the neatly clipped lawn," the laughter is explosive. Now the audience knows for sure that this guy isn't an alien, he's one of them. Wojnarowicz has them in the palm of his hand, and he's enlisting them in the war against the bigots, homophobes, and AIDSphobes who run the country, the media, churches, schools. It's not that this information is all new, but that these things are just not said in public. Especially in *Normal*. "Do you think that because you sleep in a comfortable place that this disease will stop outside your walls?" growls Wojnarowicz in his bearlike voice.

When the performance is over, the audience rushes the artist. Wojnarowicz stands for almost two hours shaking hands, signing posters, accepting gifts. When a student asks him to sign the jacket on her back, Wojnarowicz obliges her, but he's a little embarrassed. This tall, lean man with the big, blue eyes and the booming voice is actually quite shy.

Wojnarowicz is determined to change the theory and practice of sex "in this country called America," before more people needlessly die. He'll take on John Cardinal O'Connor and anyone else who prevents the free flow of safe sex education. One can easily assume that O'Connor has some support in *Normal* (home of the Beer Nut). "This is the kind of town where people know what you eat for lunch," says Blinderman, biting into a turkey sandwich. Not

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