Wojnarowicz To Sue Reverend Wildmon

Artist Doesn't Turn Other Cheek

By Elizabeth Hess

Donald Wildmon, the reverend from Tupelo, Mississippi, has been working overtime to destroy the National Endowment for the Arts. To accomplish this, the director of the American Family Association has developed a rewarding method. First he whips up censorship controversies, then he milks them for everything they're worth, depositing the money in the AFA's tax-exempt bank account. The man gets away with

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murder; the characters he's assassinated include Madonna, Andres Serrano, Robert Mapplethorpe, and most recently, artist David Wojnarowicz.

Can this man of the church be stopped? Mapplethorpe wasn't around to defend himself or his work, but David Wojnarowicz is. "We are filing a legal action this week," says Kathryn L. Barreti, Wojnarowicz's attorney, in response to a mailing produced by Wildmon reviling the artist's work. "We intend to sue for copyright infringement," says Barrett, "breach of the New York Artists' Authorship Rights Act," which makes it illegal to mutilate an artist's work, "and defamation of character." The complaint will ask for an immediate preliminary injunction.

The origins of this lawsuit bring us back to Normal, Illinois, where Barry Blinderman, director of the University Galleries, received a $15,000 NEA grant to organize a 1989 retrospective of Wojnarowicz's work. ("David Wojnarowicz: Tongues of Flame" will be shown at Exit Art, 578 Broadway, from November 10 through January 5.) Subsequently, the artist became the focus of congressional attention when NEA chairman John Frohnmayer withdrew a $10,000 grant for an exhibition on AIDS last November at Artists Space in New York; Frohnmayer later restored the grant for the exhibition on the condition that the funds not be used for the catalogue, which contained a provocative essay by Wojnarowicz.

The NEA refused to pay for this text in New York, but paid for it in Normal; the identical text was published in the Normal catalogue, which was funded by the endowment. "The catalogue sold very well," says Blinderman. Wildmon, no doubt, couldn't wait to get his hands on the book—primarily to cut it up.

The reverend (or his minions) went cruising through the catalogue's reproductions, plucking out what he considered to be the most "obscene" pictures. ("He missed a few good ones," says the artist.) This was not an easy task. Wojnarowicz's work is directly concerned with sexuality, homosexuality to be exact, and much of it is quite sexy; but the work is dense, layered with innumerable interpretations, images and texts.

Wildmon had to cut out details and decontextualize them in order to make the work look as much like traditional "pornography" as possible. The images bear little relationship to the artist's original works, which all have a recognizable style. Fourteen details, some severely cropped, some enlarged, all isolated from their surroundings, are reproduced in uniform size on the front and back of a flier. Wildmon dropped this broadside in the mail to approximately 200,000 people, including every member of Congress. The images are identified as the work of NEA-funded artist David Wojnarowicz.

"It's not my work," said Wojnarowicz when he first saw the mailing. Indeed it's not. All the credit for this masterpiece goes to Wildmon, who has succeeded in making the artist look like a mediocre "pornographer." The mailing gives the distinct impression that these pictures are reproductions of *whole* objects from a consistent body of work, which couldn't be further from the truth. In comparison to these images, Mapplethorpe's theatrical photographs look repressed.

"Your Tax Dollars Helped Pay for These 'Works of Art,'" says the headline on Wildmon's flier. Even this headline is inaccurate; the government did not fund these "Works of Art," which were created exclusively for this mailing. Wojnarowicz has never received any direct support from the government, according to the artist. The NEA awarded a grant to Blinderman to organize a retrospective exhibition of Wojnarowicz's work.

When I phoned the American Family Association to talk with Wildmon about the hardcore reality of this mailing, I was put through to someone who identified himself as Allen. "Hi, Elizabeth," he said. "We have no comment for *The Village Voice*." Allen hung up on me so fast I was left listening to a dial tone.

Too bad. I wanted to find out what the American Family Asso-

At left, David Wojnarowicz's *Water* (1987), 72" x 94". At right, one side of Donald Wildmon's mailing and his "Works of Art." The top right cropping, by the way, is of two men . . . dancing.