

# Aesthetic Investigations

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## David Wojnarowicz and the Surge of Nuances. Modifying Aesthetic Judgment with the Influx of Knowledge

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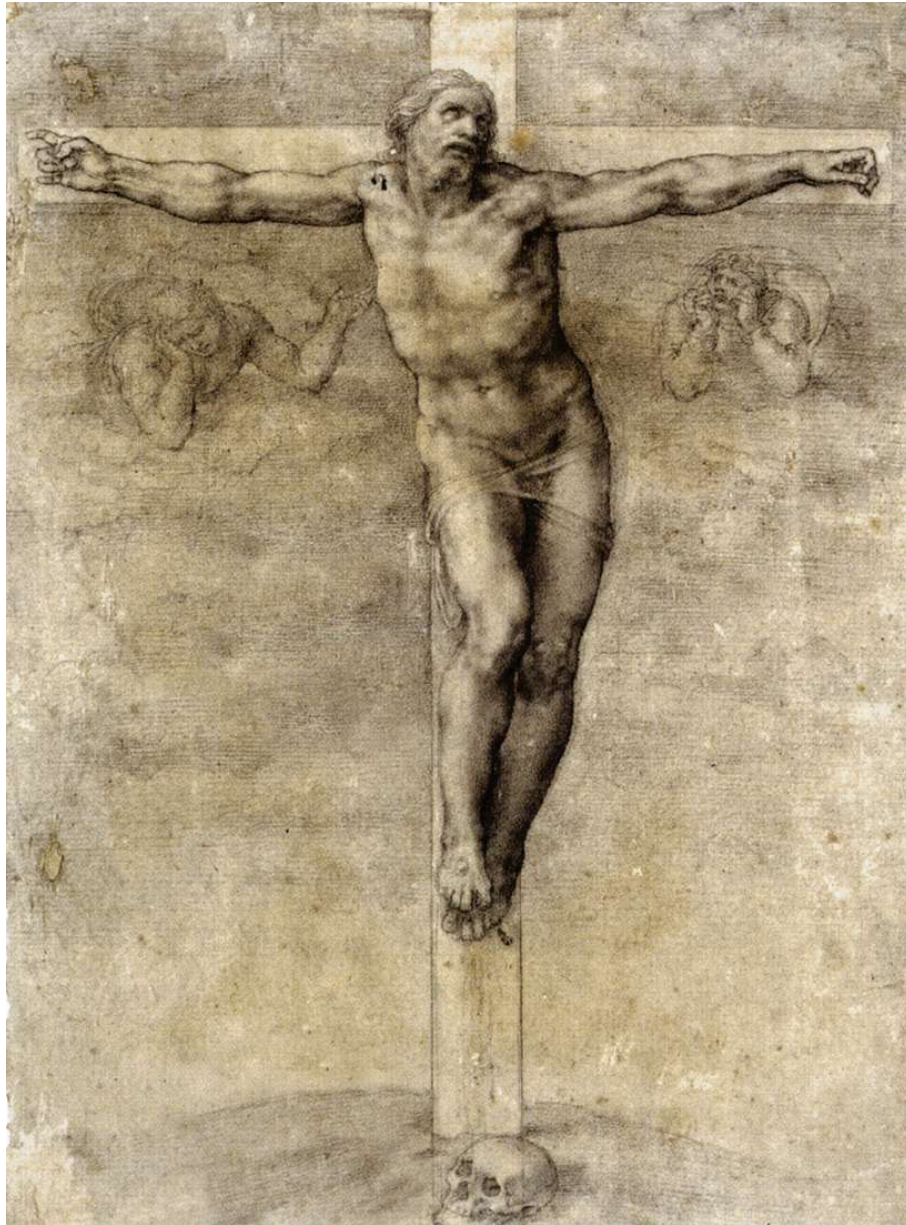
**Abstract:** Learning that an artist was a victim of inconceivable torment is critical to how their artworks are experienced. Forced as it were to absorb the wretched demons from the here and now, artists such as David Wojnarowicz have implausibly found the resolve to depict this adversity, and its psychological detritus, in their singularly creative manners. Recognised for his autobiographical writings no less than his artwork, Wojnarowicz is especially admired for his sheer defiance of conventional life scripts, and his fortitude in the face of adversity in the circumscribed world of imaginative constructions. *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*, *A Fire in My Belly*, and *Wind (for Peter Hujar)* for example. The enduring value of his artwork, inextricably enhanced by his diaries and essays, is that they simultaneously provide a narrative portal into the untangling of his inner life, as well as fundamentally influence how these works are perceived.

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When looking at two paintings, ostensibly by Rembrandt, is there an aesthetic difference in how these paintings are experienced if we know that one of the two paintings is a forgery? Most certainly, declared Nelson Goodman, who noted that this bit of knowledge ‘makes the consequent demands that modify and differentiate my present experience in looking at the two [Rembrandt] paintings’.<sup>1</sup>

Is that also true about depictions of Christ on the cross? Does knowledge of Christ’s story alter how Michelangelo’s *Christ on the Cross* is experienced? If what we know, or think we know, has the capacity to ultimately influence

what we notice, the answer must be affirmative.<sup>2</sup> The aesthetic experience of looking at Michelangelo's *Christ on the Cross* depends on what we know about Christ's story.



**Figure 1:** *Christ on the Cross*, Michelangelo, chalk drawing, circa 1541

This latter point is worth emphasising because Christ on the cross is arguably the most durable illustration of the aesthetic impact of artistic imagery ever conceived in the wake of catastrophe. In a simple, but revelatory artwork, the crucifixion of Christ managed to encompass the tortured demise of a young man, whose human spirit allegedly transcended death, while symbolising his power for redemption and self-renewal.

The same might be said more generally about tragic narratives and their accompanying indicia. Awareness impacts viewers acutely. This is especially evident in Holocaust memorials, where the ghastly artifacts, and the unfathomable story lines, are *intrinsic* to their aesthetic power.<sup>3</sup>



**Figure 2:** *Crematorium entrance at Dachau.* Photo by Paul R. Abramson, 2016

This insight however is by no means limited to curated monuments. Learning that an artist was also a victim of inconceivable torment is no less critical to how their artworks are experienced. Forced as it were to absorb the wretched demons from the here and now, artists such as David Wojnarowicz, have implausibly found the resolve to depict this adversity, and its psychological detritus, in their singularly creative manners.

Recognised for his autobiographical writings no less than his artwork, Wojnarowicz is admired for his sheer defiance of conventional life scripts, and his fortitude in the face of adversity in the circumscribed world of imaginative constructions. An avatar of emotional bedlam so to speak. The enduring value of his artworks, inextricably enhanced by his diaries and essays, is that they provide a narrative portal into the untangling of his inner life.<sup>4</sup>

If knowledge can modify aesthetic judgements, how can this affirmation then be applied to the interpretation of artworks? Knowing the personal details of the artist and the aesthetic features of the artwork is still a far cry from interpretation. Interpretation is largely about crafting a reasonable explanation for understanding the constituent elements of a creative representation.

Several cautionary provisos are also worth mentioning. Given the plausibility of alternative interpretations, equally reasonable in many cases, skepticism should be the first rule of thumb. Disdain for *a priori* interpretive systems is no less essential. Despite appearances otherwise, there are no Holy Writs for interpretation.

Interpretation is best served with a reasoned, but ultimately tentative, rationale. Suggestions work better than proclamations. Thoughts about the subject matter, or the unifying concept of an artwork, are certainly critical, but they work equally well without the adamancy of a decree.

### DAVID WOJNAROWICZ'S *WIND (FOR PETER HUJAR)*

In his short lifetime (1954-1992) David Wojnarowicz was an extraordinarily productive artist. He was also a prolific commentator. He wrote essays<sup>5</sup>, memoirs, diaries<sup>6</sup>, songs, postcards, and also incorporated text into his photographs and paintings. Most of his papers and other documents are housed in the New York University Artist Archives, while his other documentary records are held at the Fales Library Downtown collection. The transcript of Wojnarowicz's 1990 civil lawsuit (*Wojnarowicz v. American Family Ass'n*) is also available, as are the many recollections about Wojnarowicz by his friends and fellow artists.<sup>7</sup> It is a robust evidentiary archive, now supplemented by an excellent biography.<sup>8</sup>

Wojnarowicz had a relentlessly traumatic life. His father was a physically and psychologically abusive man. Though his parents divorced, and his mother had custody, his father kidnapped Wojnarowicz, taking him to a rural farm in Michigan. Wojnarowicz was eventually reunited with his ambivalent mother, who was now living in a small apartment in New York City. At sixteen, Wojnarowicz left home, lived on the streets, and survived as a teenage prostitute. In 1976, his father committed suicide. Throughout his adult life, Wojnarowicz suffered from the unrelenting burden of his childhood struggles, as well as persecution as an openly gay man. In the 1980s and beyond, Wojnarowicz agonised over the horrors of the AIDS epidemic, losing countless friends, colleagues, and lovers, only then to succumb to the disease himself in 1992. He was thirty-seven years old.

Wojnarowicz was a prophetic and psychologically sophisticated diarist who continuously revisited the enigmatic outlines of emotional and sexual connectedness. He was also a champion of the unexpected forms of personal autonomy. His notorious 1989 essay, *Postcards From America: X-Rays from Hell* — which jumpstarted the National Endowment of the Arts funding crisis — is a case in point. A superbly crafted indelible manifesto against governmental retribution and institutional negligence, it was also, curiously enough, hilarious, albeit in a derisive kind of way: *This fat cannibal from that house of walking swastikas up on fifth avenue should lose his church tax-exempt status and pay taxes retroactively for the last couple of centuries.*<sup>9</sup>



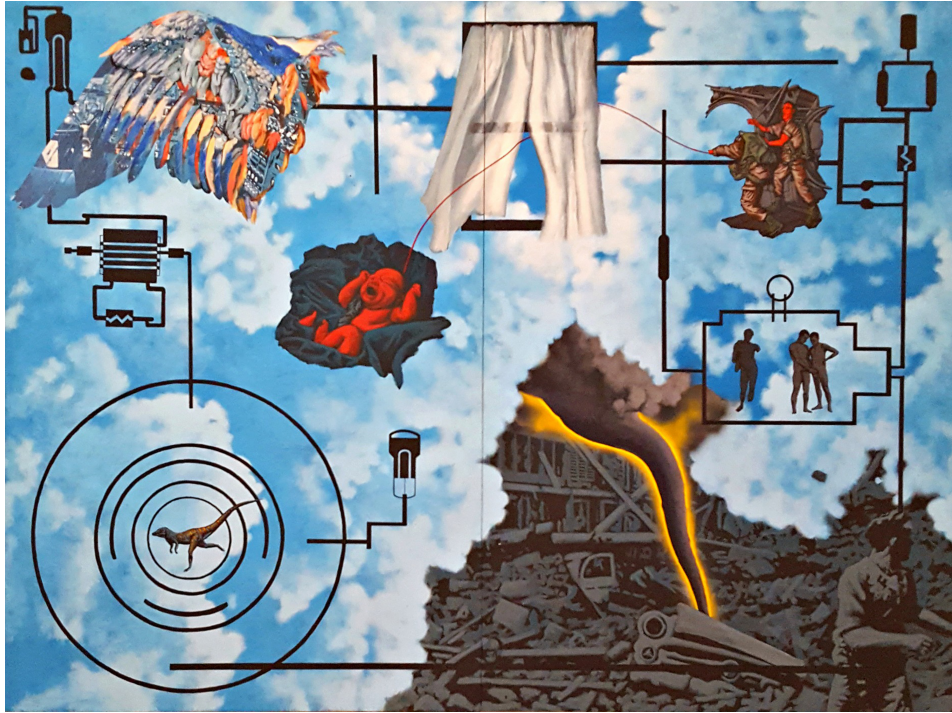
**Figure 3:** *David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar, 1981. Photo by Paul R. Abramson, 2019*

Yet, when Wojnarowicz needed to be discreet, his testimony in his civil lawsuit for instance, he was capable of describing the explicit sexual imagery in his 1989 painting *Bad Moon Rising* with sensitivity and aplomb. Wojnarowicz was clearly a young man of prodigious talent, fueled by a complex emotional palate, and a long history of severe trauma.

How then can this knowledge be used to gain insight into Wojnarowicz's artwork? His painting, *Wind (for Peter Hujar)*, is a good place to start. It has been said that Wojnarowicz explicitly commented on this painting shortly after Peter Hujar died.

Two curious claims about *Wind (for Peter Hujar)* are worth reconsidering. Both claims appeared in an *Art News* article by Maximiliano Durón (2018). The first is that when talking about this painting, Wojnarowicz purportedly said of Peter: *He sees me. I know he sees me. He's in the wind in the air all around me.*<sup>10</sup>

Although Wojnarowicz did in fact use those words in his diary, they were not in reference to this painting.<sup>11</sup> Wojnarowicz was instead describing how he was walking around the cemetery, searching for Peter Hujar's grave site,



**Figure 4:** *Wind (for Peter Hugar)*, David Wojnarowicz, 1987, Acrylic and collage on wood. Photo by Paul R. Abramson 2019

three days after his death: ‘walking backward and forward at the same time, realising in that instant how rattled I was . . . seeing his spirit, his curled body rising invisible above the ground . . . watching me, looking at the fresh ground where he lies buried . . . wondering if he knows I’m there. He sees me. I know he sees me. He’s in the wind in the air all around me.’

Does knowing this detail modify how viewers experience this painting?

The second claim was made by David Kiehl, a co-curator of Wojnarowicz’s recent retrospective at the Whitney Museum, who asserts in the exhibition catalogue that the element of the cord passing through the open window in *Wind (for Peter Hugar)* symbolises a dream associated with impending death.<sup>12</sup>

Since we rarely know what an image truly symbolises, if indeed it symbolises anything, Kiehl’s claim might have been more persuasive accompanied by a qualifier, the word *possibly* for instance, and then followed by an explanatory rationale. Or it could have been personalised, *I like to think*, for example. As it now stands, Kiehl’s statement is conclusive, which is never the case where symbols are concerned. The kaleidoscopic spectrum of images, and the vast differences in personal histories, makes extrapolation across artists and artworks conjectural at best.

Kiehl’s interpretation is surprising in another regard. It doesn’t correspond with how Wojnarowicz used the term *window* in his diary, particularly when talking about his artwork. On February 22nd, 1989 for instance, Wo-

Wojnarowicz wrote: *I put all this stuff out there in a state, a whirl of sensory examination, and what is it I want or need? I want to open a window on who and what I am. I want to create a myth that I can one day become.*<sup>13</sup> With that in mind, it seems more plausible to suggest that David combined various symbols (e.g. a newborn baby, an open window, paratroopers) to refer to impending death or possibly the inevitability of death, and the transitory and unjust nature of life itself.

What then can be said about this painting's title?

It appears as if the painting has been known by three related titles. In an interview with the artist Matthew Rose, that was published in *Arts Magazine* in May of 1988, David called the painting *Air*, further noting that it *is structured with associations of wind.*<sup>14</sup> That the ancient Greeks called the four elements *Earth, Water, Air and Fire* suggests perhaps that David always called the painting *Air*, since the *Arts Magazine* interview was conducted after the death of Peter Hujar. That notwithstanding, when the painting was first exhibited as part of the entire series *The Four Elements: Earth, Wind, Fire and Water* at the Gracie Mansion gallery in September of 1987, it was simply titled *Wind*. After Peter Hujar's death, the painting then became, as we know it now, *Wind (for Peter Hujar)*.

Peter Hujar was an iconoclastic American photographer who started to gain recognition in the mid 1970s while living and working in New York City. On September 21st, 1981, David mentions in his diary that he met Peter in a bar (most likely in December 1980)<sup>15</sup> and then went back to Peter's apartment, where he had the opportunity to look at Hujar's *Portraits in Life and Death*, the only book published during his lifetime.<sup>16</sup> Susan Sontag wrote that book's introduction. And Wojnarowicz wrote 'I knew it, knew it well' in his diary.<sup>17</sup> After their relationship developed, he felt confident enough to then show Hujar his own artwork, leading Wojnarowicz to note, 'His response has been one of disinterest, or at least of being mostly unaffected by my images. This causes me some sort of extreme discomfort.'<sup>18</sup> That discomfort, and its fall-out, ultimately coalesced into an exactingly complex and allusive artistic vision that now defines his oeuvre.<sup>19</sup>

Several days after Hujar died (on November 26, 1987), Wojnarowicz also commented in his diary: 'This guy was one of the first people I ever truly trusted, this sense of him as father and brother.'<sup>20</sup> In the same diary entry, Wojnarowicz also appears to be describing his having discussed Hujar with a psychotherapist. 'Started seeing a woman today, started crying when I reached the point of trying to explain how I felt about Peter, what he meant to me . . . this guy was like a father . . . I also saw him as sexual, handsome, beautiful mind, beautiful body . . . he could finish my sentences.'<sup>21</sup>

Given the latter sentiment, perhaps it is not surprising that Peter Hujar and David Wojnarowicz were briefly lovers, most likely in 1981. Due to their sexual relationship, Wojnarowicz was exposed to syphilis. 'He called me up

and told me that he has syphilis. I've gotten my shot and am in a state of pain and reexamination of all I once held as my life.<sup>22</sup>

Besides syphilis, Wojnarowicz was at least gradually becoming aware of the risk factors for HIV. On May 11th, 1982, the *New York Times*, for example, published a story with the headline *New Homosexual Disorder Worries Health Officials*. Around the same time The Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) began providing HIV/AIDS crisis counseling, and by 1985, the first HIV diagnostic test became available. Two years later, in 1987, ACT UP (the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power) was formed to advocate for more resources in the fight against AIDS, and then in 1988 David was diagnosed with HIV.

Having sold his body *literally thousands of times for sex*, having had countless short-term affairs and many long-term relationships, having shared needles while injecting illicit drugs, and having had sexual partners who were HIV infected, Wojnarowicz must have surely known that at some point in time he too was at high risk for contracting this disease.<sup>23</sup> The question then is whether this realisation had any bearing on the subtitle of the painting *Wind (for Peter Hujar)*. Although recognisable images are evident in Wojnarowicz's entire *The Four Elements* series, the imagery in *Wind (for Peter Hujar)* is more muted and dreamlike. There are also no explicitly sexual references in *Wind (for Peter Hujar)*. *Water*, on the other hand, includes several overtly sexual acts, plus floating spermatozoa.

Most conspicuous of all, *Wind (for Peter Hujar)* is dominated by images that have some relation to death. The structural overlay, Wojnarowicz explained in the interview with Matthew Rose, is a diagram of a nuclear reactor, while the crying baby, which came from Wojnarowicz's dream, coincided with the still-born death of a friend's infant.

Was this the underlying rationale for Kiehl's interpretation noted previously? If so, it is still a hypothesis that needs an explanation and appropriate qualifiers. Lastly, the bird wing, in the upper left-hand corner, was from a postcard that depicted Albrecht Dürer's painting *Wing of a European Roller*. The postcard itself was given to Wojnarowicz by a close friend who was also diagnosed with AIDS. In reference to *Wind (for Peter Hujar)*, David reportedly said 'One of the strongest feelings I have about death is that it's a time when the energy we carry is dispersed and becomes part of everything'.<sup>24</sup>

Did the subtlety of this painting make it more appropriate to dedicate to a dear friend, mentor, and former lover who had now died from an incurable disease? A fate that was more than likely, it should be noted, to claim the artist's life. Or, alternatively, was the painting conceived to evoke serenity, or possibly harmony, in deference to dying friends? Wojnarowicz was certainly capable of holding the United States government responsible for ruthlessly re-fashioning HIV as a reprisal for nonconforming intimacy, yet that sentiment is conspicuously missing in *Wind (for Peter Hujar)*.

The essential images in *Wind (for Peter Hujar)* are evenly distributed throughout, giving a compositional symmetry to the overall depiction. The



internal diagram, connected like a stylised computer circuitry board, is structured likewise. In this respect, the painting bears a slight resemblance to Salvador Dali's 1949 *The Madonna of Port Lligat*, where the internal frame surrounding the Madonna is a loosely connected sculptural arc. Infants also appear in both paintings, but in Dali's case, the infant is Christ the child. The two paintings, for very different reasons, are demonstrably tranquil, evocative of a blessed life and the dispersion of death.

Perhaps the images in *Wind (for Peter Hujar)* are also vestiges, latent content as it were, from Wojnarowicz's childhood, organised in a dreamscape. Young boys enjoy playing with dinosaurs, gadgets, and soldiers. Perhaps the two boys sharing this dream, conceivably re-imagined as Peter and David, can soon once again frolic with the toys, in a world where playthings remain eternally viable. Along those lines, it is also conceivable that the painting, perhaps unconsciously, was always meant to disclose itself to the viewer, but only at the end of a dream.

These preliminary thoughts are simply offered as a loose rendering in light of Wojnarowicz's writings and interviews. Whatever his motives truly were, they are dimly lit at best. Wojnarowicz described his own psychological interpretations of his artworks as 'lame'.<sup>25</sup>

The point developed herein is not so much that these interpretations are correct or even nearly so, but instead, that they are plausible, only when accompanied by qualifiers, and a willingness to revise. We now turn to the motivation for this paper, the question being whether the evidentiary record on Wojnarowicz has had a pronounced impact on how people engage with his artworks.

Consider Wojnarowicz's *Arthur Rimbaud in New York* 1978-1979 series. Wojnarowicz had photocopied the portrait of Arthur Rimbaud that appeared on the cover of Rimbaud's book *Illuminations*. He then used the photocopied image to make a life-sized mask. Once the mask was created, Wojnarowicz photographed friends and lovers wearing the Rimbaud mask in various locations throughout New York City.<sup>26</sup>

Does it matter whether the viewer knows anything about Arthur Rimbaud? Rimbaud died approximately 85 years earlier. The mask itself is not distinctive. Rimbaud looks like almost any late 20th century white male New Yorker. What if the viewer knew that Rimbaud was a prominent French poet, who also happened to be gay? Would that effect how these artworks are encountered? What if the viewer finds out that Rimbaud died at 37 years of age, the same age at which David Wojnarowicz died? Or that Wojnarowicz and Rimbaud were born nearly 100 years apart, September 14th, 1954 and October 20th, 1854, respectively?<sup>27</sup> Has the viewer's aesthetic judgement been modified by any, or all of this knowledge, including the title of the series itself, *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*? If so, what are we to make of all of these nuances in how we perceive Wojnarowicz's artwork?



**Figure 5:** *Arthur Rimbaud in New York (Coney Island)*, David Wojnarowicz, 1978-79, silver print. Courtesy of the Estate and David Wojnarowicz and P · P · O · W, New York.

To further this line of questioning, what if the viewer also knew that Wojnarowicz had created an artwork in 1982 titled *Peter Hugar Dreaming/Yukio Mishima: St. Sebastian*, and then a second version in 1983 titled *Yukio Mishima St. Sebastian*? Would that viewer also be influenced by the knowledge that the English title of Mishima's breakout second novel was *Confessions of a Mask* (1958), whose main character is gay, like its author. Masks are also fundamental to actors in Noh, a dramatic art form that greatly appealed to Mishima. Would any, or all of this information, influence how the informed viewer receives Wojnarowicz's *Arthur Rimbaud in New York*?

There are, of course, many other examples of Wojnarowicz's artworks where the descriptive nuances largely portend the dramatic impact of the artwork itself. As queried previously, does knowledge of Christ's story alter how Christ on the Cross is perceived? This question is no less germane to Michelangelo, than it is to David Wojnarowicz. Knowledge of Christ's story, certainly for Christians, is a vividly illuminating perspective. This finding was especially evident in the public clamor, and the subsequent removal, of Wojnarowicz's short video *A Fire in My Belly* from the Smithsonian's exhibition *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. The 30-minute video included 11 seconds of footage of ants crawling over a hori-

zontal Christ on a crucifix. ‘It’s hate speech,’ claimed Bill Donohue, president of the Catholic League.<sup>28</sup>

If the lineaments of the 11-second narrative in *A Fire in My Belly* were altered, substituting Ken and Barbie dolls for Christ on the Cross for instance, would it still be censored by the Smithsonian? Did knowledge of Christ’s story matter?

No doubt, the aesthetic experiences arising from each of the representations discussed herein is modified by the influx of knowledge, yet this effect is by no means homogenous. We see what we know: perception is constructive, while knowing is idiosyncratic. Our argument is simply that being informed is preferable to being uninformed, and that knowing, however manifested, has the capacity to influence perception, and thereby modify aesthetic judgement, even if it fails to invariably do so.<sup>29</sup>

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### NOTES

1. Goodman 1976, 105.
2. Gombrich 1960; Goodman 1976; Herder 2006.
3. Abramson 2019.
4. Carr 2012; Wojnarowicz 1991; Wojnarowicz 1999; Wojnarowicz 2014; Wojnarowicz 2015.
5. Wojnarowicz 1991.
6. Wojnarowicz 1999.
7. Wojnarowicz 2015.
8. Carr 2012.
9. Wojnarowicz 1991, 114.
10. Durón 2018.
11. Wojnarowicz 1999, 200.
12. Breslin and Kiehl 2018.
13. Wojnarowicz 1999, 219.
14. Rose 1988, 6.
15. Carr 2012, 170.
16. Hujar 1976.
17. Wojnarowicz 1999, 181.
18. Wojnarowicz 1999, 182.
19. Carr 2012.
20. Wojnarowicz 1999, 203.
21. Wojnarowicz 1999, 203.
22. Wojnarowicz 1999, 183.
23. Wojnarowicz 1999, 238.
24. Rose 1988, 6.
25. Wojnarowicz 1999, 130.
26. Carr 2012.
27. Carr 2012, 133.
28. Dew 2010.
29. Spaid 2018.

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