

DECEMBER 9, 2010  
**CRASS**

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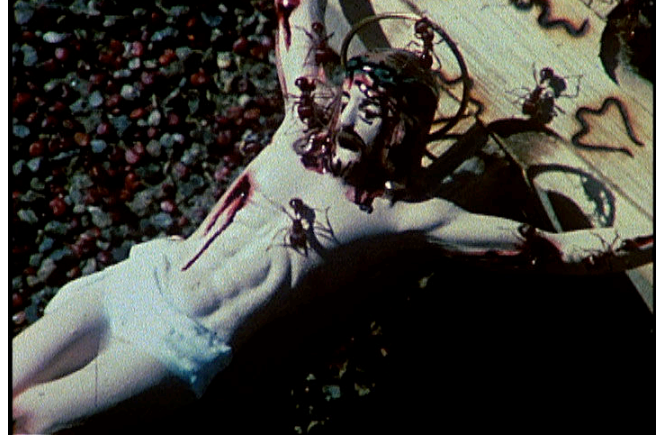
**ALWAYS FRESH  
ALWAYS FREE**

**The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston  
presents a screening and panel discussion of  
David Wojnarowicz's 1987 video *A Fire in My  
Belly*.**

**Screening and Panel  
Discussion of David  
Wojnarowicz's  
*A Fire in My Belly*\***

**Wednesday, December 15, 2010  
6pm, free admission**

**\*Special location: Glassell School  
of Art, Freed Auditorium, 5101  
Montrose Blvd., Houston**



David Wojnarowicz, *A Fire In My Belly* (still), 1986-87. Super 8mm film, black and white & color. Silent. Courtesy of The Estate of David Wojnarowicz and P.P.O.W Gallery, New York and The Fales Library and Special Collections/ New York University

Houston, TX (December 9, 2010)—The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston joins organizations across the country in protesting the decision by Smithsonian Institution secretary G. Wayne Clough to remove a video by David Wojnarowicz from a show at the National Portrait Gallery, following protests from conservative Republicans and Catholic groups. *A Fire in My Belly*, Wojnarowicz's 1987 video, had been part of the Gallery's *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* exhibition on sexual identity. Next week, on **Wednesday, December 15 at 6PM**, the original 21:06-minute version edited by Wojnarowicz will be shown followed by a panel discussion. Panelists **Bill Arning**, Director, CAMH; **James Harithas**, Founding Director, Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Houston, and former director of CAMH; and **Anne Wilkes Tucker**, Curator of Photography, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; will discuss the work, the history of censorship in the arts, and its implications for today. The event is co-sponsored by the Glassell School of Art and will take place in their Freed Auditorium.

**CAMH**



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“We are pleased to join museums around the country who are responding to the real threat to artistic freedom manifested by the unconscionable act of censorship that occurred at the National Portrait Gallery. Museums should be safe places to discuss controversial issues, and we, along with our colleagues across the city, hope to set up a forum for constructive and open dialogue,” said Bill Arning.

The National Portrait Gallery exhibition included a 4-minute version of Wojnarowicz’s *A Fire in My Belly*, re-edited by Jonathan Katz, one of the co-curators of the exhibition, and Bart Everly. The video, which features images of ants crawling over a crucifix, was removed by NPG on November 30, 2010. *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture* is the first major museum exhibition to focus on sexual difference in the making of modern American portraiture and is on view at NPG through February 13, 2011.

Wojnarowicz was an artist and filmmaker working in New York in the late 1970s through the 1980s. His work has been shown in such venerable institutions as The Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art, where his work was included in the 1985 Whitney Biennial. He was an activist who in 1990 won a historic Supreme Court case: *David Wojnarowicz v. American Family Association*. The courts sided with Wojnarowicz after he filed suit against Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association, who copied, distorted, and disseminated the artist's images in a pamphlet to speak out against the National Endowment for the Arts' funding of exhibitions that included art works of Wojnarowicz and other artists. Wojnarowicz died of AIDS-related complications in 1992 at the age of 37.

In a 1989 interview Wojnarowicz spoke about the role of animals as symbolic imagery in his work, stating, “Animals allow us to view certain things that we wouldn’t allow ourselves to see in regard to human activity. 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.”

Following the screening and discussion at the Glassell School of Art, the video will be on view at Inman Gallery (3901 Main Street, Houston) during regular gallery hours. For a complete listing of organizations hosting screenings of *A Fire in My Belly* nationwide, as well as for more information about the removal of Wojnarowicz's video from the *Hide/Seek* exhibition currently on view at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., go to [www.hideseek.org](http://www.hideseek.org).

## **ABOUT THE FILM**

David Wojnarowicz  
*A Fire in My Belly* (A Work in Progress), 1986-87  
16mm and DVD Color and B&W  
Silent  
TRT: 00:21:06

## **OFFICIAL STATEMENT BY P.P.O.W AND THE ESTATE OF DAVID WOJNAROWICZ**

P.P.O.W and The Estate of David Wojnarowicz disagree with the Smithsonian's decision to withdraw the artist's 1987 film piece *A Fire in My Belly* from the National Portrait Gallery's exhibition entitled *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*. P.P.O.W has represented Wojnarowicz's work since 1988 and maintained a close working relationship with the artist until his death in 1992. The gallery now represents his estate.

On behalf of the estate, the gallery would like to offer the artist's words to illuminate his original intentions. In a 1989 interview Wojnarowicz spoke about the role of animals as symbolic imagery in his work, stating, "Animals allow us to view certain things that we wouldn’t allow ourselves to see in regard to human activity. 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."

The call for the removal of *A Fire in My Belly* by Catholic League president William Donahue is based on his misinterpretation that this work was "hate speech pure and simple." This statement insults the legacy of Wojnarowicz, who dedicated his life to activism and the arts community. David Wojnarowicz's work is collected by international museums including the Museum of Modern Art, NY, The Whitney Museum, The Library of Congress, The New York Public Library, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, The Reina Sofia in Madrid, Museum Ludwig in Cologne, the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography, etc. Wojnarowicz is also an established writer; his most well known memoirs are *Close to the Knives* and *Memories That Smell Like Gasoline*, which are included on many university syllabi.

In 1990 the artist won a historic Supreme Court case, *David Wojnarowicz v. American Family Association*. The courts sided with Wojnarowicz after he filed suit against Donald Wildmon and the American Family Association, who copied, distorted and disseminated the artist's images in a pamphlet to speak out against the NEA's funding of exhibits that included art works of Wojnarowicz and other artists. We are deeply troubled that the remarks, which led to the removal of David's work from *Hide/Seek*, so closely resemble those of the past. Wojnarowicz's fight for freedom of artistic expression, once supported by the highest court, is now challenged again. In his absence, we know that his community, his supporters, and the many who believe in his work will carry his convictions forward.

Two versions of *A Fire in My Belly* will be posted on P.P.O.W's Vimeo channel and on our website's news page: Vimeo channel: <http://vimeo.com/user5389555/videos>  
P.P.O.W News Page: <http://www.ppowgallery.com/news.php>

This includes the original 21:06-minute version edited by Wojnarowicz and the 4-minute version shown at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, edited by curator Jonathan Katz and Bart Everly with audio from an ACT UP march in which you can hear David Wojnarowicz' voice. To download and to screen contact P.P.O.W Gallery.

Additional images of his other works, including *Christ with Ants* and *Untitled (One Day This Kid...)* can be found on his artist's page: [http://ppowgallery.com/selected\\_work.php?artist=14](http://ppowgallery.com/selected_work.php?artist=14)

For further information or a DVD of these videos please contact the gallery at (212) 647-1044 or email [info@ppowgallery.com](mailto:info@ppowgallery.com)

#### **STATEMENT FROM JONATHAN D. KATZ**

Co-curator of the National Portrait Gallery's *Hide/Seek: Difference and Desire in American Portraiture*

I curated, with David C. Ward of the National Portrait Gallery, the groundbreaking exhibition *Hide/Seek*. Sadly, I was not consulted when the Smithsonian elected to censor a work by David Wojnarowicz, and then redoubled that insult by referring to "AIDS victims" in their statement—employing the very victimizing locution Wojnarowicz fought with his dying breath to oppose. (Ward was "consulted" but his objections were ignored.) An exhibition explicitly intended to finally, in 2010, break a 21-year-old blacklist against the representation of same sex desire in America's major museums now, ironically, finds itself in the same boat. In 1989, Senator Jesse Helms demonized Robert Mapplethorpe's sexuality, and by extension, his art, and with little effort pulled a cowering art world to its knees. His weapon was threatening to disrupt the already pitiful Federal support for the arts. And once again, that same weapon is being brandished and once again we cower. When will it be time for the decent majority of Americans stand against a far-Right fringe that sees censorship as a replacement for dialog and debate? There are larger principles at work, and generations hence will judge our actions today.

This is a culture war we did not seek out, nor start. But appeasing tyranny has never worked and can never work, for tyranny wants only obedience, and blind obedience is antithetical to what this nation stands for; we were, as a people, born in protest to tyranny. Were the men and women whose portraits grace the National Portrait Gallery able to take a stand, I have little doubt they would line up behind the separation of Church and State, enshrined in our Constitution, that this incident calls so painfully into question. Furthermore, they would readily agree that America's core value, also enshrined in our Constitution, is our freedom of speech. With this as our defining principle, it stands to reason we will disagree, but our disagreements are healthy, even necessary to achieving a

genuine democracy. We should be promoting this national conversation, not killing it. Art in general, and this kind of art in particular, is precisely a spur to conversation and to thought--something all civil society should support and celebrate. But when the Smithsonian, under pressure to be sure, starts bowing to its censors, it abrogates its charge as our National museum.

Over a century and half ago, Walt Whitman wrote, in support of precisely the core values currently under threat: "Unscrew the locks from the doors! Unscrew the doors themselves from their jambs! Whoever degrades another degrades me, And whatever is done or said returns at last to me.... Through me forbidden voices, Voices of sexes and lusts, voices veil'd and I remove the veil, Voices indecent by me clarified and transfigur'd."

We sought to remove a veil and in opposing that move, our enemies have damaged our democracy once again. I pray it is not another 21 years before someone else tries to remove that veil again. I am sad for us all.

### **CAMH MISSION**

The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is an idea and a place shaped by the present moment. The Museum exemplifies the dynamic relationship between contemporary art and contemporary society through its exhibitions, public and educational programs, and publications. The CAMH provides the physical and intellectual framework essential to the presentation, interpretation, and advancement of contemporary art; it is a vibrant forum for artists and all audiences, and for critical, scholarly, and public discourse.

### **ALWAYS FRESH, ALWAYS FREE**

### **GENERAL INFORMATION**

The Contemporary Arts Museum Houston is located at 5216 Montrose Boulevard, at the corner of Montrose and Bissonnet, in the heart of Houston's Museum District. Hours are Wednesday 11am-7pm, Thursday 11am-9pm, Friday 11am-7pm, Saturday and Sunday 11am-6pm. Admission is always free. For more information, visit [www.camh.org](http://www.camh.org) or call (713) 284-8250.