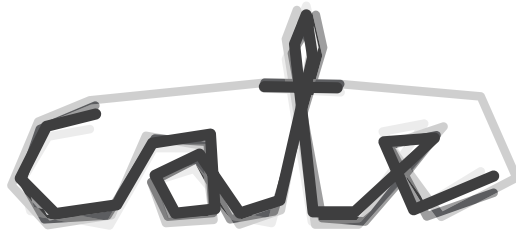


NOV.06  
6 P.M.



Conversations At The Edge - Fall 2014

# The X-Ray of Civilization

Films by Tom Rubnitz, David Wojnarowicz, and Tommy Turner

1985–92, USA/Mexico, multiple formats, ca 85 min + discussion

Introduced by Marvin J. Taylor, Director of Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University and founder of the Downtown collection

The Culture Wars and devastation of the AIDS epidemic contributed to a cultural scene in 1980s New York that crackled with tension and ached with sadness. Against this background, artists Tom Rubnitz, David Wojnarowicz, and Tommy Turner transformed mass media's detritus into transgressive responses to the socio-political order. From the sprawling suburbs in *Where Evil Dwells* (Turner/Wojnarowicz, 1985) to America's status as a global military power in *Listen to This* (Rubnitz/Wojnarowicz, 1992) and *A Fire In My Belly* (Wojnarowicz, 1985) to Hollywood itself in *Psycho III The Musical* (Rubnitz, 1985), the three artists scrutinized and scathingly satirized mainstream American iconography.

**Tom Rubnitz** (1956, Chicago–1992, New York) was a video artist best associated with New York City's East Village drag scene in the 1980s. Rubnitz crafted low-budget, candy-colored video fantasies featuring the likes of Ann Magnuson, the B-52s, the "Lady" Bunny, and the late John Sex. A genre artist par excellence, Rubnitz treated the sexy-druggy-wiggly-luscious-desserty qualities of the '80s Downtown club scene with the loving care only a true hedonist could show.

**David Wojnarowicz** (1954, Red Bank, New Jersey–1992, New York) was a painter, photographer, writer, filmmaker, performance artist, and powerful presence in the New York City downtown art scene of the 1970s and '80s. Wojnarowicz's work affirmed art's vivifying power in a society he viewed as alienating and corrosive, especially for those who were not part of the mainstream.

**Tommy Turner** (1959, New York–), began documenting New York City through moving image in the late 1970s. Turner contributed to magazines such as Richard Kern's *The Valium Addict* and then went on to produce a magazine of his own titled *Redrum*. He has subsequently become associated with the underground movement Cinema of Transgression. Turner has exhibited his work at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City; Museum of Modern Art, New York City; Yerba Buena Center of the Arts, San Francisco; and The British Film Institute, London.

## program

### *Listen to This*

**Tom Rubnitz**

(1992, USA, Video, Color, Mono, 16 mins.)

*Listen to This* is a fragment of collective memory that finds critical relevance in contemporary Queer discourse. Tom Rubnitz weaves narration, image, and a form of temporality, dislocated from 'real time', into a video where artist and AIDS activist David Wojnarowicz's loss and anger is palpable.

This document, unfinished at the time of Rubnitz's death, elicits various modes that trace their origins to oral history traditions: repetition, non-linear narrative construction, and disruption. In the video, Wojnarowicz sits alone facing the camera, infected with a plague (AIDS) that prevents him from abstracting his own mortality to some point in the distant future. He speaks to the present and in the present. Fragments of popular mass culture – Madonna, the Newscaster, a military helicopter – cut through Wojnarowicz's impassioned performance, acting as visual prompts for the "diseased society" he has contracted.

Rubnitz constructs the work utilizing the aesthetic framework of the non-site of television, the dominant vessel for mass culture. He marks time and place through Wojnarowicz's visceral attacks on Western power structures, and commonly held conceptions of the past and present. *Listen to This* is not an obituary, nor a memorial to its creator, but a furious attack on a homophobic HIV/AIDS policy, the consequences of which we still live with today.

*continued on back »*

## upcoming

November 13 at 6pm

***Mati Diop: A Thousand Suns***

## Artists' Film, Video, New Media, & Animation



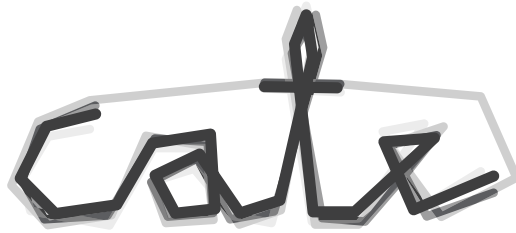
A public program of



Department of  
Film, Video, New Media,  
and Animation



NOV.06  
6 P.M.



## Conversations At The Edge - Fall 2014

---

### program continued

---

#### *A Fire in My Belly (A work in progress)*

**David Wojnarowicz**

(1986-87, USA/Mexico, Super 8 onto Video, Color & B&W, Silent, 21 mins.)

Echoing themes explored throughout David Wojnarowicz's art and writing, *A Fire in My Belly* is a visceral meditation on cultural and individual identity, spirituality, and belief systems. On a trip to Mexico City with Tommy Turner to scout Day of the Dead imagery, Wojnarowicz shot 25 rolls of Super 8 film, documenting scenes that embodied the violence of city life. A central image is that of a child exploited as a fire-breathing street performer, which resonates in the title of the film and Wojnarowicz's own experience hustling on the streets at a young age. He later staged scenes in his New York City apartment to combine with this footage, collecting dreamlike images to illustrate thematic sections he planned for the film's structure, outlined in a cutting script. Among these images is a dancing, gun-wielding marionette, coins dropping into a plate of blood, vibrantly colored loteria cards, and the now iconic self-portrait of the artist with his lips sewn shut.

*A Fire in My Belly* was never completed. What currently circulates and is preserved in the Fales Library Collection of NYU, which holds the David Wojnarowicz Papers archive, is a 13-minute version entitled *A Fire in my Belly, A Work in Progress*, and a 7-minute excerpt that possibly represents a chapter planned for the finished version. Wojnarowicz's cutting script shows that he thought of organizing it into discrete sections (numbered 1 - 8, with notes to combine sections). Each section includes notes on general themes, such as "aggression" or "hunger," accompanied by specific symbols - religious icons, the four elements, or colors. The physical film reveals Wojnarowicz's unfinished ordering of the sections; masking tape splices holding together the deconstructed film have since been removed for preservation, and are now indicated by black leader.

The cutting script makes clear the intended kinetic fury of the film, propelled by quick shots and stark transitions, an approach similar to the frenzied conclusion of his collaborative film with Tommy Turner, *Where Evil Dwells* (1985). Vibrant color and graphic images play a formal and conceptual role comparable to his paintings of the time. The iconography of the film resonates with such works as *Crash: The Birth of Language/The Invention of Lies* (1986), which shows a fearsome, sooty locomotive plunging through the ruins of civilization, a correlation of industry and speed with humankind's separation from nature and ultimate destruction that is a prominent theme of *A Fire in My Belly*, as is the violence with

which visual and spoken language can obscure as much as reveal the truth.

The movement of the film itself--never resting too long on an image, scenes of Mexico City shot from a passing car--becomes an expression of the speed and aggression of modern living. As Wojnarowicz describes in his essay *In the Shadow of the American Dream: Soon All This Will Be Picturesque Ruins*, especially in the sprawling west of America, vehicles are not just a convenience, but an agent of class stratification and indifference: "Owning a vehicle, you could drive by and with the pressure of your foot on the accelerator and with your eyes on the road you could pass it quickly--maybe not fast enough to overlook it completely, but fast enough so that the speed of the auto and the fear centers of the brain created a fractured marriage of light and sound. The images of poverty would lift and float and recede quickly like the gray shades of memory so that these images were in the past before you came upon them. It was the physical equivalent of the evening news."

#### *Where Evil Dwells*

**Tommy Turner & David Wojnarowicz**

(1985, USA, Super 8 onto 16mm, B&W, Sound, 29 mins.)

Loosely based on the story of the "Satan" teen killer Ricky Kasso, Tommy Turner and David Wojnarowicz's *Where Evil Dwells* is a fragmented, small gauge film that unites splatter flick, experimental cinema, and transgressive art. The original footage was destroyed in a fire and the only element that survived is this preview that was put together for the Downtown New York Film Festival in 1985.

#### *Psykho III The Musical*

**Tom Rubnitz**

(1985, USA, Video, Color & B&W, Sound, 24 mins.)

*Psykho III The Musical* is an intriguing play on the tension between "authentic" and "pop" camp. This celebration of artifice was originally conceived by Mark Oates as a stage musical parody following the release of *Psycho II* in 1983, and was performed at the East Village's most notorious nightclub--The Pyramid Club. Due to popular demand in 1985, Oates reached out to Tom Rubnitz to immortalise the musical through this video. With its premiere screening taking place at Area Nightclub in the fall of that year, the cast features many Downtown legends including John Kelly aka Dagmar Onassis, Mark Phredd aka Hapi Phace, Stephen Tashjian aka Tabboo!, and Brian Butterick aka Loretta Nicks. Not only is *Psykho III The Musical* a brilliant Queer reading of a Hitchcock classic, it is an important historical document that celebrates the vibrant underground Queer community of New York City.

---

## Artists' Film, Video, New Media, & Animation

---



A public program of



Department of  
Film, Video, New Media,  
and Animation

