

Deafening the satellites and lifting the curtains

Kendra Paitz

"I am screaming but it comes out like pieces of clear ice...I am disappearing. I am disappearing but not fast enough," writes David Wojnarowicz (1954-1992) in his 1992 work *Untitled (Sometimes I come to hate people)*, included in *Re-imagining a Safe Space*. Although he spoke of the fragility of his wasting body, Wojnarowicz's searing and prescient voice—shared in brutal texts and singular works of art—blazes onward against injustice as ever before. His unrelenting photos, paintings, collages, films, sculptures, performances, and writings from the 1980s and early 1990s are still blistering and compelling, particularly amidst the hellfire of the current administration.

Wojnarowicz's first large-scale solo museum exhibition, *Tongues of Flame*, took place at University Galleries of Illinois State University in 1990. With its provocative imagery and scorching commentary about the AIDS crisis and LGBTQ visibility, it became a touchstone for conservatives seeking to silence viewpoints and end federal funding for the arts. Wojnarowicz spent a great deal of time at this Midwestern university, working closely with students, interacting with community members, creating his *The Four Elements* lithographs (and other works), and fighting back against the American Family Association, which was targeting him for producing "extremely offensive material." All of this transpired before I arrived, and Wojnarowicz later talked about disappearing, but his impact is still deeply felt, not only here, but worldwide.

At University Galleries, we offer emerging and mid-career artists their critical first survey exhibitions and monographs, in addition to curating group exhibitions. Fueled by a rich history, we pride ourselves on cultivating a laboratory of expression. We embrace artists who take risks, both in content and presentation: from Terry Adkins' stereoscopic videos relating to abolitionist John Brown and botanist/inventor George Washington Carver; to Irena (Knezevic) Haiduk's text- and performance-based works about Eastern European atrocities; to Coco Fusco's video about dissident Cuban poet María Elena Cruz Varela; to Brian Gillis' archive relating to the assassination of Black Panther Party leader Fred Hampton; to Abigail DeVille's room-encompassing installation about time-travel and slavery; to Cecilia Vicuña's heartbreaking performance in the aftermath of the 2016 U.S. presidential election. And while the country felt like it was collapsing around us following that Electoral College outcome, we were proudly exhibiting *Strange Oscillations and Vibrations of Sympathy*, featuring work by twenty-one female artists that acknowledge women writers, including Mary

Wollstonecraft, María Elena Cruz Varela, Virginia Woolf, Zora Neale Hurston, and Clarice Lispector, among ten others.

In recent years, we have also sharply focused on engaging with our community. Just a few examples include: art historian/critic Lori Waxman's three-day performance writing free reviews for thirty regional artists; Edra Soto's collaborative performance that brought the visual culture of her native Puerto Rico to our gallery's windows; a program for K-12 students to visit Juan Angel Chávez's exhibition and make their own sculptures; and professional development opportunities for educators to incorporate Carrie Schneider's photographs and videos into their curriculum. We have also organized: off-site video screenings and satellite exhibitions; workshops presented in partnership with the Ecology Action Center and Children's Discovery Museum; performances with the debate team and theatre students; and a collection bin for clothing donations to Home Sweet Home Ministries. Our *TASK Party* with Oliver Herring—which has since extended to many museums and classrooms throughout the Midwest—brought together 300 participants who collectively took over our space in an explosive amalgamation of glitter, paint, cardboard, foil, hand-holding, singing, shouting, and revolting.

It is our job, particularly at a university gallery, to present and preserve these unbridled voices—whether artists' or visitors'—and maintain a space for protest, unity, and resilience. In the last paragraph of the *Tongues of Flame* catalogue, Wojnarowicz writes:

But, bottom line, this is my own feeling of urgency and need; bottom line emotionally, even a tiny charcoal scratching done as a gesture to mark a person's response to this epidemic means whole worlds to me if it is hung in public; bottom line, each and every gesture carries a reverberation that is meaningful in its diversity; bottom line, we have to find our own forms of gesture and communication—you can never depend on the mass media to reflect us or our needs or our states of mind; bottom line, with enough gestures, we can deafen the satellites and lift the curtains surrounding the control room.¹

Wojnarowicz has not disappeared; his spirit haunts our institutional history, encouraging openness and demanding boldness. We go forward as torchbearers of his legacy, offering a public platform for "deafen[ing] the satellites and lift[ing] the curtains."

—Kendra Paitz is Senior Curator at University Galleries of Illinois State University. She has organized solo exhibitions featuring Terry Adkins, Carrie Schneider, Edra Soto, Juan Angel Chávez, Melanie Schiff, Stanya Kahn, Kendell Carter, Stephanie Brooks, Oliver Herring (co-curated with Barry Blinderman), Jason Lazarus (co-curated with Barry Blinderman), Adam Farcus, Shinique Smith, Lori

Waxman, and Irena Haiduk, among others. Her group exhibitions include *Strange Oscillations and Vibrations of Sympathy*, *The House of the Seven Gables*, *Orison for the Forest*, and *but you gave me flowers*. Paitz's essays and interviews have been published by University Galleries of Illinois State University; Hyde Park Art Center, Chicago; Golden Parachutes, Berlin; and Daylight Books. She is currently overseeing production of her tenth exhibition catalogue. Paitz is also the director of Violet Poe Projects, an occasional project space in her home in Bloomington, Illinois.

* The title of this text refers to the later quote from David Wojnarowicz's essay, "Postcards from America: X-rays from Hell."

¹ David Wojnarowicz, "Postcards from America: X-rays from Hell," in *Tongues of Flame*, ed. Barry Blinderman. Normal, IL: University Galleries of Illinois State University, 1990: 109.