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David Wojnarowicz

***In the Shadow of Forward Motion***

Brooklyn: Primary Information, 2020

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Colin Campbell

***More Voice-Over: Colin Campbell Writing***

Edited by Jon Davies

Montreal: Concordia University Press, 2021

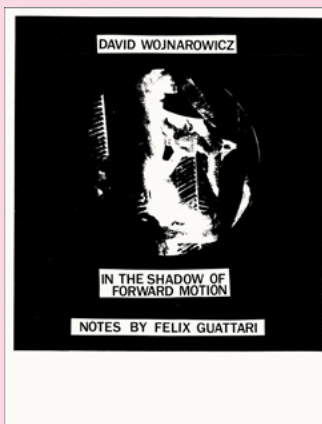
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Charles Reeve

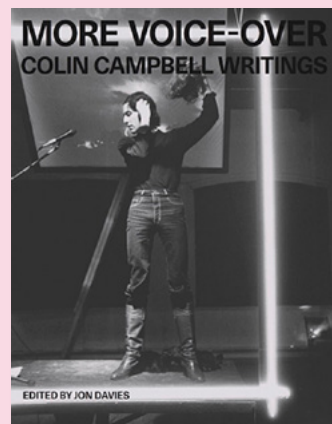
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Writing from the heart of bizarreness that was the 1980s, Fredric Jameson noted that postmodernity's fragmentation of the subject brought with it a double-edged freedom: a liberation not merely from anxiety, he said, but from "every other kind of feeling as well, since there is no longer a self present to do the feeling."<sup>1</sup> Postmodernism meant, among other things, the disappearance of the self and Jameson made clear that he meant this observation as a warning. Forty years later, though, and notwithstanding Jameson's intent, I can't help wondering if this discussion of the disappearing self is less warning than wish. As the Cold War lurched with renewed intensity toward its conclusion, an unprecedented sensibility (if that's the word) of paranoia and anxiety pervaded the social unconscious. Cowed by a complex of novel existential threats—hypercapitalism, the terrifying viciousness of AIDS, Ronald Reagan's lurid vision of



nuclear apocalypse—the denizens of the time traded in their booze and weed for coke and ecstasy while driving both Michael Jackson's "living the dream" narrative and the Sex Pistols' "living the nightmare" schtick to the top of the charts. "Tell me when it's over/Oh let me know when it's done," moaned Los Angeles band The Dream Syndicate tunelessly, their lament summing up the despair that stultified many people. In such a thoroughly chiliastic zeitgeist, what could be better than to disappear?

For some folks, though, this same despair provoked an energizing fury. And so it was that, on the other side of the country, a very different kind of band emerged when a young David Wojnarowicz—having bolted from his homophobic New Jersey family to the precarious life of a Manhattan rent boy before finding his way into the art community—teamed up with a few friends, a drum machine, and a tape deck (plus some other bits and pieces) to form 3 Teens Kill 4 No Motive. As it turned out, Wojnarowicz never grew old, dying from AIDS in 1992 at the age of thirty-seven (following



which, his ashes were scattered on the White House Lawn as part of ACT UP's Ashes Actions). However, this short existence just makes his prodigious output all the more remarkable and 3 Teens Kill 4's most notorious song—a stuttering, yet oddly compelling cover of the Chaka Khan hit "Tell Me Something Good," overlaid with a media account of John Hinckley Jr.'s attempt to assassinate Reagan—served notice of the coming wild ride. Wojnarowicz and his fellow travelers were determined to fight against society's collapse (or evisceration), notwithstanding the likelihood of such a struggle's failure.

In the decade following the launch of 3 Teens Kill 4, Wojnarowicz was relentlessly active: films like *A Fire in my Belly*, which would ignite a culture-wars conflagration in 2010 when it was included in the show *Hide/Seek* at Washington's National Portrait Gallery; numerous books, probably the best-known of which is *Close to the Knives: A memoir of disintegration* (1991); and some of the most captivating photographs produced at the time, including *Silence = Death*, an image of Wojnarowicz with

his mouth sewn shut, *Untitled (Face in Dirt)*, a photo of Wojnarowicz buried except for his eyes, nose, mouth and chin, and *Untitled (Falling Buffalo)*, a found photo of a herd of buffalo tumbling over a cliff, on which Wojnarowicz has scrawled numerous seemingly unrelated phrases.

As well as gracing the cover of *Close to the Knives*, this last image inspired Wojnarowicz's show *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*, held at P·P·O·W in 1989. In the show's catalogue, re-printed in 2020 by the mighty specialty press Primary Information, Wojnarowicz writes, "A metaphorical image for the title of the show: a sense of impending collision contained in this acceleration of speed within the structures of civilization..." The two concepts—forward motion's sense of momentum encountering the impending collision's sudden stop—seem incompatible, yet for Wojnarowicz they were mutually supportive in that he found nothing more stagnant than order and structure. "I have found comfort and hope in various forces of nature that were either unexplainable or uncontrollable," he writes a few pages earlier in the catalogue (which features an introduction by Felix Guattari, the era's grand master of anti-structure). In the debate over reform or revolution, Wojnarowicz sided with the latter, and one wonders if the persistence of that sensibility throughout much of the cultural community motivated Primary Information to reprint *In the Shadow of Forward Motion* thirty years later—whether to complement the Whitney Museum's 2018 retrospective of Wojnarowicz's work, or to rebuff it. As Conor Williams

notes, Wojnarowicz's response to the Whitney's celebration would have been complicated, since "[t]o see his work displayed in such a sprawling and ritzy venue, one that sits atop the very spot he once cruised and made art, would likely have nauseated him."<sup>2</sup>

That is to say, the 1980s—when Wojnarowicz came of age as an artist—was the era of the "anti-aesthetic," as the title of Hal Foster's landmark assemblage of essays put it at the time.<sup>3</sup> The anti-aesthetic held that aesthetics à la Baumgarten and Kant were obsolete and destructive, as were the associated values: disinterest, taste, genius, authenticity and their attendant, intransigent bourgeois stasis. Not that opposition to this cluster of values was new, but two crucial changes in the 1970s and 1980s lent new urgency to this oppositional culture. The first was the spreading belief that the disintegration of the subject lamented by Jameson had an upside: the cracks in the facade could allow hitherto-suppressed voices to be heard. The second was an insistence—galvanized by the war on drugs, government inaction on AIDS, and the civil rights and equal rights movements—that these voices needed to be heard. Hence the emergence of a forceful generation of artists who understood pictures less as windows to look through than as screens to look behind, all the better to expose the man in the funny hat at the controls. Along with Wojnarowicz, one could name Sherrie Levine, Gran Fury, Martha Rosler, David Hammons... the list goes on.

But historiography works in strange ways, and so it is that the idea

of the "anti-aesthetic" and the associated periodicity of the "Pictures" generation have given rise to the impression that these sensibilities belonged to Manhattan—that nowhere else was sufficiently cynical, queer, savvy, gritty, neurotic and racially diverse to produce such rich cultural critique. There is, though, plenty of evidence to the contrary, as we see in the impressive new compendium of writings by Colin Campbell, an influential, forward-thinking video artist and queer activist who lived most of his adult life in Toronto until his premature death in 2001. Part of Concordia University Press's "Text/Context" series of writings by Canadian artists (which also features collections by Ken Lum and Liz Magor, with a volume by Ian Carr-Harris forthcoming), *More Voice-Over* has been painstakingly edited by Jon Davies to provide a substantial, informative tour of Campbell's wide-ranging writings: letters, memorials, public talks and chunks of unpublished novels stand alongside scripts and transcripts from his videos, all neatly set up by a 1991 interview with Sue Ditta in which Campbell uses his dry wit and brilliant conversationalism to dispense comments that seem both casual and insightful at once. As Davies puts it, Campbell is an "author who resists authority," especially his own (xv). Asked by Ditta about the contrast that occurs when Campbell doesn't disguise his "deep, resonant male voice" while in drag, Campbell responds, "I've never been very good at doing what men are supposed to be doing" (xlv). Today, such a comment would be unremarkable in many contexts, but that's because over the last three decades

we've been through the thorough dismantling of male subjectivity that was just beginning at the time. (See, for example, Dennis Cooper.) A little later in the same interview, Campbell mentions the miserable spectre of film students standing around outside in mid-winter because no one wrote a script. The vaunted quality of "spontaneity" isn't much fun and doesn't make for good art, Ditta offers, to which Campbell responds, "No. It makes for a lot of editing" (xlv).

It's classic Campbell, the wit so dry that it's not clear whether it is wit or statement of fact. In any case, the sensibility pervades Campbell's work, as with the celebrated "Woman from Malibu" series (1976–77), in which Campbell plays the eponymous character, dismantling his masculinity by constructing his femininity. For example, in the series' final tape, "Hollywood and Vine," the character puts on make-up, a wig, and sunglasses while relating a sequence of recent experiences, starting with an anecdote about attending "the funeral of a friend who had been fumigated to death, accidentally" (42). The situation's ridiculousness is heightened in the video by the artist's slightly overdone femininity (putting the "camp" in "Campbell," one might say). But Campbell's slow, almost stilted, deadpan delivery in the video dampens the scene's humour potential to foreground the bathos of the everyday, which in turn underscores how improbable is the notion of the individual. If all of our experiences are variations on the same banal themes, to what extent are we "individual" and our experiences spontaneous? In whose

or what's name can one defend the associated and equally timeworn ideal of romantic masculinism?

And yet, defend it people do, their claims becoming motivation and target for Campbell, Wojnarowicz, and several generations of queer art-ivists. That's what Wojnarowicz has in mind when, near the end of *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*, he offers an articulate credo for the legions who've had enough (which he reads in a rising crescendo in the performance ITSOFOMO)<sup>4</sup>:

[B]ut I say there's certain politicians that had better increase their security forces and there's religious leaders and healthcare officials that had better get bigger dogs and higher fences and more complex security alarms for their homes and queer-bashers better start doing their work from inside howitzer tanks because the thin line between the inside and the outside is beginning to erode and at the moment I'm a thirty seven foot tall one thousand one hundred and seventy-two pound man inside this six foot frame and all I can feel is the pressure all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release (n.p.).

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1. Fredric Jameson, "Post-Modernism: or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," reprinted in *Art in Theory: 1900–1990* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1992), 1080.

2. Conor Williams, "Of Grief and Anger: David Wojnarowicz's *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*," *Bomb Magazine*, May 26, 2020, <https://bombmagazine.org/articles/of-grief-and-anger-david-wojnarowicz-in-the-shadow-of-forward-motion-reviewed/>.

3. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983).

4. ITSOFOMO is an acronym for *In the Shadow of Forward Motion*. Wojnarowicz debuted the piece at The Kitchen in 1989 with Ben Neill and Don Yallech. A CD was released in 1992, and a double LP vinyl recording was released in 2018. See: <https://itsofomo.bandcamp.com/album/itsofomo-in-the-shadow-of-forward-motion>.

Erin Benay

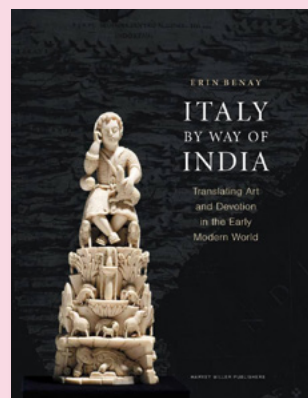
***Italy by Way of India: Translating Art and Devotion in the Early Modern World***

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€ 100 (relié) ISBN 9781912554775

Itay Sapir



L'histoire de l'art globale, d'un point de vue post ou décolonial, semble avoir jusqu'ici presque ignoré l'Italie de la première modernité (et vice-versa). S'il est impensable aujourd'hui de parler de l'art espagnol ou hollandais du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, par exemple, sans au moins mentionner l'entreprise coloniale européenne qui sous-tend la prospérité et la puissance de ces pays, on continue, à quelques exceptions